Policy & Practice Briefs to Eliminate Child Care & Preschool Suspension

An NCECF & TREP Project Collaboration

Strengthening Policy & Practice Guidelines for Preventing Exclusionary Discipline

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High rates of exclusion from early care and learning environments is the result of policy (in)action and can be reduced when legislators provide expectations and guidance for how early childhood educators respond to young children's behavior. Policy makers who write the guidelines that govern how early care and learning programs operate are in a unique position to interrupt *the epidemic of exclusion for our youngest learners*. By understanding evidence-based principles that guide best practices for the social and emotional development of preschoolers, policy makers can effectively write legislation that sets expectations for early educators to use developmentally appropriate responses with young children who exhibit challenging behaviors.

The importance of preventing exclusion in child care and preschool settings is not to be understated. *Educators' use of suspensions and expulsions puts young children at up to 10 times the average risk* for high school pushout, grade retention, and incarceration. Children who are expelled or suspended from their preschools *are often those most in need of support* from their educators because they are *more likely to experience multiple intersecting types of adversity*, including poverty and racial discrimination. To ensure that these children receive developmentally appropriate support to cope with adversity and flourish, we can create policies that restrict or prohibit the use of exclusionary discipline, while also equipping educators with *social and emotional support strategies* to respond to the full range of young children's behavior challenges.

Visit *TREP's consequences of traumatic stress webpage* to learn how educators can support.
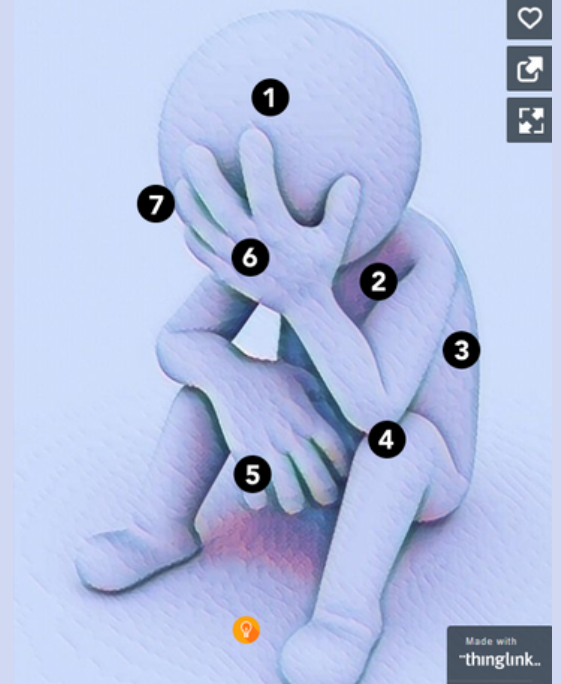
What to Include When Writing Policies to Regulate Exclusionary Discipline

Set definitions for removal, suspension, and expulsion. When children are excluded from their early learning settings, research shows that the terms used, and the way those terms are defined, differ greatly across centers and preschools. By setting definitions for these terms in statewide policy, educators, parents, and legislators can have a shared understanding of what is an acceptable reason to exclude children from the care and learning environment.

Provide regulation, not just guidance. It is important to *establish accountability for administrators and staff* to follow the stipulations set out in the policy. Ensure that policies include procedures to monitor adherence to guidelines and outline the next steps for programs that do not follow practices meant to reduce exclusion from care and learning.

Allocate funding for childcare, preschool, and pre-kindergarten programs to improve their practices. When new policies aren't accompanied by funding to support implementation, requiring or banning specific practices can backfire. Without proper funding, changes in requirements can *cause an increase in the use of early childhood exclusion*.

Require statewide tracking in childcare, preschool, and prekindergarten programs for behavior response regulation. One promising way to regulate how early childhood educators respond to children's behavior is by creating or strengthening reporting requirements, such as requiring preschools and child care centers to document the steps they take to improve the challenges before suspension or expulsion occurred. To ensure that exclusion is used only as a last resort, and prevent future instances of its use, early childhood educators should document:

- Consultation efforts with state technical assistance and other support centers
- Social-emotional learning focused professional development and other efforts to build staff capacity
- Instances of educator attempts to provide behavioral support to each child presenting behavior challenges
- Updated plans for how other children with behavior challenges will be supported

States like *Arizona and Illinois have implemented data systems to prevent suspensions and expulsions* by requiring state agencies to report data on factors including the planned removals and transitions of children from one childcare center to another, demographic characteristics (age, disability, race, ethnicity, income level) of children at risk of being excluded, types and durations of interventions done to address behavior challenges, and number of hours of consultation that staff had with early childhood mental health professionals.

Not only do these kinds of systems allow for consistent tracking of data across childcare centers and preschool programs, but the act of documentation may make apparent the non-exclusionary options and resources that are available to staff and educators.

Early Care and Education Providers Can Take Institutional and Individual Action to Ensure Supportive Responses to Children's Behavior

Most of the research on school discipline rates reflects the aggregate number of disciplinary incidents across the entire school year and we are learning that this is not very helpful information for creating change. It is important that data is used for action. A *recent study* suggests that change can be created by monitoring daily discipline rates and disparities throughout the year, and responding to their fluctuations with timely interventions. This is key to alleviating discipline disparities and reducing anxiety and disruption for students

Research also helps us understand that *discipline rates increase throughout the year*, dropping right before school breaks and increasing sharply once school restarts. For schools with high racial discipline disparities at the beginning of the year, those gaps widen throughout the year at the expense of Black students' learning experiences. This means that a Black student who has a challenging day at the end of the school year is likely to be punished more harshly for their behavior than at the beginning of the school year.

Understanding that discipline rates fluctuate throughout the school year, educators can **monitor those daily trends,** and then **take steps to respond to any discipline rates that seem to be increasing** to prevent further student exclusion. School administrators can carve out time professional development that emphasizes equitable treatment, just before the school year starts and following extended holiday breaks.

In addition to collecting daily trends, *researchers suggest that administrators use two main metrics when understanding their discipline rates and disparities:* (1) *subgroup absolute rates and* (2) *subgroup risk ratios.* To calculate subgroup absolute discipline rates, divide the number of students in a group that receive discipline by the total number of students in that group. To calculate subgroup risk ratios, divide the absolute rate of one group by the absolute rate of another group (or of the entire student population).

To understand your school's discipline practices more fully, calculate metrics by student racial group and by teachers or class periods. By collecting data that shows if there are certain teachers or certain times of day when students are more likely to receive disciplinary action, you can make data actionable and identify potential solutions to discipline disparities in your school.

Individual Educators Can Build Capacity to Reflect on and Sideline Racial Biases in their Discipline Practices

The following strategy is excerpted from Chapter 8 of *Trauma Responsive Educational Practices: Helping Students Cope and Learn.* Research shows that racial-ethnic and gender differences in receiving punitive discipline are largely accounted for by educators' perceptions, not by differences in students' acting-out behaviors. Educators are more likely to send Black and Latinx students than White students to the office for the same disciplinary infractions, and among those students sent to the office, Black and Latinx students are more likely than White students to receive punitive punishments.

This pattern occurs because racial, ethnic, and gender stereotypes can lead educators to see particular behaviors as more concerning when done by Black students versus White students, especially Black boys. In response, Black and Latinx students notice that they are being treated unfairly and may respond in ways that are perceived by educators as them acting out.

Acknowledgment, reflection, and accountable action can enable educators to keep implicit biases from determining which children experience punitive discipline.

SELF-ACKNOWLEDGEMENT IS THE FIRST STEP. The goal of this process is to ensure that your classroom does not replicate the racial, ethnic, and gender biases that permeate much of our social world. This means beginning with the acknowledgement that race, ethnicity, and gender matter in the likelihood that students will experience discipline that is punitive and damaging of their identity and dignity. The research-based evidence on this pattern is consistent and indisputable.

CRITICAL SELF-REFLECTION IS THE SECOND STEP. Examine your data to determine the racial, ethnic, and gender disparities in who receives disciplinary statements and consequences in your classroom and your school. Take time to understand these students' stories to determine whether you are sanctioning them for having cultural and lifestyle differences that conflict with yours. Reflect on your responses to their behaviors to identify the things that you do that perpetuate challenging interactions. As writer and educator *Carolyn Holbrook* notes, "taking a look at the parts of ourselves that we don't want to face can be uncomfortable. However, when you are responsible for children's lives, this kind of honesty is vital."

HOLDING YOURSELF ACCOUNTABLE FOR TAKING ACTION TO CREATE CHANGE IS THE THIRD STEP. Each educator must hold themselves accountable for racial, ethnic, and gender differences in who receives disciplinary action, as well as what type they receive and how often they receive it. If your check of the class roster shows that there are disparities based on these identity markers, debrief with a colleague and ask them to observe your classroom to help you understand what may be happening to create these disparities.

There is much that you can do as an individual early learning educator to ensure that race and ethnicity aren't associated with children's access to high quality learning environments.

In the next brief, we will discuss how legislative reporting requirements can be used to make visible disparities in exclusion from early care and learning environments and the forms of parent communication and collaboration that can reduce the use of exclusionary discipline.

Access previous briefs and other resources at our end early learning exclusion resource website.

The **North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation** (NCECF) promotes understanding, spearheads collaboration, and advances policies to ensure each North Carolina child is on track for lifelong success by the end of third grade.

The **Trauma Responsive Educational Practices (TREP) Project** aims to create schools and classrooms that can meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of students coping with toxic levels of stress and trauma.