

Examining the early childhood suspension & expulsion problem

Curbing the problem starts with changing the early childhood program approach



Little Jimmy started to cry, threw blocks across the room and refused to move as nap time began. Sounds like a typical tantrum from a young child still learning behavioral skills, right? Nope — count this child as one of an estimated 50,000 preschoolers each year to have been suspended at least once, according to the [2016 National Survey of Children's Health](#).

In fact, the numbers in early childhood suspension and expulsion are appalling:

- Young children (under five-years-old) are expelled from state-funded preschools at three times the rate of K-12 students ([source](#))
- Private and community child care programs expel children at more than 13 times the rate of K-12 students ([source](#))
- Even infants and toddlers are at high risk for suspension and expulsion. A statewide study in Illinois found that 42% of infant/toddler care centers reported at least one [expulsion](#) in the past year ([source](#))

If preschool is designed to set a foundation of learning for children, expose them to structure, and build social, emotional and behaviors skills, then what is happening to produce these alarming rates?

In this article, we will look at some of the underlying issues contributing to early childhood suspension and expulsion, as well as some steps that are being taken to curb the problem.

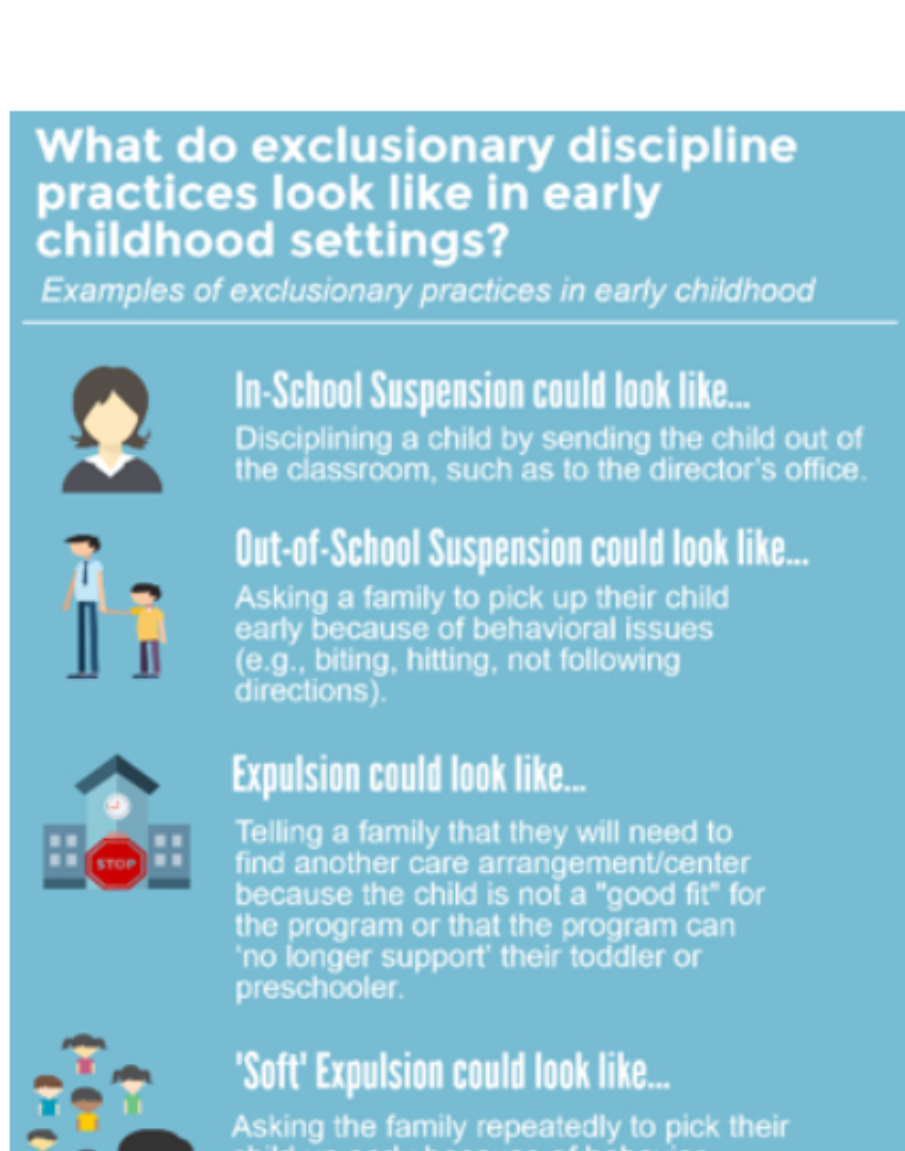
According to Education Researcher, [Kerry Friedman](#), and Co-Director of Early Learning Research and Evaluation, [Todd Grindal](#), of [SRI Education](#), there are many challenges contributing to this problem, but they pointed to several key causes.

- *A range of childhood behaviors*

“Suspension and expulsion in early childhood is more a factor of adult behavior instead of childhood behavior,” explained Grindal. “There is not always a simple explanation on what is right or wrong behavior.”

Part of the challenge is that kids can display a wide range of behaviors. They are learning how to process their emotions, communicate and express independence, so this can come out in different ways depending on the child, and even moment-by-moment. Additionally, behavior is interpreted differently by different people. For example, some behaviors learned in children's homes may be developmentally appropriate or even culturally appropriate, but not be considered a fit in classroom settings.

- *Lack of consistency in what is considered suspension and expulsion*



Despite early childhood suspension and expulsion being a national issue, there is still not a set standard on what early childhood suspension and expulsion explicitly is and what behaviors relate to it. In fact, many schools may not even label their exclusionary discipline practices in early childhood as “suspensions” or “expulsions.” However, it is important to recognize that regardless of their names, they are the equivalent of

suspending or expelling a child.

Broadly, suspension and expulsion are types of exclusionary practices that involve asking children to leave the classroom, program or school temporarily or permanently. The chart here offers some examples exclusionary practices in early childhood.

Grindal notes, recent research conducted by SRI revealed that while program leaders made concerted efforts to keep children in school, about half of the leaders stated that their program does not have an official written policy about how to address children whose behaviors adults find challenging. This sums up the problem of expulsion and suspensions. Because there is not a standard approach to how challenging behaviors can be perceived and what actions are taken, it is hard to create a consistent conversation on what is taking place.

- *Lack of teacher tools, training and experience across the board in suspension practices*

SRI researchers have found that, more than one quarter of teachers reported engaging in some form of exclusionary discipline each year. The study also found that teachers with fewer years of experience teaching preschool were more likely to ask children to attend school for a shorter day or stay home from school for one or more days. This shows that less experienced teachers are more likely to use exclusionary disciplinary practices than those of more experienced teachers.

Grindal notes, “Equally interesting is that we didn’t find that having a master’s degree compared to a bachelor’s degree mattered at all. This is more about length of time in the job, experience, getting practice with kids and knowing you can take that experience into practice and manage that in the classroom.”

The work of Friedman and Grindal suggests that in many cases, preschool teachers who often haven’t had the same level of preparation as K-12 grade teachers are less able to handle the challenging behaviors because they don’t have the same access to tools or experience in addressing disruptive behaviors. When they experience challenging behaviors, they often don’t know to provide effective solutions, so the result is often, “I can’t handle this. You can’t be in my class today.”

It’s time to move from recognition to action

The problem of suspension and expulsion in early childhood education is well known and has been for years. Decades ago, [Walter Gilliam](#), a researcher from Yale, surprised people with the staggering rates of early childhood suspension and expulsion. Since then, there has been a large amount of replication on this research highlighting this problem, but it’s time to take the research and move to action.

Friedman and Grindal note that there is a lot of energy going toward this subject right now. Academics, policy experts and SRI researchers are trying to address this issue with a new approach to childhood development methodologies.

A new approach

SRI researchers are currently working on supporting states in thinking about how to collect data on childhood disciplinary actions. One of the challenges to successfully achieving this goal is defining suspension and expulsion in a consistent way so researchers can collect high quality data.

For example, many states such as California and Ohio are implementing a no suspension/expulsion rule. “There are a number of states are blanketly implementing a ban on suspension/expulsion,” said Friedman. “And it’s great they’re taking steps to curb the problem, but simply saying you can’t suspend or expel won’t work — they will still do it but just call it by another name.”

She explains that this tactic could cause a ripple effect, as it puts stress on providers by taking away their tools for dealing with student’s challenging behaviors. If you take them away, then you must replace those tools with something else. If that doesn’t happen, it will cause a whole lot of other problems, and that will probably be at the detriment of other students in the class.

Grindal adds that to combat this, SRI researchers are thinking about what information to collect, who to collect it from, how to get data across different early childhood programs in a consistent way and then how to use that data.

They are also focusing on understanding the needs of teachers. Research currently underway shows that many early childhood teachers or providers do not feel well trained in promoting social-emotional development in young children — and especially how to effectively support children whose behavior in early childhood programs creates challenges for providers.

“We have been trying to break down and understand more why teachers are more likely to engage in this type of behavior and if we know and understand that, we can give them better guidance,” explained Friedman.

A multi-year SRI evaluation of state-wide preschool programs found that a majority of teachers wanted more program development on supporting children that show challenging behaviors. Other key areas identified by teachers include:

- Preventing and stopping aggressive behavior
- Practicing and establishing solutions to disruptive behaviors
- Guidance on involving parents in supporting children with behavioral challenges
- Knowing their rights as educators dealing with childhood aggression and information about specific clinical profiles (e.g., ADHD, obsessive compulsive disorder, autism)

SRI also has worked closely with a panel of national experts in early childhood settings to create a guide to provide relevant, specific recommended policies and practices that are actionable and address the underlying root causes of early childhood suspension, as well as effective alternatives on how to prevent preschool suspension. Find the guide [here](#).

In closing, it’s no secret that early childhood expulsion and suspension has been an issue for years. Research helped educators bring light to the situation, but now is the time to take immediate action to apply the research to solutions. This will be a key focus area of SRI over the coming years.

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