



Kicked Out Before Kindergarten

Evidence-based efforts can prevent suspension and expulsion from early childhood programs

Acknowledgements

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Thousands of police chiefs, sheriffs, prosecutors and violence survivors protecting public safety by promoting solutions that steer kids away from crime.

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Authors:

Sandra Bishop-Josef, Ph.D., Research Director

Brian Lee, California State Director, Fight Crime: Invest in Kids

Contributors:

Joshua Spaulding, Acting National Director

Barry Ford, Vice President and Acting Chief Operating Officer

David Kass, President

Mariana Galloway, Graphic Designer

Michael Klein, Senior Research Associate

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Preschoolers are more than three times more likely to be expelled as students in grades K-12.¹

Every year, parents enroll their young children in preschool or child care, looking to give their kids the right start in life. A shocking number of children, however, are getting suspended—or even expelled—from early childhood education settings. In fact, children in public preschools are more than three times as likely to be kicked out as kids in kindergarten through 12th grade.

Often, the children who would most benefit from quality preschool and child care are the ones being removed. Research shows that children who exhibit challenging behaviors that lead to suspension and expulsion are likely to experience later behavior problems and academic troubles. These difficulties can set children on a path that boosts the chances they will come into contact with the criminal justice system.

Fortunately, evidence-based programs can support preschool teachers and child care providers in helping these children, preventing expulsion and suspension, and reducing the likelihood of later problems. Such interventions benefit not only the at-risk child and his or her family, but improve the learning environment for all the children in the early childhood setting.

To address the problem in California, the law enforcement leaders of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids support legislation that provides protection, for children in state-funded preschools, against expulsion. Providing children and teachers with the support they need and keeping young children with challenging behaviors in quality early education programs will put them on a path toward productive adulthood and away from a life of crime.

Thousands of young children are suspended from preschool each year

The latest data available from the U. S. Department of Education indicate that, in 2013-2014, more than 6,500 3- and 4-year olds were suspended from public preschool.² About half of those children received more than one out-of-school suspension. In addition, nearly 200 young children were permanently expelled from preschool. In California, at least 575 preschool children were suspended in 2011-2012 and 18 were expelled.³

These numbers, however, seriously underestimate the actual number of preschoolers suspended and expelled. A 2005 study found that preschoolers were expelled at a rate more than three times higher than students in grades K-12 (6.2 vs. 2.1 per thousand).⁴ In that study, moreover, preschoolers in public school settings were less likely to be expelled than those in community, faith-based, or other private early childhood settings. These latter settings are not included in the Department of Education data. Researchers posit that the risk of expulsion in child care programs is up to 13 times higher than in public K-12 schools.⁵

Based on the studies of child care centers and non-public preschools, we can clearly say that the Department of Education's data on preschool suspension and expulsion—while disturbing—represents just the tip of the iceberg. It is far too common for kids to get kicked out—temporarily or permanently—from their early childhood settings. It is essential that these children receive the help they need, rather than being suspended or expelled.

More than 6,500 American children were suspended from public preschool and 200 were permanently expelled. These excluded children would fill 335 preschool classrooms.

Many young children with challenging behaviors experience later difficulties

Most preschool-aged children occasionally exhibit disruptive behaviors such as temper tantrums or hitting others. For most of these children, such behaviors pass as they mature and develop better self control, with help from the caring adults in their lives. However, children with severe and/or frequent challenging behaviors are more likely to have later behavioral problems. For example, a 19-year study found that children who were very aggressive in preschool had high delinquency rates at age 23.⁶

In another investigation, high levels of defiance, destruction of property, deceitfulness, and peer problems in preschoolers predicted later conduct disorder,⁷ which is often associated with criminality in adulthood.⁸ Children whose behavior issues are seen as severe enough to result in suspension or expulsion from preschool or child care are, at best, not receiving the full benefits of early education and are likely disrupting the learning of their peers. Preschool and high-quality child care are settings in which young children can learn social-emotional skills essential for school readiness, such as learning to get along with others and to function well in a

school setting. Suspension and expulsion deny the children most in need of learning these skills the opportunity to do so.⁹ At worst, these children are on a path that could lead to later deviant behavior, including crime.

Evidence-based programs can help teachers support children with challenging behaviors

Fortunately, there are evidence-based programs that can successfully address the needs of preschoolers with behavior difficulties. For example, early childhood mental health consultation (ECMHC) programs place highly-trained consultants in preschool and other early childhood settings to work with teachers and parents to address existing behavior problems, prevent further difficulties, and build children's social-emotional skills.¹⁰

Research has demonstrated that ECMHC programs can provide benefits to both children (e. g., decreased behavior problems, fewer children expelled, improved social-emotional skills, improved learning environment for all children in the class) and early childhood education staff (e. g., reduced stress, increased teaching skills, increased involvement with parents). For example, a rigorous study of the Early Childhood Consultation Partnership (ECCP) in Connecticut found that, compared to teachers who did not participate, teachers who received ECCP services for three months reported a significant decrease in children's acting-out behavior in class.¹¹ ECCP is also cost-effective, costing approximately \$2,000 per child, compared to \$12,000 per child for placement in a special education class.



Teachers need support to help children with challenging behaviors

Only about one-third of early childhood educators feel that they have the skills needed to address children's mental health needs.¹² The necessary skills go beyond typical early childhood teacher training: Neither teachers' level of education nor specific early education credentials are associated with whether they expelled children from preschool.¹³ Instead, teachers who reported higher levels of job stress were more likely to expel children. Higher child-to-staff ratios and extended days (8 hours or more) are also associated with expulsion. Providing teachers with the support they need to address children's challenging behaviors benefits both teachers and their young students.

What is early childhood mental health consultation?

Teachers are understandably focused on the minute-to-minute demands of the classroom and often do not have the time or training to recognize the unique needs of a child who is acting out. A trained professional is able to identify underlying issues and provide potential solutions. Lauren Wiley, an ECMHC in the Chicago area, recalls a three-year-old, “John,” who regularly exhibited disruptive behavior, including running from the classroom, and was facing expulsion from his private preschool. By observing the classroom, Wiley was able to identify that John suffered from anxiety and had serious sensory issues. He simply could not tolerate other children being in extremely close proximity to him. Wiley was able to suggest a “sensory diet” for John in the classroom—such as giving him the option of sitting slightly apart from the rest of the group—and to bring in an occupational therapist to work with him. As a result, John was able to remain in school.

Early childhood mental health consultation in California

In California, despite the elimination of a dedicated state funding stream for early mental health interventions in 2012, there are promising local efforts to provide mental health services for preschool and child care programs. With funds generated by tobacco taxes, the First 5 Contra Costa Commission supports **Child Care Solutions**, which provides mental health specialists to assist children struggling with mental health, social, emotional, and developmental problems enrolled in licensed preschool and child care settings. The program serves

close to 300 children annually, with the majority of children remaining in their child care program or transitioned to a program more beneficial to their development.¹⁴ The Orange County Commission supports the **Early Childhood Mental Health Collaborative**, which is developing a pilot program to address suspension and expulsion rates in preschool settings, identify children in need of intervention at an earlier age, and connect families, teachers and caregivers with early childhood mental health consultants and the training required to help young children succeed.¹⁵

“When you expel a child, there is a profound impact on how educators and other people look at that child, including their parents, which can have a devastating effect on the trajectory of that child both academically and socially.”

Andrea R. Garcia

Senior Vice President of Behavioral Health
& Organizational Leadership, Kidango

Conclusion

As evidence of the effectiveness of early childhood mental health consultation accumulates, states are beginning to implement this evidence-based approach to supporting children with challenging behaviors and prevent them from being removed from preschool—temporarily or permanently.

In California, legislation introduced in 2017 would provide protections against expulsion for children in state-funded preschools, and encourages screening of the child's social and emotional development, referrals to community resources, and implementing behavior supports within the program. This legislation, if enacted, would improve the quality of early childhood education in the state. By addressing the needs of our youngest at-risk children, the legislation will help ensure that young children can progress toward educational success and responsible adulthood, free from involvement in the criminal justice system.

Endnotes

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211 Sutter Street / Suite 401 / San Francisco, CA 94108 / 415.762.8270

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1212 New York Avenue NW / Suite 300 / Washington, DC 20005 / 202.464.7005

