Standing United: Preventing Suspension & Expulsion in Early Childhood

For Early Childhood Educators

> "If a child doesn't know how to read, we teach."
> If a child doesn't know how to swim, we teach.
> If a child doesn't know how to multiply, we teach.
> If a child doesn't know how to behave, we…..Punish."

John Herner

National Association of State Directors of Special Education President 1998-1999

HeartWired Video

https://youtu.be/ZacejFXe_O4?si=RULjiMY69em2ReND

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Policy Statement on Expulsion and Suspension in Early Childhood Settings

A child's early years set the trajectory for the relationships and successes they will experience for the rest of their lives, making it crucial that children's earliest experiences truly foster—and never harm—their development. As such, expulsion and suspension practices in early childhood settings, two stressful and negative experiences young children and their families may encounter in early childhood programs, should be prevented, severely limited, and eventually eliminated.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,
U.S. Department of Education

✉ Dear Early Childhood Educators,

In our journey together in early childhood, we share a common goal: to create a safe, nurturing environment where every child feels valued and supported. The early years of a child's life are foundational, and your role in shaping their experiences cannot be overstated.

We also recognize that challenges will arise when we are working with young children, whether it's understanding a child's behavior and diverse needs, or simply navigating the complexities of early childhood education for the children and families we serve. **But remember, suspending or expelling a child from care is not just a last resort; it's a practice we can and should strive to avoid altogether.** Every child deserves a chance to learn, grow, and thrive in our classrooms.

To achieve this, we must unite as a community of educators. Let's focus on understanding the root causes of challenging behaviors, managing complex classroom dynamics, as well as embrace trauma-informed practices, while curating individualized and responsive practices, that will foster strong relationships with families. Together, we can create environments that meet every child's unique needs.

You are not alone in this effort. Reach out for support, collaborate with your colleagues, and continue to grow in your understanding and skills. When we stand united against suspension and expulsion, we make a powerful statement: that every child matters, and every child deserves our commitment and care.

Thank you for your dedication to the children and families you serve. **Your work truly makes a difference.**

🔍 Understanding Child Development and Behavior in Early Childhood

As early childhood educators, you play a crucial role in nurturing the growth and development of young children. A key aspect of this is understanding that behavior is often a reflection of where a child is developmentally. Knowing what to expect at different stages can help you respond to challenging behaviors with empathy and appropriate strategies.

Infants (0-12 months)

At this stage, infants are exploring their world primarily through their senses. They communicate their needs through crying, cooing, and other non-verbal cues. Their behavior is driven by basic needs like hunger, sleep, and comfort. It's important to remember that any fussiness or difficulty settling is often due to their developing nervous system.

Toddlers (1-3 years)

Toddlers are at a stage where they are beginning to assert their independence. They may test boundaries and express frustration through tantrums or defiance, which is developmentally appropriate. Their language skills are still developing, so they may struggle to communicate their needs verbally, leading to outbursts. Understanding that these behaviors are a normal part of development can help you guide them with patience and positive reinforcement.

Preschoolers (3-5 years)

Preschoolers are becoming more social and starting to develop their problem-solving skills. However, they are still learning how to manage their emotions and understand others' perspectives. This can lead to conflicts with peers or difficulty handling disappointment. At this stage, children benefit greatly from modeling and teaching social-emotional skills, such as taking turns, expressing feelings, and using words instead of actions to resolve conflicts.

The Importance of Emotional Regulation

Across all stages, it's crucial to recognize that emotional regulation develops gradually. Young children often lack the skills to manage strong emotions, which can manifest in behaviors that seem challenging. Your role as an educator is to support this development by creating a safe, predictable environment and helping children learn strategies to calm themselves, like deep breathing or finding a quiet space. Help children identify and express their feelings by incorporating tools like a feelings board during morning circle time, or by modeling language when a child is experiencing emotions, such as sadness or happiness.

Behavior as Communication

Remember that behavior is a form of communication. When children act out, they may be expressing unmet needs, such as feeling overwhelmed, tired, or needing attention. By carefully observing and understanding the context of a child's behavior, you can often identify what they are trying to communicate and respond in a way that addresses the root cause.

To effectively understand and support a child's behavior, consider these three key factors: Development, Temperament, and Environment.

a. **Development:** A child's developmental stage significantly influences their behavior. For example, biting in a two-year-old is often developmentally appropriate, reflecting their evolving self-regulation skills or sensory needs. Understanding what is typical for a particular age can help you approach these behaviors with patience and appropriate strategies.

b. **Temperament:** Temperament, defined as a child's biologically based approach to the world, profoundly shapes how they respond to experiences (Thomas & Chess, 1956). The nine categories of temperament include:

- Activity level
- Distractibility
- Intensity
- Regularity
- Sensory threshold
- Approach/withdrawal
- Adaptability
- Persistence
- Mood

Caregivers can use this understanding to anticipate and support a child's behavior, ensuring a "goodness-of-fit" between the child's temperament and their environment (Chess & Thomas, 1991).

c. **Environment:** A child's environment plays a critical role in shaping their behavior. Influences include the caregiver-child relationship, stressors, changes in routine, sleep, nutrition, prenatal history,

and experiences of trauma (Blair, 2010). Being aware of these factors allows caregivers to create supportive environments that meet the child's needs and promote positive behavior.

Cultural and Individual Differences

Children's development and behavior can also be influenced by cultural backgrounds and individual temperaments. What might be considered typical behavior in one culture could be interpreted differently in another. Being mindful of these differences helps ensure that your responses are respectful of each child's unique context.

Working with Families

Collaborating with families is essential in understanding a child's behavior. Families can provide insights into a child's development, temperament, and any recent changes that may be affecting them. Building strong, respectful partnerships with families allows for consistency in supporting the child both at home and in the childcare setting.

Brain Development

The five R's of supporting a young child's developing brain—Relationships, Responsive Interactions, Routines, Respect, and Repetition—are fundamental principles that can help guide childcare teachers in fostering healthy development:

a. **Relationships:** Strong, positive relationships with caregivers provide the foundation for a child's emotional and cognitive development. A secure attachment helps children feel safe, valued, and understood, which is essential for exploring the world and learning.

b. **Responsive Interactions:** Being attuned to a child's needs and responding promptly and sensitively helps build trust and supports the development of communication skills and emotional regulation. When children know their caregivers will respond consistently, they feel more secure and confident.

c. **Routines:** Consistent routines provide a sense of predictability and security for young children. Knowing what to expect helps reduce anxiety and allows children to focus on learning and exploration. Routines also support the development of self-regulation skills as children learn to transition between activities.

d. **Respect:** Treating children with respect, acknowledging their feelings, and valuing their individuality promotes a positive self-concept. When children feel respected, they are more likely to respect others and develop healthy social relationships.

e. **Repetition:** Repetition is key to brain development, as it reinforces learning and helps children master new skills. Repeated experiences strengthen neural connections, supporting the development of memory, language, and problem-solving abilities.

By integrating these five R's into daily practice, caregivers can create an environment that nurtures a child's developing brain and supports their overall growth and well-being.

A Holistic Approach

As we develop our understanding of young children's behavior, it's important to employ a holistic approach that includes self-care, observation, reflection, direct support, and effective communication with parents. Here are some strategies that encompass these areas:

Self-Care for Early Childhood Educators

Why it matters: Supporting young children can be physically and emotionally demanding. Teachers need to prioritize their well-being to be patient, present, and effective in their role.

Strategies: Regularly practice stress-relief techniques, such as deep breathing or mindfulness. Set boundaries to ensure a healthy work-life balance and seek support when feeling overwhelmed. Taking care of yourself ensures you can take care of the children in your care.

Strengthening Responsive Care

Why it matters: Providing consistent, warm, and attuned interactions—is foundational to healthy development in children from birth to age 5. As an early childhood educator, your timely and thoughtful responses to children's cues help build secure attachments, promote emotional regulation, and support cognitive growth. By intentionally practicing responsive care, you create a safe, nurturing environment where young children feel seen, supported, and ready to learn.

Strategies: Self-reflection is critical in strengthening responsive care of young children. Regularly reflect on and assess your interactions with the children in your care. Consider whether you are demonstrating consistent addressing challenging behaviors through developmental understanding and responsive care. When documenting children's behaviors, rely on objective, observable facts rather than subjective interpretations. Additionally, create a developmentally appropriate environment ensuring that all children feel valued.

Observation and Reflection

Why it matters: Understanding a child's behavior begins with careful observation. By noticing patterns and triggers, caregivers can better understand what a child is communicating through their behavior.

Strategies: Take time to observe the child in different settings and note any recurring behaviors. Reflect on what might be influencing the behavior—consider developmental stages, temperament, and environmental factors. Journaling observations can be helpful in identifying patterns over time.

Supporting Children

Why it matters: Young children need consistent, supportive interactions to help them navigate their emotions and behaviors. Caregivers can guide them through challenging moments and teach them valuable social-emotional skills.

Strategies: Provide clear, age-appropriate guidance and set consistent boundaries. Offer praise and encouragement when children manage their emotions or follow directions. Use calming techniques, such as deep breathing or a quiet space, to help children regulate their emotions.

Relational Impact on the Child's Motivation to Learn

Why it matters: Positive relationships with caregivers can greatly enhance a child's motivation to learn. When children feel secure and valued, they are more likely to engage in exploration and learning.

Strategies: Build trust through consistent, nurturing interactions. Show interest in the child's ideas and efforts and create a learning environment that fosters curiosity. Use positive reinforcement to motivate and celebrate small achievements, helping children feel confident in their abilities.

Importance of Communication with Parents

Why it matters: Open, ongoing communication with parents is key to understanding and supporting a child's behavior. By working together, caregivers and parents can ensure consistency and address any concerns collaboratively.

What to Communicate:

- What's Happening Before and After: Share observations about what occurs before and after challenging behaviors. This can help identify triggers and effective responses both at home and in the care setting.

- Strategies You Have Tried: Let parents know what approaches you've taken to support the child. This transparency helps build trust and allows parents to replicate or adjust strategies at home.

How to Communicate:

- Use positive, non-judgmental language, focusing on the child's needs and strengths.

- Encourage open dialogue by asking parents for their insights and suggestions, ensuring they feel included in the process.

- Regular check-ins, whether through informal conversations at pick-up/drop-off or scheduled meetings, can help maintain strong communication.

When to Refer

Knowing when to refer a child for additional support or services is crucial in ensuring they receive the help they need to thrive. While challenging behaviors or developmental concerns can often be addressed within the childcare setting, there are times when a referral to a specialist or external service may be necessary.

When to Consider a Referral:

Persistent Challenging Behaviors:

When to refer: If a child consistently exhibits challenging behaviors that do not improve despite appropriate classroom interventions, it may be time to seek additional support. Red flags and/or challenging behaviors could include, but are not limited to the following: frequent aggression, self-harm, extreme withdrawal, eating difficulties, sleeping difficulties, or other behaviors that significantly disrupt their ability to function in the classroom.

Who to refer to: Infant Mental Health Endorsed professional or Consultant, Behavioral specialists, child psychologists, or other mental health professionals. Early intervention

Developmental Delays:

When to refer: If a child is not meeting anticipated developmental milestones (e.g., speech, motor skills, social interactions) and consistent efforts to support the child's specific developmental needs within the classroom are not effective, a referral to Early Intervention is recommended creating the ability to address potential developmental issues early in the child's overall development.

Who to refer to: Pediatricians, early intervention programs, or developmental specialists.

Emotional or Social Difficulties:

When to refer: If a child shows signs of ongoing emotional distress (e.g., excessive anxiety, depression, difficulty forming relationships) that go beyond typical developmental phases, professional support may be needed.

Who to refer to: Infant Mental Health Endorsed professionals/Consultants, Child psychologists, counselors, or therapists specializing in young children. Early intervention

Health Concerns:

When to refer: If there are concerns about a child's physical health (e.g., frequent illness, significant weight changes, unexplained fatigue) that may be impacting their behavior or development, a medical evaluation is necessary.

Who to refer to: Pediatricians or other healthcare providers.

Impact on Learning and Development:

When to refer: If a child's behavior or development is significantly impacting their ability to learn or participate in daily activities, despite adjustments and support, a referral for specialized educational services may be needed.

Who to refer to: Educational psychologists, special education services, or early intervention programs.

Trauma or Family Changes:

When to refer: If a child has experienced trauma or significant changes in their home environment (e.g., loss, divorce, abuse) and is showing signs of distress, a referral for counseling or trauma-informed care can provide the necessary support.

Who to refer to: Child and family therapists, trauma specialists, or social services.

How to Approach a Referral:

Communicate with Parents:

Discuss your observations including the intensity, rate and frequency of the behavior or the developmental concern with parents in a sensitive and non-judgmental way. Share the reasons for your concerns and the steps you've already taken to support their child.

Frame the referral as a positive step toward getting the child the support and intervention they need to support their overall growth, emphasizing that early intervention can lead to better developmental outcomes for the child.

Collaborate with Specialists:

Work with the referred specialists to ensure a smooth transition and ongoing support for the child. Maintain open communication to share insights and observations that can aid in their assessment and interventions.

Follow-Up:

Continue to monitor the child's progress and stay in touch with the parents and specialists involved. Your ongoing support in the classroom is crucial to the child's success.

By knowing when to refer and how to approach the process, caregivers can play a pivotal role in connecting children and families with the resources they need for healthy development and well-being.

Visit https://itcva.online/central-directory/ to make a referral to Part C Early Intervention services.

🔗 Additional Resources

American Association of Pediatrics: https://www.aap.org/

California Tools to Focus on Prevention: https://preventingchildcareexpulsionca.org/california-tools-to-focus-on-prevention/

Child Development Module: http://veipd.org/elearn/course/index.php?categoryid=14

VA's Integrated Training Collaborative | Partnership for People with Disabilities at VCU

This module provides information about infant and toddler development (birth to 36 months) as well as the impact of specific conditions on development. Completing the module takes approximately 2 hours and results in a certificate of completion.

Child Development Topics and Trends: https://www.veipd.org/main/sub_child_dev.html

This website provides resources about infant and toddler development (birth to 36 months).

Division for Early Childhood: https://www.dec-sped.org/

Expulsion Prevention Self-Reflection Checklist: https://www.pyramidmodel.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/ExpulsionPreventionChecklist-Revised1.22-Final.docx

Infant Toddler Temperament Tool (IT3): https://www.ecmhc.org/temperament/index.html

Resources to Share with Families: https://preventingchildcareexpulsionca.org/resources-to-share-with-families/?utm_source=MAP+Newsletter&utm_campaign=4649c3cb13-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2018_08_07_08_31&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_54a9e8e226-4649c3cb13-154887421

Expulsion Prevention Self-Reflection Checklist: https://www.pyramidmodel.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/ExpulsionPreventionChecklist-Revised1.22-Final.docx

National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations: https://challengingbehavior.org/

Zero to Three: https://www.zerotothree.org/

Virginia Early Intervention Professional Development Center: https://www.veipd.org/main/

Social Emotional Based Curriculum

- **Kimochis:** https://www.kimochis.com/
- **MindUp:** https://mindup.org/
- **Incredible Years:** https://www.incredibleyears.com/
- **Second Step:** https://www.secondstep.org/
- **Conscious Discipline:** https://consciousdiscipline.com/

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