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Implementing Policies to Reduce the Likelihood of Preschool Expulsion

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Expulsion: A Severe Response to Challenging Behaviors

Introduction

Behavior problems during the preschool years are meaningful predictors of continued behavior problems, poor peer standing, and academic difficulties during Kindergarten.[1,2] Fortunately, high-quality early education and intervention programs may prevent severe behavior problems in young children from low-income communities and families.[3,4] Yet some preschoolers may begin their early education programs with severe behavioral problems already present, potentially limiting their ability to participate fully and benefit from the early educational experience.[5]

This policy brief examines factors associated with expulsion from Prekindergarten (PK). Recent research has explored issues regarding the rate at which preschoolers (children ages three to four) are expelled from PK programs, as well as some of the factors associated with expulsion and the effectiveness of mental health consultation to reduce the classroom behavior problems that may lead to expulsion. Although several factors that predict an increased likelihood of expulsion have been described, this brief addresses those factors that may inform changes in policy that can be both implemented and regulated.

What Is Expulsion?

For children in Kindergarten through high school (K-12), behavior problems may result in temporary suspension of educational services or—less commonly—expulsion or long-term exclusion from the program.[6] About two-thirds of the states do not have a clear definition of expulsion practices for K-12 students.[7] Although expulsion is the most severe disciplinary sanction that an educational program may impose,[8,9] its effectiveness at reducing future behavior problems has not been supported by research.[10]

Results of a national survey of state-level PK administrators during Fall 2005 indicated that two-thirds of the state PK systems either explicitly allowed expulsion or left the decision to local providers.[11] Of the 32 state systems allowing PK expulsion, only eight required any documentation of the expulsion and only four required the preschool to provide any assistance to the expelled preschooler (usually in the form of referrals to other potential providers).

What Do We Know About Expulsion in Preschool?

In a study of nearly 4,000 state-funded PK classes randomly selected across the nation, 10.4 percent of PK teachers reported at least one expulsion in their classes during the past 12 months.[12] A rate of 6.7 expulsions per 1,000 preschoolers enrolled in state-funded programs nationally was reported. Rates were highest for older preschoolers and African Americans. Boys were more than four and a half times more likely to be expelled than girls.

The overall rate of PK expulsion in state-funded programs was found to be more than three times greater than the national rate of expulsion for students in Kindergarten through Twelfth Grade.[12] In the less regulated area of private child care, expulsion rates for preschoolers, as well as infants and toddlers, have been reported to be much higher, ranging from 10 expulsions per 1,000 enrolled preschoolers in Colorado to more than 27 per 1,000 in Massachusetts and in the Detroit area.[13-18]

Predictors Of Early Expulsion

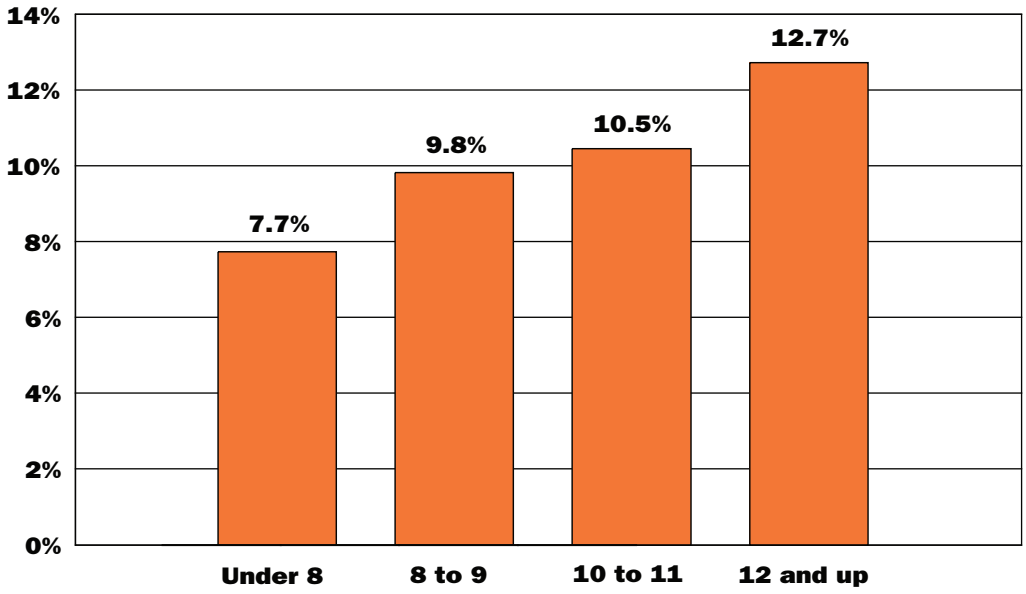
Although the family and community factors that place children at risk for early expulsion are yet unexplored, there are several characteristics of PK and child care programs, including both structural and process variables, that are associated with an increased likelihood of expulsion. Structural variables are influenced by programmatic policies, such as class size, student-teacher ratios, and program duration. Process variables are related to teacher-student interaction, such as teacher beliefs about discipline, teacher job stress, etc.

Class Size and Student-Teacher Ratios

A higher number of children per teacher predicts increased expulsion likelihood in state-funded PK programs (Figure 1).[12] Only 7.7 percent of PK teachers reported an expulsion in the past year when there were fewer than eight children per adult in the class, compared to 12.7 percent when 12 or more children per adult were enrolled.

Child care research indicates that smaller group sizes are associated with more positive caregiving in infant and toddler programs,[19] but less so for programs serving preschoolers (ages three to four), where the effects of group size vanish when student-teacher ratios are considered.[20] In contrast to group size, lower student-teacher ratios are associated with better classroom quality across all age ranges of young children.[20,21]

Figure 1.
Expulsion Increases With Student-Teacher Ratios



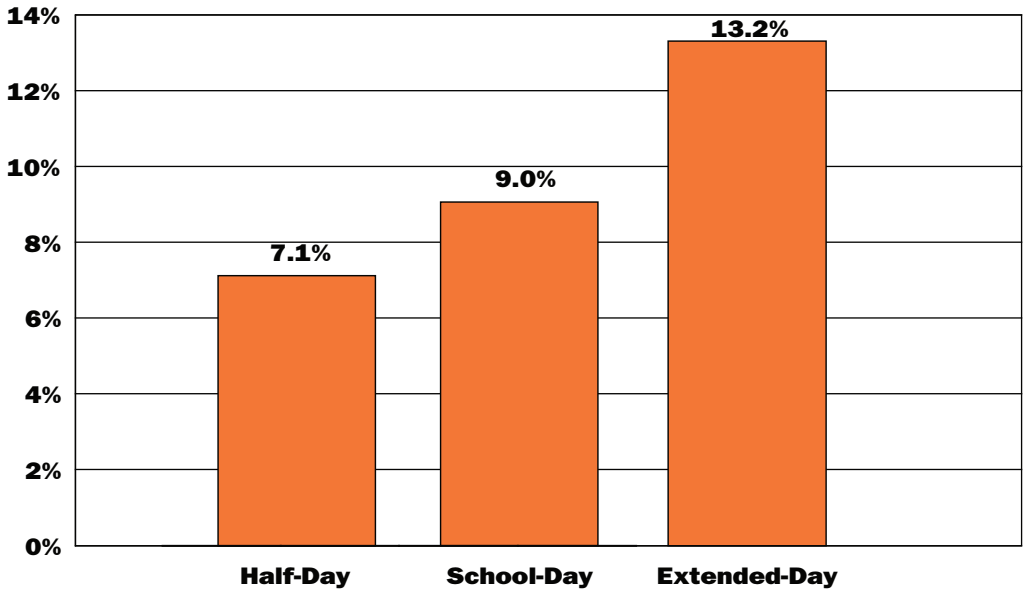
Hours per Day in PK

Program duration is related to expulsion rates in state-funded PK, although no such relationship has been found in child care centers.[12,17] Only 7.1 percent of half-day PK classes experienced an expulsion over a 12-month period of time, compared to 9 percent for school-day classes and 13.2 percent for extended-day classes of eight or more hours per day (Figure 2).

Teacher Education, Credentials, and Years of Experience

The number of years PK teachers have taught four-year-olds is related significantly to both better teacher-child interactions and more appropriate learning opportunities.[22] However, neither teacher educational level, early education credentials, nor years of experience teaching young children are reliable predictors of expulsion in either child care or PK.[12,17]

Figure 2.
Expulsion Increases With Length of Class Day

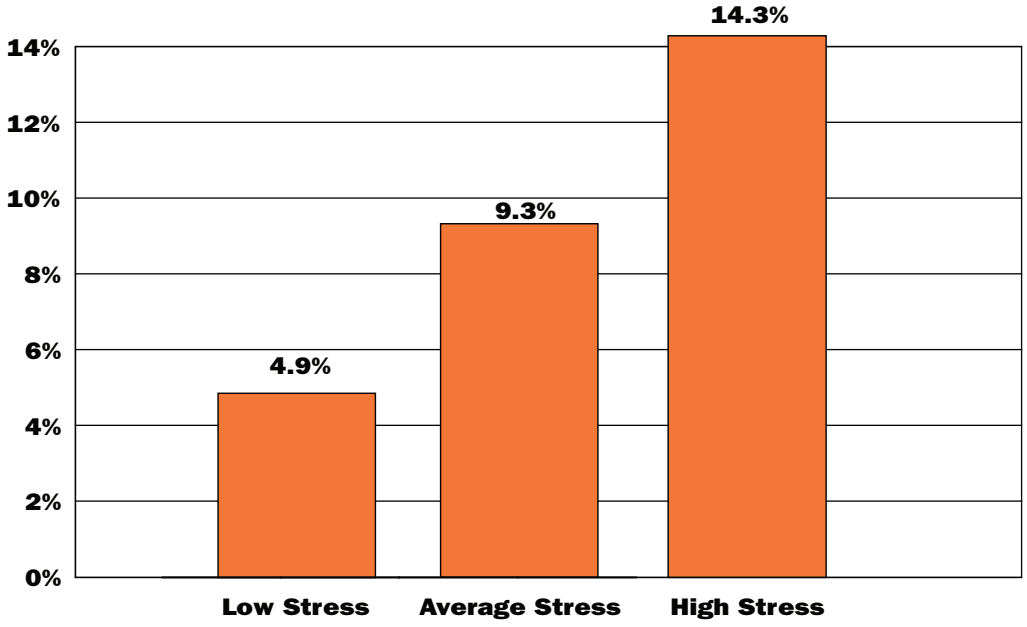


Teacher Job Stress and Other Variables

In addition to the program structural variables, various psychological characteristics of PK teachers may affect their classroom and behavior management skills or tolerance for problem behaviors. These characteristics include teacher beliefs related to authoritarian childrearing, teacher depression, and job stress. Of PK teachers who reported an elevated level of job stress, 14.3 percent reported an expulsion in the past year, compared to only 4.9 percent who reported low levels of job stress (Figure 3).[12] A similar relationship between teacher job stress, depression, and expulsion rates also has been reported among child care teachers.[17]

PK teachers and child care staff who report elevated symptoms of depression are somewhat more likely to engage in child care practices that are rated as less sensitive to children's needs, more intrusive and more negative,[23] as well as lead classrooms that spend larger amounts of unstructured time.[22] Also, PK teachers who report using a teacher-led instructional approach, as opposed to a more child-led approach, demonstrated a significantly lower quality of teacher-child interactions.[22]

Figure 3.
Expulsion Increases With Teacher Job Stress



A Promising Alternative to Preschool Expulsion

Early childhood mental health consultation (ECMHC) may be an effective means for decreasing the likelihood that children with challenging classroom behaviors will be expelled or suspended.[17] PK teachers who have ongoing relationships with classroom-based mental health consultants are about half as likely to report expelling a preschooler as teachers with no such support.[12] Unfortunately, only 23 percent of PK teachers report regular classroom access to a mental health consultant.

In ECMHC, professionals skilled in managing challenging classroom behaviors in preschools help PK and child care teachers gain the skills they need to manage child behavior. This has the potential to reduce the number of children expelled from the program or transferred to more costly early educational options. A further goal of ECMHC is to facilitate teachers' abilities to handle challenging behaviors in the future.[24,25]

In a recent statewide random-controlled study, PK and child care classes that received ECMHC demonstrated statistically significant decreases in teacher-rated acting-out behavior problems in the classroom, relative to classes that did not receive ECMHC.[26] Effects were greatest and of moderate magnitude in the areas of oppositional behaviors and hyperactivity. Findings did not support significant effects in improving observable classroom quality, teacher-child interactions, or teacher job stress. Nonetheless, ECMHC was found to be an effective means for reducing the disruptive classroom behaviors that are likely causes of preschool expulsion.

Furthermore, research suggests that longer duration and higher intensity of mental health consultation services may be related to lower staff turnover, improved teacher effectiveness, and higher program quality.[27,28] Staff who reported good relationships with their mental health consultants were more likely to report that the consultants were better integrated into the program, had more clearly delineated roles, and were in general more effective.[29]

Seven Recommendations For Reducing PK Expulsion

1. Early education programs should not expel children with challenging behaviors. Rather, programs should assess the child's needs and determine the behavioral supports necessary for the child to succeed in his or her current educational program or transition the child to a program better able to meet his or her needs.

The primary goal of early education is to start children on their educational careers so they can succeed in elementary school and beyond. Children with severe behavioral challenges obviously need considerable support to be ready to succeed in school. Therefore, expelling the children most in need of classroom socializing opportunities runs counter to the mission of school readiness and shifts the focus of early education away from the children who need the most help.

Recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) regarding expulsion and out-of-school suspension for children in grades K-12 should be adopted for PK and child care programs serving young children.[8] The AAP recommends that all children who are expelled or are at risk for expulsion should be assessed for developmental, behavioral, and medical problems to identify underlying concerns that might be targeted through intervention services. Also, before expelling or suspending a child, program staff should discuss the child's educational and care arrangements with the parents. Children with severe behavior problems that cannot be safely maintained in a typical preschool program may require specialized services, such as special education preschool or therapeutic preschool programs.

2. All early education and child care teachers should have regular access to early childhood mental health consultation to help teachers address challenging behaviors in the classroom.

Teachers who have access to classroom-based behavioral consultants are nearly half as likely to report an expulsion, compared to teachers who reported no such access. Only one in five preschool teachers, however, report having regular access to such consultants. Although more research is needed, the emerging research suggests that early childhood mental health consultation systems reduce the classroom behaviors that may lead to expulsions.

3. Early education and child care programs should enforce student-teacher ratios of no more that 10 preschoolers per teacher, preferably less.

Teachers in PK classes with larger student-teacher ratios are more likely to report an expulsion. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) recommends ratios no greater than 10 preschoolers (ages three to four) per teacher or assistant teacher in the classroom.

4. Early education and child care programs should ensure that teachers work reasonable hours with breaks away from children.

Teachers in extended-day PK programs are typically with the children for eight or more hours each day.[12] Like truck drivers and hospital staff, PK teachers need reasonable hours and regular breaks in order to do their best work.

5. Supportive policies and services should focus on teacher job stress.

Teaching young children, especially those with challenging behaviors, can be a very stressful job. Teachers with children at risk for expulsion reported higher levels of job stress, indicating a need for supportive services and policies aimed at reducing job stress among teachers.

6. Federal and state funds should be made available to track the number of children expelled from public-funded programs and to implement and evaluate promising models of improving children's classroom behaviors and preventing preschool expulsion.

Public-funded early education and child care programs should provide their state and federal funders with the data necessary to track disenrollment patterns and determine the rates at which children are disenrolled due to behavior problems. The implementation and evaluation of promising models of expulsion prevention, such as early childhood mental health consultation, should be funded through federal and state appropriations.

7. Further research should focus on (a) family and community factors associated with risk for expulsion, (b) effective methods for fostering effective preschool-home collaborations, (c) teacher training in classroom behavior management, and (d) the effectiveness of early intervention services as a preventive for severe behavior problems.

Effective models of facilitating strong working relationships between families and staff at early education and child care programs should be an integral component to addressing behavioral problems in young children. It is likely that many children expelled from preschool programs began their early educational experiences with pronounced behavioral problems already present. Little is known about the amount, quality, and effectiveness of training that teachers receive for dealing with challenging classroom behaviors and identifying children who may benefit from assessment and targeted behavioral interventions. More needs to be known about how early intervention services for infants and toddlers, such as Early Head Start, may help prevent severe behavior problems, and how children and families are best supported in their transition to PK and child care programs.

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