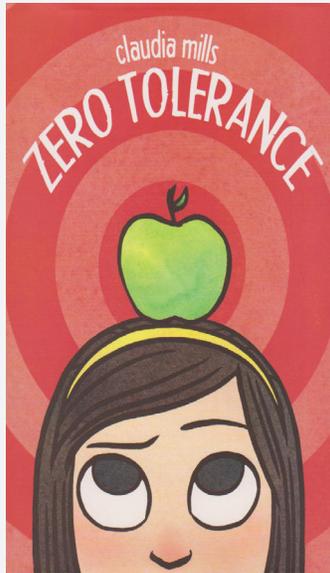


## Second Reaction: Zero Tolerance: Is There Such a Thing as Too Safe?

Mills, Claudia. *Zero Tolerance*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013.

Calli Deedrick



*Zero Tolerance* by Claudia Mills is a book that addresses the complicated lives of middle school students. Sierra Shepard, an honor student at Longwood Middle School, experiences many inner conflicts to which students of this age group can relate. From drama with friends and boys to parental disagreements, *Zero Tolerance* does a great job of relating to the young reader through applicable life experiences.

As a future educator, reading this book gave me many opinions and ideas for possible use in the classroom setting. Currently, I am working as a pre-service teacher in a fifth grade classroom, and I could see how my students could enjoy this book. While they may focus more on the social conflicts side of the story, it is impossible to ignore the main conflict of the zero-tolerance policy that is enforced on a student who made an honest mistake.

Throughout the story, Mills keeps the reader hoping that everything will work out in favor of Sierra and that her life will return to a sense of normalcy. She points out the very important downfall of zero-tolerance policies. While these policies are used to help keep students safe, some students can wrongfully be punished for the acts of others or for accidental events, such as the one highlighted in this book. When rules are enforced unreasonably, students can use the system to work around doing things that are required of them in their classes. Take a closer look at Luke. This boy is a prime example of someone who works the system, maybe even a

little too well. While he served his first suspension for a justified reason, he knew exactly how to find himself back in the detention room just to spend time out of the classroom. He also was well aware that he could face expulsion, which was okay with him because he did not like Longwood Middle School and their strict rules.

Zero-tolerance policies have their place in the school setting; however, a clause for exceptions should be made for students like Sierra, who accidentally picked up her mother's lunch, which had a paring knife in it. As a student who was trying to do the right thing and turn the knife in, the act of bringing a knife to school caused her to miss out on an entire week of instructional time while serving detention.

This is not something I would ever want my future students to encounter. When we take a look at statistics that show how students who are behind in school and tend to have behavior issues in the classroom, one realization could be that any time spent in a suspension setting results in the student falling further behind in his or her classwork. One solution might be that teachers could send work for students in the suspension room, rather than allowing the students an entire free day to sit and play their handheld game devices.

I think an event in the book that would leave a powerful impression with students is Colin's idea to write the petition for Sierra, as well as his plan to boycott the choir trip. It is through Colin's character that students could realize the power of speaking out to that which they consider an injustice. While Sierra's consequence was a very clear case of school policy gone wrong, there are issues in every school that students wish they had a say in, but no one thinks to speak out. While the petition may not have provided any positive results for Sierra, it certainly helped unite the school in a common cause. When a student realizes the power he or she holds as a human being, the possibilities are endless. Through sharing this book with students, I hope they would gain a sense of self-importance, as well as seeing how reason can prevail.

### **About the Author**

**Calli Deedrick** attends Franklin College. As a major in elementary education, she enjoys reading about and focusing on views regarding social issues in today's school systems. She hopes to become a fifth or sixth grade teacher and to inspire students to make positive impacts on their environment.