Developing a Child Guidance Policy

This guidance will help Pyramid Model (PM) leadership teams assess and improve their existing child guidance policies to effectively support each child in their program and reduce or eliminate the use of exclusionary discipline practices. Using a program policy to help prevent suspension and expulsion is a key recommendation of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' joint policy statement. The U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2014) recommends "early childhood programs develop and clearly communicate preventive guidance and discipline practices" (p. 5) that are developmentally appropriate and promote social-emotional and behavioral health. Discipline policies should reflect an instructional, rather than punitive, approach and emphasize proactive, evidence-based strategies to support student's social, emotional, and behavioral needs (U.S. DOE, 2021).

Early childhood programs often face the challenge of addressing a child's persistent, challenging behavior. Many programs respond to this challenge by developing policies outlining the steps that the program can take to ask a family to leave the program under such circumstances. Often, these policies follow a 'three strikes and you're out' approach or zero tolerance for specified behaviors (e.g., biting that breaks the skin, hurting another child or teacher). Removing a child out of a program and program activities results in a loss of the instruction and support that are 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 feelings about the program, and have higher dropout rates and increased incarcerations (Children's Equity Project, 2020, 2022; Zeng et al., 2021).

Early education programs should not expel or suspend children with challenging behaviors. Instead, programs should assess the child's needs and determine the behavioral support necessary to succeed in their current educational program (Gilliam, 2008; Zinsser et al., 2022). An effective policy describing the guiding principles used in the program helps ensure staff consistently implement evidence-based, developmentally appropriate, and culturally relevant strategies to support each child in the program effectively (Garrity et al., 2017). A policy also communicates to families that the program has a process for addressing behavior and mechanisms for families to be partners in that process. Evidence-based behavior guidance policies can significantly impact children's social, emotional, and academic well-being. Adopting a systematic and purposeful approach to behavior guidance can lead to several key outcomes, such as consistent use of evidence-based classroom practices, fostering meaningful relationships with families, promoting professional development, and equitable decision-making processes using data (Garrity, Longstreth, and Linder, 2017; Longstreth and Garrity, 2018).

The Pyramid Model is a comprehensive framework of evidence-based practices for early childhood programs that provides a tiered approach to promote, prevent, and intervene in children's social, emotional, and behavioral development. A core feature of the Pyramid Model is partnering with families to support children's development effectively. The Pyramid Model involves training

and supporting staff to use evidence-based and culturally responsive practices to enhance all children's social, emotional, and behavioral skills. In addition, targeted support is provided to children who may experience difficulties in learning these skills. Individualized and intensive interventions are provided for the few children with persistent challenging behavior or social-emotional intervention needs, even with other forms of support in place. By implementing the Pyramid Model as a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS), early childhood programs systematically provide support to teachers to ensure the inclusion of every child and promote their social, emotional, and behavioral skills.

In the program-wide implementation of the Pyramid Model, a leadership team ensures that the critical components of an implementation infrastructure are in place so teachers can use Pyramid Model practices. The Early Childhood Program-Wide PBS Benchmarks of Quality (EC-BoQ) guides the leadership team's work. One of the critical elements of the EC-BoQ is developing a child discipline policy statement that includes promoting social and emotional skills, using positive guidance and prevention approaches, and eliminating the use of suspension and expulsion.

Resources for Developing Your Child Discipline Policy

In developing a child discipline policy statement, using the Teaching and Guidance Policies Essentials Checklist (TAG PEC; Longstreth & Garrity, 2018, 2023) can be beneficial. The TAG PEC was developed to provide an easy-to-use checklist for programs to use in their design of policies that promote young children's social-emotional and academic success and implement the systematic features that will prevent and address challenging behavior. As displayed in the table below, the essential features of the TAG PEC are highly aligned with the critical elements of the program-wide implementation of the Pyramid Model.

Alignment of the TAG PEC with Pyramid Model Implementation

Essential Feature of TAG PEC	Early Childhood BoQ Critical Elements and Pyramid Model Practice Fidelity Resources
EF 1 Intentional Focus on Teaching Social-Emotional Skills	Promoting social-emotional skill development is a core feature of the Pyramid Model.
EF 2 Inclusive, Developmentally, Culturally, and Linguistically Appropriate Learning Environment	Pyramid Model practice checklists for infant/toddler and preschool classrooms; Pyramid Model fidelity tools (Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool; Teaching Pyramid Infant Toddler Observation Scale)
EF 3 Setting Behavior Expectations	Program-Wide Expectations (EC-BoQ items #14-20)
EF 4 Preventing and Addressing Challenging Behaviors Using a Tiered Model of Intervention	Procedures for Responding to Challenging Behavior (EC-BoQ item # 28-34)
EF 5 Working with Families	Family Engagement (EC-BoQ item #10-13)
EF 6 Staff Training and Professional Development	Professional Development and Staff Support Plan (EC-BoQ item #21-27)
EF 7 Use of Data for Continuous Improvement	Monitoring Implementation and Outcomes (EC-BoQ item #35-41)

Program leadership teams can use the TAG PEC in the following manner to review and revise their current behavior guidance policies.

Step 1

Convene your Pyramid Model leadership team. Consider if you want to include additional members in reviewing and revising your policy. Your team might want to seek input from early childhood professionals who are not currently on the team (e.g., early childhood mental health consultants) or ensure that families and other staff are represented on the team. As you engage in the review and revision process, your team should align all revisions with the values and practices used in the Pyramid Model.

Step 2

Examine your current score on item #5 on the EC-BoQ. Reflect on whether your team has developed a child guidance or discipline policy statement that is aligned with your commitment to the Pyramid Model (i.e., the program has a child discipline policy statement that includes the promotion of social and emotional skills, use of positive guidance and prevention approaches, and eliminates the use of suspension and expulsion). As you review and revise your child guidance policy, include this work in your program-wide implementation plan.

Step 3

Gather existing documents that include your program's approach to addressing behavior. In addition to a current policy statement, these documents might include staff or family handbooks, family newsletters, or behavior data-collection tools. After your team revises your behavior guidance policy, update the documents accordingly.

Step 4

Assess the quality of your behavior guidance policy using the TAG-PEC. As part of your implementation plan, identify goals for revising your behavior guidance policy. Add action steps to your plan to modify the policy with a target date for completion.

Step 5

Implement and monitor your action plan to improve your behavior guidance policy. Consider if you need to provide professional development to support the implementation of the revised behavior guidance policy or engage in other activities to ensure staff understand and can follow the policy.

In the figure below, we provide a sample child guidance policy to illustrate how each essential feature of the TAG PEC is reflected. This sample policy might be helpful to Pyramid Model program leadership teams as they develop or revise the policy within their program.

Sample Child Guidance Policy

Sunshine Learning Academy Behavior Guidance Policy

Intentional Focus on Teaching Social-Emotional Skills

At Sunshine Learning Academy (SLA), we believe that social-emotional learning during the early years of a child's life sets a positive foundation for their future growth and learning. We use the Pyramid Model for Promoting Social and Emotional Competence in Infants and Young Children (Pyramid Model) to achieve this. The Pyramid Model provides a framework of evidence-based, developmentally, and culturally appropriate practices to promote young children's social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes from birth to five years old. These links provide detailed lists of the Pyramid Model practices recommended for teachers to use with children 2-5 years and for infants/toddlers. These practices are embedded throughout the daily activities.

Working with Families

Our Commitment to Families

Our program is dedicated to nurturing each child's unique cultural identity while fostering a deep respect for others. We recognize that families play a crucial role as the most significant adults in a child's life. We actively promote mutual respect between families and teachers. Daily communication between families and our staff is highly encouraged, and our doors are always open to welcome and engage with families. If a child needs additional support in learning social-emotional skills or addressing challenging behavior, we will collaborate with the family to develop strategies and interventions.

Developmentally and Culturally Appropriate Learning Environment

Our Commitment to a Nurturing Learning Environment

The Pyramid Model includes practices for building nurturing and responsive relationships with children and positive relationships with families as the foundation. We believe this is essential for promoting children's learning. The Pyramid Model also provides practices to establish a predictable environment, a balanced schedule of child-directed and teacher-directed activities, and strategies for supervising and guiding children to promote their engagement in learning

Setting Behavior Expectations

Our Program's Behavior Expectations

At SLA, we have three program-wide behavior expectations that are taught to children and expected of all adults.

These expectations are:

- We are safe
- We are kind
- We are responsible

Teachers in our SLA classrooms establish a few rules aligned with these expectations and appropriate for the needs of the children in their classrooms. These rules help children know how to meet the program-wide expectations by clearly defining what children should do (versus telling children what not to do) within activities and routines. Our goal is for children to learn emotional regulation skills as they engage in behaviors that meet these expectations.

We Believe Behavior Has Meaning

We know that young children might engage in behavior that challenges adults. These behaviors are a form of communication. The behavior might communicate a variety of messages, such as wanting an object or attention or wanting to avoid an activity or interaction. Children often engage in challenging behavior when they don't know how to communicate a complex emotion like frustration or anger. We can understand and address their needs when we identify what children communicate through their behavior.

In the use of the Pyramid Model, our teachers implement practices to prevent child challenging behavior and promote social-emotional skill development with all children. Teachers commonly respond to children's difficult behavior by redirecting them to more appropriate behavior, guiding them to express their needs, or helping them use social-emotional skills to regulate or cope with their strong emotions. At SLA, teachers are prohibited from verbally shaming, humiliating, or threatening a child, isolating children, and withholding food as a response to behaviors they find challenging.

Preventing and Addressing Challenging Behavior Using a Tiered Model of Support

Our Commitment to Supporting All Children

Some children will need additional help in learning social-emotional skills. When that happens, we will meet with the family to discuss how we can provide additional instruction (e.g., using special materials, structuring children's play with each other, using intentional teaching techniques). We also use a questionnaire with families that will help alert us to children who might need additional help learning social-emotional skills. The Ages and Stages Questionnaire for Social Emotional (ASQ-SE) is provided to all families in our program to gain insight into their child's development and identify their strengths and needs.

For children with persistent challenging behavior, we will team with the family to develop an individualized intervention plan to prevent the behavior and teach the child replacement skills. The development of individualized interventions will involve a collaborative team process that includes functional behavior assessment to identify the meaning of the child's behavior and the collaborative development of a behavior plan. The team can also develop a behavior support plan for families who want assistance addressing behavior at home or in the community. The team regularly meets to assess the effectiveness of the support provided and the child's progress in the program and at home. Should the program exhaust all resources possible, SLA will work with the family to identify a program where their child can be successful and will guide and support the family throughout the process of moving to a different program.

Using Data for Continuous Improvement

Our Commitment to Continuous Improvement

An important aspect of the implementation of the Pyramid Model is the use of data in decision-making. We use data to improve our understanding of children's needs, how well we implement the Pyramid Model, and to ensure that children with additional intervention needs make progress. We also collect data on how teachers respond to children's behavior incidents and the factors that might be related to the behavior. By tracking teacher responses to behavior incidents, we can analyze those data to see if changes might be needed to strengthen our prevention and intervention practices. We also review our child guidance policy annually to determine if any revisions are required.

Staff Training and Professional Development

Our Commitment to Supporting Program Staff

At SLA, all staff members will receive training on the child guidance policy when hired and annually after that. Our program is committed to providing continuous professional development to our teachers so that they can effectively implement Pyramid Model practices in the classroom. All program staff will regularly participate in training in Pyramid Model practices, and teachers will receive ongoing coaching to ensure that they are supported in implementing Pyramid Model practices with fidelity.

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