

Boy, Interrupted



Christopher: Kicked Out of School at Age Five

Christopher Rogers was featured on the front page of the Cincinnati Enquirer, as well as by local television stations, because he was removed from three schools and frequently suspended from a fourth for throwing tantrums, hitting teachers, and fighting with other children. It was his first year of school.

Christopher, six years old, lived with his mother, Ana Cohen, in a Section 8 housing complex of small brick buildings with patches of green grass between them on the west side of Cincinnati. Their apartment was small and dark, with boxes stacked on the floor because Ana had just moved there. Her mother, Michelle Thomas-Mitchell, lived elsewhere but was very involved in Christopher's life and came over to Ana's apartment for the interview.

Christopher was behind when he got to kindergarten. "When he was two, he had problems with hearing and speech," said Cohen. "He had an ear infection, tubes in his ears, and his speech was delayed because of all the months he couldn't hear." He also had seizures between the ages of one and three.

When he went to preschool, she said, he had a "transition period," then settled in all right. But she thinks that the particular program he attended "didn't prepare him enough for actual school." After spending two years in preschool, he knew 10 letters of the alphabet and shapes and colors. "Most of the kids in his kindergarten knew how to write their names. He didn't. And they knew their numbers and he didn't."

His disciplinary problems began in July 2003 at a year-round charter school in the

Over the Rhine neighborhood. Cohen chose this school because the hours, 7 a.m. to

5 p.m., would provide supervision while she attended classes in graphic design. She also thought Christopher would enjoy the martial arts and music programs, and she hoped that the dozen Black male staff workers would be positive role models.

Almost from the start, he had problems. He was sent to the principal's office several times for refusing to sit down in class, Cohen said. There, on one occasion, he took off his socks and shoes and laughed while being disciplined. Later, he hit a girl he said was picking at his hair while they were standing in line. After more fights and other trouble, he was suspended several times and then put on probation. "I came to the office to sign papers for the probation period. The same day they called and asked me to come get him. They said he was too immature and needed a more structured setting," recalled Cohen.

Christopher lasted two weeks at a second charter school. "They wanted to send him home for the least little thing," Thomas-Mitchell said. "Ana or I were constantly running up to the school. Some days she'd drop him off at eight and by nine they'd be calling me to come get him."

At his next school, a Catholic school, Christopher hit another student and had tantrums on the floor. "They would physically remove him from the classroom and he would sit with the principal," Cohen said. Christopher was there not much more than a week when the principal

suggested that Cohen send him to a public school, explaining that he would be able to receive services there for a severe behavioral handicap, if he was identified as having such.

By then, it was October. At the neighborhood elementary school, Christopher's initial teacher told him she was going to call his mother when he wouldn't sit still in class. As she walked towards a phone, he grabbed her ankles and she fell. He was sent home. The next day, Cohen came in for a conference and Christopher was able to return to school, but the teacher insisted he be placed in another class. "She was a new teacher, young, 23, no kids of her own, and she was afraid of him," said Thomas-Mitchell. She shook her head. "He's just a little boy. I'm going to the bus stop to get him and you can meet him and see for yourself."

She left, and Cohen said that Christopher continued to get in trouble in the other kindergarten class, and she and her mother continued to get calls to come get him. "He gets frustrated very easily and he has trouble controlling his emotions," she explained. "Every five minutes, he's calling the teachers names and they get tired of that. Maybe that's because he's an only child. Sometimes other kids hit him or tease him and he hits back. I tell him, 'Don't hit back. Tell the teacher.' He says, 'I tried to tell the teacher but she didn't listen to me.' He gets so angry he starts crying and gets so upset it's hard to understand him, and the teachers won't try to figure out what the problem is because they've got other students to take care of."

The suspensions did not help Christopher control his behavior. Dr. Sorter, of Children's Hospital, says kindergarten students with behavioral problems very often cannot make the connection between suspensions and their own misbehavior. Cohen then asked the school to test Christopher for special education. He was found eligible for services and received a completed IEP in February.

At about the same time, the family doctor referred Christopher to the Division of Developmental Disorders at Children's Hospital. The psychiatrist said Christopher has attention deficit disorder and prescribed medication. Cohen said it helped at first but she thinks the dose isn't strong enough. "But I haven't been able to get in touch with the psychiatrist and I don't want to increase the dose on my own."

With his IEP in place, Christopher was no longer being sent home but he often spent time in in-school suspension (ISS). "He's always the youngest person there. The older ones have a packet of work to do but Christopher is too young to work on his own."

The door opened and Christopher came in, followed by his grandmother. He looked warily at the visitor. "Who she?" he asked. Christopher is a small, medium-brown boy with short, wiry hair and he wore a backpack almost as big as he is. He walked over to his mother, and she looked through the bag for a note from the school to find out what had gone on with Christopher that day. She pulled out a construction paper hat with stars shooting out of it that he'd made in art class. "That's my alien hat!" Christopher exclaimed. She noted the word "Nico" written across the band. "That my alien name!" he said. "Nico!"

She found no note and asked Christopher what he did that day. He said, "Breakfast and lunch and art and ISS."

"What happened?" she asked.

"I was at the door to go to lunch and a boy got on my back and grabbed on my shirt and I started shaking my shoulders and he started crying and said I pushed him."

"Did he fall down?"

"He did it on purpose. He pushed himself and said I pushed him."

It was unclear from Christopher's account exactly what had happened, whether an adult was present or whether the other boy was disciplined. But he spent part of the afternoon in in-school suspension.

"Did Mr. C. help you with your work?" Cohen asked, referring to an aide the school had recently assigned to keep an eye on Christopher.

"I didn't have any work. I sat there coloring on a girl's paper."

A few minutes later, he got his skateboard and disappeared down the hallway. Then came a crash. He had run into a mirror at the end of the hallway and was trying to pick up the pieces.

"Don't pick it up," his mother said. "Come here."

He came over, sat in a small chair near her, hung his head, and began to cry. "You want to say something?" his grandmother asked.

He looked up. "I'm soooory."

"We have told you I don't know how many times not to skateboard in the house." Not long after that late April interview, Christopher was transferred to a special class at the Children's Home designed for children with behavioral or emotional problems. The class has a waiting list because sending a student there costs the school district

\$20,000 a year compared with the usual \$11,000.

Thomas-Mitchell believes the media attention helped. "We were fortunate," she said. Contacted when the school year ended, she said Christopher was doing better but is still behind academically since he missed at least 30 days of class at his first four schools. "It's been a rough first year of school for that little boy."