An Open Letter to Claire’s Corporate.

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I am a former employee of one of your Edmonton, Alberta area Claire's locations. I didn’t mind piercing the ears of children who were excited to get new earrings, but nervous about the procedure. I’d do what I could to put them at ease. I had a couple "gray area" piercings, though; piercings where the children resisted heavily, were pressured and intimidated by the parents into settling down, and the children weren't happy with what had happened even after the earrings were in place and the standard lollipop had been dispensed. I didn't feel good about those, and I started to wonder at what point the piercer and the parent are actually violating a child's personal boundaries. Last week was a breaking point.

A seven year old girl came in to Claire's with her mother to get her ears pierced. I was to assist with the piercing, since it was what we call a "double," both ears at the same time. It's reserved for nervous kids who might change their mind after the first earring goes in. The girl pleaded and sobbed for thirty minutes not to be pierced. Despite Mom saying, "Honey, we can go home whenever you want," she was not letting her daughter go home. She was putting a great deal of pressure on her daughter to go through with the piercing. This child was articulate, smart, and well aware of herself and her body. She expressed that she didn't want us touching her, that we were standing too close, that she was feeling uncomfortable. She made it clear she no longer wanted to get her ears pierced. She begged, over and over again, for Mom to please, just take her home. That child's message was loud and clear to me: Do not touch my body, do not pierce my ears, I do not want to be here. I'm inclined to respect a child's right to say, "NO," to any adult forcing any kind of non-medical contact on them, so I told the other piercer I wouldn't be part of the ear piercing for this girl. To my great relief, in the end the mother respected her daughter's wishes, and took her home.

The next day at work, my manager asked about the previous day. I explained the child that refused the piercing and begged to be left alone, and I told my manager that I would not have been able to pierce that little girl's ears if Mom had insisted on it. I was firmly told, "You would have had no choice but to do it."

So I brought up the worst scenario I could think of. I wanted to know how far we were supposed to take this policy of piercing non-consenting children. "So if a mother is physically restraining her daughter, holding her down and saying, 'DO IT,' while that little girl cries and asks me not to, do I do the piercing?" My manager did not hesitate to respond, "Yes, you do the piercing."

I gave my notice that day. I had a choice between facing disciplinary actions (that would eventually lead to my termination) the next time I refused to pierce the ears of children who withdrew their consent, or leaving on my own terms. I chose the latter. My manager continues to assert that the other Claire's managers in this district are in agreement with her, and that our District Sales Manager confirms this policy is correct: Children can be held down and pierced. Children do not have a voice in the piercing process. The associate doing the piercing has no right to refuse to shoot metal through the ears of a child who begs not to be touched.

Your Policies and Procedures Manual offers only one policy, Policy 509, on the right to refuse a piercing. It is this: “We reserve to the right to refuse an ear piercing if a successful one cannot be done.” There is no mention of the use of physical restraint by the parent, or the employee’s right to refuse an ear piercing if their concerns are for the emotional welfare of the child. Basically, if I’m not going to get kicked in the head by that restrained child, or if that hysterical seven year old is unlikely to knock the gun from my hand, I must go ahead with the piercing.

This is, by my point of view, a deeply flawed policy that helps facilitate situations where children can be traumatized or otherwise subject to forms of intimidation and abuse in-store. The employee who refuses to be a party to these actions will be, “coached,” written up, and eventually terminated after enough write-ups.

I believe in upholding a child’s right to bodily integrity at all costs, and I will not be an adult that commits an indignity to a child. Kids who don’t want to endure the discomfort and pain of the procedure should not be forced to because a paying adult comes in, claims to be the legal guardian and insists upon the ear piercing. I cannot be part of a company that teaches a child that their right to say, “NO”, to invasive non-medical contact can be so easily overridden by an adult, and moreover, that they're supposed to accept that. This is about a child’s right to refuse to be pierced. This is also about an employee’s right to refuse to pierce the child that refuses to be pierced.

If you are a company that cares about kids, I implore you to consider changing this policy that blatantly ignores every child who vocally protests, cries, shows obvious signs of distress or is physically restrained by their alleged guardian while they sob and beg to be released. There needs to be something in place that protects both the rights of the child to protect his or her own body, and the right for the employee to refuse to pierce a heavily distressed child that adamantly refuses to have his or her ears pierced.

So I implore you now, as does everyone who shares this letter--Be better. Be accountable. Know what’s going on in your stores, and do something about it. And until you do, myself and perhaps many others have no interest in shopping at Claire’s and helping fund what we believe to be a cruel practice. Our children deserve better. Please do better by them.