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Child with autism accused of shoplifting from Boynton mall store

By Alexia Campbell, Sun Sentinel

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Police this week arrested a boy with autism on shoplifting charges after they say he walked out of a Boynton Beach Mall store with a greeting card in his hand.

A Spencer Gifts store employee called police Sunday after stopping the 12-year-old boy leaving with the $2.95 card, according to a Boynton Beach police report.

A manager at the store declined to comment when reached by phone Wednesday afternoon. A few hours later, however — after news media inquiries and an outcry on Facebook — store managers told police they no longer would press charges against the boy.

Still, the arrest outraged the boy's mother and sparked heated discussion online about the handling of the incident.

Jacqui Feldman, 48, said she was shocked to find out the manager wanted to press shoplifting charges against her son, who suffers from Asperger's syndrome.

The high-functioning form of autism causes forgetfulness and distraction, which likely led her son to forget he was holding the card when he left the store, Feldman said.

The boy was crying hysterically by the time Feldman and police got to the store, insisting that he wasn't stealing, the report said.

"As a parent, my job is to protect him, but I felt helpless," said Feldman, who let her son and two of his friends go shopping by themselves for an hour while she went to a different store.

The police officer told Feldman he would not handcuff the boy, but that her son later would need to go to court and possibly into a juvenile offender's program. The boy was barred from returning to the Spencer Gifts store for a year.

Lack of understanding about Asperger's syndrome may have played a role in the incident, said Maryellen Quinn-Lunny, director of Florida Atlantic University's Center for Autism and Related Disabilities.

"People with Asperger's don't look handicapped," she said. "The expectation is that they should act like everyone else, but they don't."
Feldman's son was diagnosed with Asperger's when he was 16 months old. He's been in therapy ever since, but still acts like an "absent-minded professor," even losing five cellphones in one year, she said.

The Boynton Beach mother shared her distress about Sunday's incident with support groups and on the Facebook page of Single Mothers Who Have Children With Autism.

Dozens of members of the online group criticized the arrest, some urging a boycott of Spencer Gifts stores and expressing their disapproval on the company's Facebook page. One member said a different autism community would help Feldman pay the attorney she hired.

"I would also like some answers and apologies for your son," wrote one woman.

Feldman said she was relieved to learn that the store would drop the charges against her son, but that he still is traumatized from the incident, setting back some of his progress in years of therapy.

"It's going to take some time for him to trust again," Feldman said. "Now I'm scared to let him out of my sight."