



# Understanding and Eliminating Expulsion in Early Childhood Programs

Research tells us that high-quality, supportive early childhood programs have a positive effect on the lives of infants, young children, and families. Early childhood programs help support young children's readiness for school and lifelong success. Unfortunately, recent data show a troubling number of children are expelled, or kicked out, of early childhood settings. When this happens, children do not receive the benefits that early childhood programs provide.

## Did You Know?

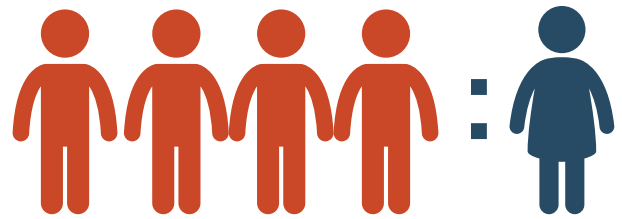
- Preschoolers are expelled at 3 times the rate of children in kindergarten through 12th grade.
- Preschool-aged boys are 4 times as likely to be expelled as girls are.
- African American children are expelled almost twice as often as Latino and white children and more than 5 times as often as Asian American children are.<sup>1</sup>

## Why Is Expulsion a Concern?

*Young children expelled from preschool are more likely to:*

- Lose chances to learn, socialize with other children, and interact with positive adult role models.
- Miss out on chances to develop and practice the very skills they may most need, including social and emotional skills.
- Develop ongoing behavior problems leading to later school difficulty.

- Experience harmful effects on development, education, and health.
- View themselves negatively or as not capable of learning.
- Develop negative views about learning, school, teachers, and the world around them.



*Families who have a child who has been expelled may:*

- Lose access to a teacher or program that may have provided support to their child and family.



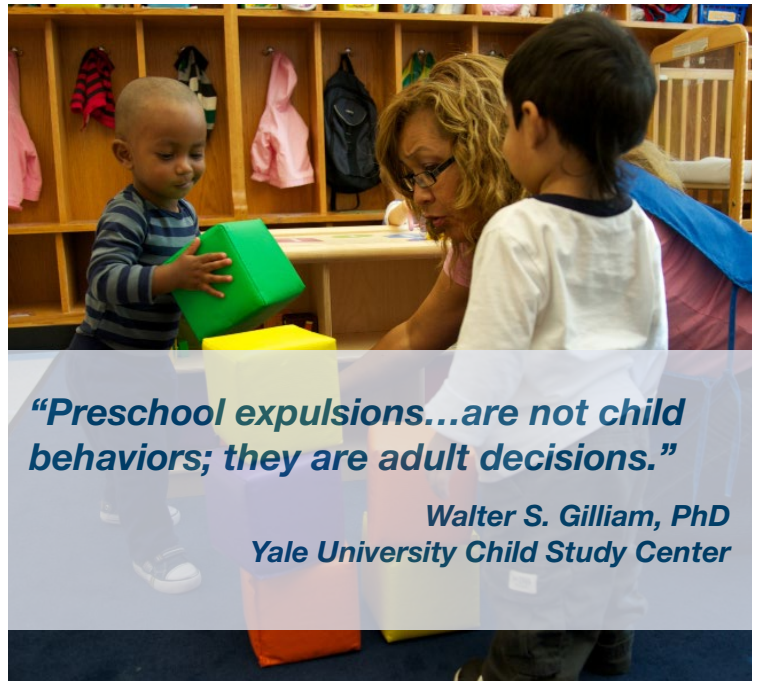
- Experience increased stress, including financial challenges, as they look for alternative care. Some parents may lose their jobs when a child is expelled because there are limited alternatives for other care.
- Blame themselves or their child. This can lead to harsh and less effective parenting approaches at home.

## Why Is This Happening?

Early childhood programs provide a variety of reasons for expelling a child. Typically, a child is removed from a program because of challenging behavior. Teachers and other staff may feel concerned about the safety of the child and other children in the program.

Other factors may include:

- Teachers may feel overwhelmed by a child’s behavior or may lack the education or skills they need to guide and respond to a child’s challenging behavior.
- Work conditions, including low salaries, may contribute to teachers feeling stressed or depressed. This can affect their behavior management skills or tolerance for problem behaviors.<sup>2</sup>
- Classroom conditions, such as high teacher to child ratios, may affect a teacher’s ability to manage a classroom and deal effectively with children who display challenging behavior.<sup>3</sup>
- Teachers may misunderstand a young child’s challenging behavior. For example, a young child who has experienced trauma may engage in aggressive behaviors or use hurtful language. His behavior may be interpreted as willful or purposeful instead of a reaction to his experiences.
- Implicit bias—unconscious negative beliefs—may affect how African American boys, in particular, are viewed. Teachers may unknowingly view African American boys as more difficult to control or more harmful. This may lead them to respond more often with harsh consequences. They may also recommend children be expelled.<sup>4</sup>



**“Preschool expulsions...are not child behaviors; they are adult decisions.”**

**Walter S. Gilliam, PhD  
Yale University Child Study Center**

- Early childhood programs may have limited resources and capacity to support staff who have difficulty with a child. Programs such as Early Head Start and Head Start with access to infant/early childhood mental health consultation report less expulsion.<sup>5</sup>

## A National Response to Expulsion

Nationwide, early childhood programs are being encouraged to implement policies to reduce and eliminate preschool expulsion.

For example, the recently revised Head Start Program Performance Standards clearly prohibit expulsion due to children’s behavior (§1302.17[b]).

Federal programs are encouraging early childhood programs to adopt mental health supports, such as infant/early childhood mental health consultation - a service that helps reduce preschool expulsion. The revised Head Start Program Performance Standards outline steps programs must take to keep children successfully participating in the program. These steps include:

- Collaborating with parents
- Using a mental health consultant

- Referring children for an evaluation to determine if they qualify for services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

In addition, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has partnered with the Health Resources and Services Administration and the Administration for Children and Families to fund a National Center of Excellence for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation. This center works to increase access to mental health consultation for early childhood programs across the country.

## Teachers and Caregivers, You Have an Important Role

During the first 5 years, young children are learning how to identify and respond to strong emotions, play and get along with other children, and respond to adults. Young children need adults who feel prepared to teach these important social and emotional skills. They also need adults who can respond to and help prevent challenging behavior.

## Some resources to explore include:

### *Resources for Infant and Toddler Teachers*

“What are ‘challenging behaviors’ when working with infants and toddlers?” Early Head Start Tip Sheet No. 36: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/ehsnrc/docs/ehs-tip-sheet-36.pdf>

“Digging Deeper: Looking Beyond Behavior to Discover Meaning—A Unit of Four Online Lessons”: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/mental-health/article/digging-deeper-looking-beyond-behavior-discover-meaning>

“Strategies for Understanding and Managing Challenging Behavior in Young Children: What Is Developmentally Appropriate—and What Is a Concern?” Technical Assistance Paper No. 10: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/ehs-ta-10.pdf>

“Challenging Behaviors,” Zero to Three: <http://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/Implementation/family.html>

## Resources for Preschool Teachers

“Helping Children with Challenging Behaviors Succeed in the Classroom”: <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/mar2016/building-environments-encourage-positive-behavior-preschool>

“Teachers’ Choice! Digging Deeper into Challenging Behavior,” parts 1 and 2 (webinars, March 1, 2014, and April 25, 2014), Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/teaching-practices/teachers-choice-digging-deeper-challenging-behavior-part-1>

“Moving Right Along...: Planning Transitions to Prevent Challenging Behavior”: [https://food.unl.edu/FitandHealthyKids/handout2BTJ\\_HemmeterTransitions.pdf](https://food.unl.edu/FitandHealthyKids/handout2BTJ_HemmeterTransitions.pdf)

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/planning-transitions-prevent-challenging-behavior>



**Use support strategies to decrease the likelihood that behavior challenges will occur.**



## Resources for Teachers in Environments Serving Children From Birth to 5 Years of Age

“Backpack Connection Series,” Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children: <http://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/Implementation/family.html>

“Pyramid Model for Supporting Social Emotional Competence in Infants and Young Children,” Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning: <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/index.html>

The Devereux Center for Resilient Children: [www.centerforresilientchildren.org](http://www.centerforresilientchildren.org)

“Standing Together Against Suspension & Expulsion in Early Childhood”: [www.naeyc.org/suspension-expulsion](http://www.naeyc.org/suspension-expulsion)

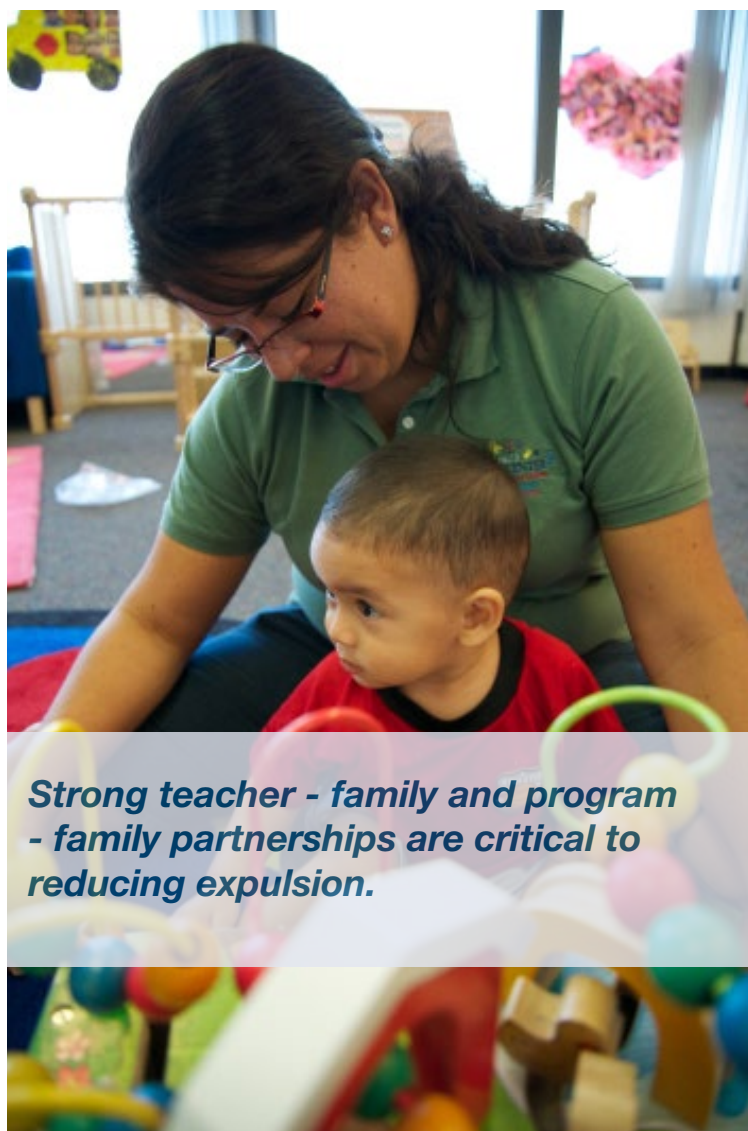
### How Else Can You Help?

While working with young children and families is rewarding, it can also be complex, intense, and stressful. Understanding and sensitively responding to the unique needs and behaviors of all young children and families is hard work! Early care and learning programs, in partnership with families, can help ensure children have the best start possible.

### Here are ways you can help.

- Know your program’s approach for developmental screening.
- Know your program’s procedures for obtaining additional services and support when concerns are identified.
- Work with your program leaders to make sure you have the support and training you need to work with children with challenging behavior.
- Seek support through the partnership with your program’s mental health consultant.
- Learn new ways to create healthy environments for all children. This includes building your skills and understanding in child development, cultural awareness, family dynamics, and trauma.

- Build positive relationships with coworkers and families to help promote awareness of the cultures that are part of your classroom and program. You can explore your understanding of differences that might influence how you perceive behaviors.
- Use relationships with trusted supervisors, colleagues, or your mental health consultant to uncover and explore biases you may have.
- Work with your program leaders and managers to connect with and use your partnerships with local mental health agencies to support children and families who need additional help.
- Help families nurture their child’s social and emotional development by connecting them with pediatricians, parenting groups, and home visiting services.



**Strong teacher - family and program - family partnerships are critical to reducing expulsion.**

- Learn more about and implement research- and evidence-based strategies to promote social and emotional development.
- Talk with your supervisor about implementing a program-wide approach that supports young children’s social and emotional development and responds to and prevents challenging behavior.

## Reflect on Your Practice

- What do you describe as challenging behavior?
- What are your attitudes and beliefs about young children with challenging behavior?
- What ideas and research findings in this fact sheet raise questions about your practice? What new approaches might you try?
- Think about the last time you responded to a young child displaying challenging behavior. What was stressful about the situation? What were you feeling before you responded? After? What would you do differently if you had the chance?
- What types of support do you need to try out these new ideas (eg, assistance from your director, additional resources for your program)?

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## Resources/Suggested Reading

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