

Morgan Hill: Preschool teacher in drugged sippy cup case sentenced to jail

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MORGAN HILL -- A former preschool teacher was tearful and apologetic when she was sentenced Monday morning to six months in jail for slipping crushed-up sleeping pills into the sippy cups of young children in her care, according to lawyers in the case.

Deborah Gratz, 60, of Hollister, also was sentenced to four years of probation, said Santa Clara County prosecutor Sumerle Davis.

"I wanted her to be granted probation, but also wanted her to do some custody time," said Davis. "There are parents who might have liked to see more time, but this is a fair resolution. ... It's very unsettling for parents to think that they could leave their child in someone's care and then be betrayed like this."

Gratz pleaded no contest to five misdemeanor charges of attempted child endangerment in May. She had worked at the Kiddie Academy in Morgan Hill since 2007, employed as the "lead toddler teacher" in the morning.

She was arrested in March when a co-worker saw her putting something into cups that were to be used by children later that day. The vessels were confiscated before any kids drank from them, and they were found to have been spiked with crushed Sominex, an over-the-counter sleep aid also used for allergies, cold relief and motion sickness.

Defense attorney Brian Worthington say Gratz was remorseful and said in court that she loved the children and did not intend to harm anyone.

"She knows she is going to have to live with this the rest of her life," Worthington said. "Obviously this is a terrible situation, and these parents should not have had to go through this. But I am confident that Debbie does not pose any danger. She made a terrible mistake under an amount of stress that made her act unlike herself."

Worthington would not elaborate on what was causing his client duress, and maintained that there is no indication that she had previously spiked the tots' drinks.

However, Davis said that some parents have reported that their child would fall asleep on them after being picked up from the preschool, or be unable to sleep later at night.

"There was some discussion, and every parent is going to wonder if there was something more," Worthington said. "But there is absolutely no evidence that it happened more than once, and Gratz has maintained all along that it was one single time."

Gratz is scheduled to start her jail sentence Sept. 27, although Worthington said they are in discussions with the judge to possibly make her eligible for a community service program in lieu of serving time behind bars.

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