

Establishing Policies and Procedures to Eliminate the Use of Exclusionary Discipline Practices in Early Childhood Programs

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This brief provides information on the use of exclusionary discipline practices within early childhood programs and how program-wide implementation of the Pyramid Model for Promoting the Social and Emotional Competence for Infants and Young Children can eliminate the use of these practices. The brief ends with considerations for state and local program leaders as they develop and implement policies and procedures to address these concerns. We will use the term, early childhood programs, to refer to all settings where young children, birth to five, receive early childhood education and care services, including but not limited to private child care, Head Start, and public, private, and faith-based Pre-K/ preschool programs.

Exclusionary discipline is defined by the [Office of Special Education Programs](#) (USDOE, 2022) and the Office of Civil Rights (OCE, 2022) as “the removal, whether on a short-term or long-term basis, of a student from a class, school, or other educational program or activity for violating a school rule or code of conduct.” For example, exclusionary discipline in an early childhood program might include actions such as sending the child home for the remainder of the day, sending the child to another classroom, making continued enrollment in the program contingent on the provision of a resource (e.g., parent attends with the child or provides a classroom assistant), having the child stay home for multiple days, or dismissing the child from the program. National data (e.g., USDOE/Office of Civil Rights, 2021; Children’s Equity Project, 2020, 2022; Zeng et al., 2019) have noted that these discipline practices are used within early childhood programs despite concerns that these practices are ineffective for addressing behavioral concerns

and are linked to harmful child outcomes (USDOE, 2022; Zinsser et al., 2022).

Professionals, families, organizations, and policymakers in early childhood have advocated for eliminating the use of exclusionary discipline practices. Pushing children out of a program and program activities results in a loss of the instruction and support that is needed for guiding a child who has behaviors of concern, disrupts the child’s development of a relationship with their teacher and peers, and causes disruption and stress for families (Zinsser, 2023). Research indicates that young children who are suspended or expelled are more likely to experience future academic failure and grade retention, have negative beliefs about school, have higher dropout rates, and increased incarcerations (Children’s Equity Project, 2020, 2022; Zeng et al., 2021). In addition to these concerns are the disturbing data that these practices are used disproportionately with preschool children who are Black and children with disabilities (USDOE/Office of Civil Rights, 2021). These disparities are alarming and require a comprehensive approach that addresses this “complex and multidimensional” problem that is harmful to children (Children’s Equity Project, 2022). Many advocates have described early suspension and expulsion as contributing to a “preschool to prison” pipeline by noting how early suspension and expulsion link to suspension and expulsion in K-12 schools and the incarceration of youth and young adults (Equal Justice Society, 2018; Meek & Gilliam, 2016; National Black Child Development Institute, 2018).

In many states, an awareness of the use of exclusionary discipline and its harmful effects on young children has

led to state legislation and policies to reduce or eliminate the use of suspension and expulsion in early childhood programs. A survey of state policies conducted in 2021 yielded responses from 43 states and identified 29 states with a state expulsion or suspension policy and six states where a policy was under development (McCann et al., 2021). In addition, federal programs that provide funding for services have also included requirements to reduce or eliminate the use of suspension and expulsion (e.g., 2014 Child Care Block Grant Reauthorization Act, 2014; Head Start Performance Standards, 2016, Office of Special Education Programs [USDOE, 2022]).

Factors related to the use of exclusionary discipline

The likelihood that a program or teacher would engage in exclusionary discipline is related to a complex array of factors. In a recent review of the suspension and expulsion research literature, Zinsser and colleagues (2022) used an ecological systems framework to untangle how various factors—factors related to the child and family, teachers and their characteristics, and the program—contribute to the use of exclusionary discipline. There is not a large body of research that provides definitive answers about the use of exclusionary discipline in early childhood programs, and few studies have examined the complexity of factors that contribute to an increased likelihood that exclusionary discipline will be used. Below are some of the factors related to the use of suspension and expulsions in early childhood programs that are particularly relevant to how we might address these concerns.

- ▶ Lack of behavior support resources and expertise – Exclusionary discipline is more likely within programs that lack the resources needed (e.g., behavior specialists or early childhood mental health consultants, assistance in the classroom) to develop interventions and provide support for children with challenging behavior (Gilliam & Shahar, 2006; Giordano et al., 2021, 2022; Zinsser et al., 2019).
- ▶ Teacher stress and wellness – Teachers who self-report that they are depressed, experiencing stress, perceive their program as not supportive, and feel hopeless about their efficacy in meeting the needs of children with challenging behavior are more likely to want to use exclusionary discipline (Gilliam & Reyes, 2018; Gilliam & Shahar, 2006; Silver & Zinsser, 2020).

- ▶ Family relationships – The use of exclusionary discipline is more likely in programs where teachers have negative perceptions of families, poor communication with families, and perceive the program as less supportive of families (Martin et al., 2018; Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019).
- ▶ Implicit bias – The data on racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions indicate that implicit bias is a factor in how program personnel perceive behavior (Gilliam et al., 2016) and the likelihood that exclusionary discipline will be used as a response.

Preventing the Use of Exclusionary Discipline Practices

The Pyramid Model for Promoting Social and Emotional Competence in Infants and Young Children (i.e., Pyramid Model) provides an approach for eliminating the use of exclusionary discipline. Research on the implementation of the Pyramid Model within preschool classrooms has demonstrated that the use of Pyramid Model practices resulted in increases in social skills for all children in the classroom and decreases in challenging behavior of children rated as having higher levels of behavior challenges (Hemmeter et al., 2016; Hemmeter et al., 2021). A state survey of child care programs found that in programs implementing the Pyramid Model, they were less likely to use exclusionary discipline (Clayback & Hemmeter, 2021), and a demonstration project reported that in a program implementing the Pyramid Model, there were no suspensions or expulsions (Fox et al., 2022).

In consideration of the factors above that contribute to the use of exclusionary discipline, the fit of the Pyramid Model to address the concern is evident. Critical features of the Pyramid Model include family engagement practices; the provision of behavior support resources and procedures to ensure children receive effective intervention; the training of all staff in practices to promote children's social, emotional, and behavioral skills; the use of a data system to track and analyze responses to child behavior incidents; the ongoing training and coaching of staff in implicit bias and the use of anti-bias and culturally responsive practices; and establishing program policies that prohibit the use of exclusionary discipline.

The following are considerations for state leaders and policy-makers as they contribute to the development of systems and actions to address the use of exclusionary discipline in early childhood programs and for local program leaders as they implement the Pyramid Model with a focus on eliminating exclusionary discipline.

Considerations for State Leaders

- ▶ State leaders should develop cross-sector policies (i.e., addressing all sectors that provide early childhood programs) that prohibit the use of expulsion, suspension, seclusion, restraint, and corporal punishment and include program guidance on steps for accessing training, technical assistance, and crisis intervention support. A resource that can support planning is the [*Pyramid Model State Leadership Team Guidance for Preventing the Use of Suspension and Expulsion and Promoting Equitable, Inclusive, and Culturally Responsive Practice*](#).
- ▶ State leaders should invest in training, technical assistance, crisis support, early childhood mental health services, practitioner coaching, and consultation to strengthen the capacity of programs to meet the needs of children and their families.
- ▶ State training and technical assistance to programs and policies related to Quality Rating and Improvement Systems should ensure that efforts to strengthen quality in programs include a focus on practices that are culturally and linguistically sustaining, promote the inclusion of children with disabilities, and guide programs in addressing issues related to equity and racism.
- ▶ State leaders should take actions that will contribute to reducing stress on practitioners, including providing appropriate compensation, child ratios, work-day length, health care, and mental health support.
- ▶ States should develop systems for collecting data on suspension and expulsion that are disaggregated by race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and language. As these data are collected, it is important that there are also processes for examining disparities, evaluating outcomes, identifying unintended consequences, and examining the relationship between program features and the use of exclusionary discipline. These data should be used to inform the delivery of training and technical assistance to strengthen programs.
- ▶ States should establish local or regional access to professionals who can guide the development of behavior intervention plans by facilitating functional behavioral assessment and behavior support planning and providing coaching to practitioners for implementation fidelity of behavior interventions.
- ▶ States should invest in systems to provide professional development, including coaching in the implementation of the Pyramid Model, use of de-escalation

procedures, addressing implicit bias, using culturally and linguistically responsive and sustaining practices, and implementing trauma-informed care.

- ▶ State systems should provide programs with resources to help families access the support needed to address adversities and strengthen their capacity to promote children’s social, emotional, and behavioral well-being.
- ▶ Consider the use of the [*State Leadership Team Equity Inventory: Considerations for the Essential Structures of Statewide Implementation of the Pyramid Model*](#) to foster awareness, careful discussion, and ongoing action planning to maximize equity considerations during Pyramid Model statewide implementation.

Considerations for Local Program and School Leaders

In the implementation of the Pyramid Model, we encourage local program and school leaders to consider the following elements that will strengthen their fidelity of the approach and address concerns about the use of exclusionary discipline:

- ▶ Use the [*Behavior Incident Report System*](#) (BIRS) or the [*Early Childhood School-Wide Information System*](#) (EC-SWIS) to collect data on child behavior incidents and staff responses. These systems provide an efficient mechanism for gathering information on elements related to behavior incidents that are used to make decisions about providing support to teachers and children within the program. In addition, they provide alerts about potential equity issues by calculating disproportionality and provide information on the frequency of behavior incidents resulting in suspensions and expulsions. The program should review data from these systems monthly and make decisions related to changes in program procedures or practices and the support of teachers or children to address any concerns.
- ▶ Review your program policy on behavior guidance (Longstreth & Garrity, 2018) and make explicit the prohibition of suspension and expulsion, including the use of soft suspensions such as: asking a family to take a child home early, suggesting the child needs a break from the program, or shortening the child’s day.
- ▶ Use the [*Pyramid Model Program Leadership Team Guidance for Preventing the Use of Suspension and Expulsion and Promoting Equitable, Inclusive, and Culturally Responsive Practice*](#) to strengthen program policies, procedures, and practices.

- ▶ Provide staff with training on the behavior guidance policy, expectations about strategies to use to address behavior, and the supports available to them if the child’s behavior is a concern. Include training on the importance of ensuring that children remain in the classroom with their peers and how to avoid sending children out of the room for a break or to another classroom to calm down. Note that this becomes more feasible for teachers when all other elements in this section are also addressed.
- ▶ Promote the use of [high-quality inclusion practices](#) and the support of all children in the program. Children found eligible for special education services and support should receive those services within their regular early childhood classroom.
- ▶ Examine your strategies and outcomes related to engaging families and the communities that your program serves. Consider if you have a breadth of strategies and supports that ensure that families of different ethnic, racial, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds feel a connection to the program and develop relationships with their child’s teachers. Provide teaching staff with training, resources, and support to develop strong relationships with all families in their classroom.
- ▶ Review your provision of ongoing professional development, including practice-based coaching, and identify whether you have provided teachers sufficient guidance in the use of culturally responsive practices, implicit bias, anti-bias curricula, and social-emotional teaching practices.
- ▶ Consider teacher wellness and stress and program strategies that might be used to provide support, connect teachers to resources to address stress, provide breaks, or access needed services.
- ▶ Review your procedures for providing teachers with classroom consultation when a child has challenging behavior and the process for developing and implementing a functional behavioral assessment and behavior support plan. Do your procedures and processes work efficiently (e.g., how long does it take to get a plan developed, do teachers receive support immediately)? Do your processes engage families? Are behavior plans implemented with fidelity and show outcomes for reducing challenging behavior and teaching new skills?
- ▶ Consider the use of the [Early Childhood Program-Wide PBS Benchmarks of Quality Cultural Responsiveness Companion](#) to enhance the fit of the program to the diverse values, needs, and cultures of children and families in the program. Use the [Pyramid Model Equity Coaching Guide](#) to support teachers in their use of culturally responsive Pyramid Model practices and address concerns related to equity.

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