



Summary of Research on the Dimensions Contributing to Expulsion and Suspension in Early Childhood Settings

As States and Territories consider strategies to prevent and ultimately eliminate expulsion and suspension in the early years, why early learning programs suspend or expel young children needs to be explored. The reasons can be considered as four dimensions of the problem: 1) the structure of quality with policies that increase the likelihood of expulsion and suspension; 2) the absence of deep understanding of child development, 3) racial disparities in discipline, and 4) young children who need more and different support than can be provided by an educator or an early learning setting alone.

Dimension 1. Structural Quality

The research also identifies program characteristics that are associated with an increased likelihood of expulsion.^{1,2} These characteristics comprise a mixture of policies, program design elements, and teacher attributes that create a context that may lead to behaviors perceived as challenging.³

- ◆ **Programmatic policies.** Higher child-to-adult ratios, larger group size, too little or too restrictive structure, physical environments that are too open or unclearly defined, longer staffing or operating hours, and a lack of behavior supports and early childhood mental health consultation for program leadership and staff
- ◆ **Teacher-student interactions.** Teachers with higher levels of stress, teachers with higher rates of depression, and teachers who hold beliefs about stricter discipline

Dimension 2. Knowledge of Child Development

Focus on social-emotional development. Children's social-emotional development is a cornerstone of school readiness, health, and overall well-being. This area of development includes personality, temperament, social problem solving, self-conceptualization, and self-regulation.⁴ Social-emotional development is a child's capacity to experience, regulate, and express emotions; form close and secure interpersonal relationships; and explore and learn from his or her environment.

Focus on cultural and linguistic competence, equity, and core child development knowledge. Cultural competence in all early learning program staff is a necessary factor in reducing expulsion and suspension and advancing equity. National data suggest that children of particular cultural communities (for example, Hawaiian, Pacific Islanders, Latino, and Black) are more likely to be expelled or suspended than White children. Cross-cultural differences in children's expression and interpretation of emotions have increasingly been documented. For example, anger, shame, and exuberant expression of positive emotions are treated differently in child socialization practices across cultures.⁵

All child development occurs in the context of culture.⁶ Children learn how to understand, address, regulate, and express culturally appropriate emotions through everyday interactions with adults and children in their families. Early childhood staff who interact daily with young children from diverse racial, cultural, and language communities need to have the knowledge and skills to understand how children's emotional responses may reflect cultural expectations and learning. They also need to be able to communicate classroom expectations in a child's first language; support social-emotional learning; and examine their own cultural socialization, bias, and practices.

Challenging behavior as part of child development. Young children's social-emotional capacity develops over time in the context of family, community, and cultural expectations.⁷ Warm, nurturing

relationships with adults help very young children develop trust, empathy, and compassion. They also support children as they develop curiosity and confidence and learn to cooperate with others and persist with challenging tasks.⁸ As young children grow, they communicate through behavior such as facial expressions, body movements, and sounds.⁹ Pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton observed that as children reach key developmental milestones, they have periods of challenging behaviors that offer “touch points” for caregivers because they “typically come with regressive behavior that can provide self-doubt and despair [for the parent or caregiver]” before the child integrates the new skill.¹⁰ In other words, some challenging behaviors are normal and to be expected in infants and young children. Some challenging behaviors are easier to understand than others as children’s behaviors reflect their experiences, culture, and personal history.¹¹

Expulsion and suspension can pathologize child behavior and increase disparities. Young children test boundaries and act out as they develop social-emotional skills. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, for example, it is typical for a preschooler’s frustration or anger to manifest as physical conflict.¹² If the child is responded to in a way that promotes empathy, for instance, this fosters the child’s development. Labeling a developmentally appropriate behavior as disruptive or challenging and removing the child from the setting does not help the child or family, and could lead to unnecessary interventions.¹³

Distinguishing concerning behaviors from developmentally appropriate behaviors. The appearance of challenging behavior is subjective, and teasing apart the reasons for such behavior can be difficult. Factors contributing to a child’s behavior may be related to the child, family, program, or all of the above.¹⁴ Identification of behaviors as challenging is often based on an adult’s perception of risk. Traits such as independent-mindedness and a willingness to assert one’s views can be viewed as disruptive, defiant, or aggressive.¹⁵

The 2012 National Survey of Early Care and Education indicates that only about 20 percent of providers reported receiving training on facilitating social-emotional growth in the past year.¹⁶ Without enough training, it may be difficult to distinguish concerning behaviors from those that are developmentally appropriate, and mischaracterizing these behaviors may lead to inappropriate responses and labeling.¹⁷

Dimension 3. Racial Disparities in Discipline

Definition of implicit bias. Implicit bias refers to the unconscious attitudes that affect understanding, actions, and decisions. These associations cause feelings and attitudes about other people based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, and appearance. Implicit associations do not necessarily align with declared beliefs. Recent studies shed light on how implicit bias contributes to the likelihood of expulsion:

- ◆ **Disproportionate levels of discipline.** In a recent study that used eye-tracking technology, Yale researchers found that preschool teachers (regardless of their race) tend to more closely observe Black children, especially Black boys, than White children when they are expecting challenging behavior. White teachers appeared to hold Black preschoolers to a lower behavioral standard, whereas Black teachers held Black preschoolers to a high standard and in general tended to recommend harsher exclusionary discipline. These biases, though different, appear to share the expectation that Black children will have more frequent challenging behaviors.

When teachers were provided background information that included familial stressors that may explain problematic child behavior, teachers of the same race as the child showed greater empathy for the child, which may have led to feelings that the challenging behavior could improve. However, this information did not have the same impact on teachers of a different race than the child, who actually rated the behavior as more severe. The researchers concluded that for these teachers, the background information may have led to feelings of hopelessness and the sense that the child’s challenging behaviors were insurmountable. These findings are consistent with studies showing a tendency for raters (applied here to teachers) to show greater empathy for the misfortunes of others when rating someone of their own race.¹⁸

- ◆ **Perceptions of children’s behavior.** A review of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study to understand disparities at kindergarten entry shows trends in teachers’ perceptions of children’s behavior.¹⁹ The review analyzed both parent and teacher perceptions of children’s noncognitive skills, such as self-control, approaches to learning, social interactions, and persistence. It found disparities in how parents

and teachers rated students' behavior. For example, Black and White parents equally rated their children's persistence, approaches to learning, and social interactions, but teachers rated Black students as having a distinct disadvantage relative to Whites in these skills. The disparity was even greater when rating self-control: "according to parents, Black children exhibit a relatively high degree of self-control, while teachers perceive them to have substantially less self-control than White students."²⁰ The study did not offer reasons for these differences; however, the ratings matched by socioeconomic status, but not by race, suggesting that race introduces biases.

- ◆ **Overestimation of threat.** Growing evidence indicates that Black boys are perceived as less innocent, less human, and more deserving of punishment than their White peers, and that adults continually overestimate Black boys' ages relative to their White and Latino peers. The findings suggest that the perceived threat commonly associated with Black men may be generalized to Black boys as young as 5.^{21,22}
- ◆ **Teacher relationships with students.** A study of kindergarteners and first graders found that while all teachers struggle in their relationships with children of both genders who exhibit challenging behaviors, teachers reported more conflict in their relationships with Black students at the end of the year than at the beginning. The study determined that teacher relationships with Black students increase in conflict over the school year, but also start with less closeness, possibly reflecting an initial bias.²³
- ◆ **Impact of underprepared teachers.** Research at Stanford University shows that underprepared early learning teachers are more likely to use punitive and rejecting disciplinary techniques and are more likely to over-identify children, especially children of color, for special education, disciplinary action, and expulsions. They lack the skills to teach problem-solving behaviors, and often misinterpret what children do and say.²⁴

These realities can be changed. Implicit biases are malleable.²⁵ Recent research suggests that early childhood mental health consultation can reduce disparities in expulsion²⁶ and that interventions can be designed to increase teachers' empathy for children.²⁷ Teachers may benefit from ongoing guidance and support on how best to use knowledge about family background, culture, and first language to improve communication with families, improve their interpretations of children's behavior, and avoid feelings of hopelessness, especially when the teacher's and child's races do not match.²⁸

Dimension 4. Trauma & Behavior Connection

Role of trauma-informed care. Young children dealing with trauma may exhibit challenging behavior. Trauma can disrupt the architecture of the developing brain—cognitively, biologically, and physiologically.²⁹ Children experiencing trauma arrive at school less ready to learn than their peers, and trauma from exposure to violence can diminish concentration, memory, organizational, and language abilities.³⁰ New strategies for supporting children who have experienced trauma are emerging, and resources are being produced to advance trauma-informed teaching practices.³¹

Infant and early childhood mental health services. Approximately 10 to 14 percent of children from birth to age 5 experience emotional, relational, or behavioral disturbance.³² As a recent Zero to Three report points out, "Children living in families coping with parental loss, substance abuse, mental illness, or exposure to trauma are at heightened risk of developing infant-early childhood mental health disorders. The stressors of poverty can compound these risks. Young children, even infants, can show early warning signs of mental health disorders ... Without intervention, serious mental health problems can manifest."³³ Early learning programs are one important place for early detection; program staff can connect families to appropriate supports and services.

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