



A Pathway to Reduce and Eliminate Early Childhood Suspensions and Expulsions

**Recommendations Aligned to
Pennsylvania Regulations and Standards
for Early Childhood Education**

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Why Suspensions and Expulsions?

Children thrive and learn best when adults maintain appropriate expectations for both learning and behavior. In order for this to happen, there must be policies in place to support educators working with young children and sufficient resources to ensure both children and adult needs are being met in the classroom. Responding to young children's behaviors by suspending or expelling them threatens their well-being during a critical period of learning and development.

To reduce and eliminate exclusionary discipline, Trying Together focuses on preventative and responsive strategies for healthy child development. The Local Leadership Council (LLC) of the Early Learning Resource Center (ELRC) Region 5 in Allegheny County aims to address inclusion across the early childhood education (ECE) system with a focus on reducing suspensions and expulsions. The ELRC uniquely positions Trying Together to engage stakeholders including center directors, school administrators, early interventionists, mental health consultants, and quality coaches to support educators, and ultimately children and families.

In order to move away from suspensions and expulsions, Trying Together understands that there must be meaningful supports, resources, and alternatives for educators and families.

Addressing the use of exclusionary discipline is a critical matter of equity and justice within the early childhood field. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the fragility of the early learning system, and programs are responding to lower enrollments and additional health and safety measures. For these reasons, Trying Together aims to continue to find equitable ways to make sure the needs of all children served are being met. The Trying Together public policy agenda calls for developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive environments to support young children in their social and emotional growth - and it advocates for policies and practices that end the preschool-to-prison pipeline.

Suspensions and expulsions are a problem.

- Child care center expulsion rates are 13 times more than K-12 rates. Infants and toddlers are also at risk for child care expulsion.¹
- State-funded pre-k programs expel children at three times the rate of K-12 schools. Each year more than 8,700 three and four- year-olds are expelled or pushed out of their state-funded pre-k classroom.²
- Young children who are suspended or expelled are 10 times more likely to hold negative attitudes about school, drop out of high school, and face incarcerations. Suspensions during the early years may increase the likelihood of students being suspended throughout their school career.³

Suspensions and expulsions are not developmentally appropriate ways to address behaviors.

- Infants, toddlers, and pre-kindergarteners are being removed or excluded for behaviors that are typically developing or for behaviors that need support through social and emotional development.
- Young children who are pushed out of the classroom often need intervention and support. Some children may have undiagnosed behavioral or developmental disabilities mislabeled as a "challenging behavior." This impedes the intervention process to get children the services they are entitled to under Part B (three- and four-year-olds) and C (birth through age two) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.
- Expulsions and suspensions are adult decisions. Research from the Yale Child Study shows implicit bias leads to the disproportionate impact of Black pre-kindergarteners.⁴

Suspensions and expulsions disproportionately impact Black children.

- Data from the U.S. Education Department indicates that racial and gender disparities exist: Black boys make up 18% of pre-k enrollment, but 48% of pre-kindergarteners who are suspended more than once. Disproportionate impact for Black students persists throughout the K-12 years.⁵
- This disproportionate impact also harms Black girls - who make up 54% of female pre-kindergarteners who received more than one out of school suspensions, despite only accounting for 20% of the country's female pre-k population.⁶
- Dr. Walter Gilliam's Yale Child Study found teachers tend to observe Black students, especially Black boys, when expecting negative behavior. This racial bias and criminalization of behaviors threatens the well-being of Black children and begins the preschool-to-prison pipeline.⁷

Policy Background

Federal Context

A joint policy statement on expulsion and suspension by the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Education raises awareness about the negative educational and life outcomes associated with suspending students in the early years. The reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) requires states to develop policies and plans to prevent exclusionary practices of children ages birth through five in child care and early education programs.⁸ Head Start encourages programs to adopt practices from the federal policy statement. Furthermore, the Head Start Program Performance Standards prohibit expelling or un-enrolling children from programs because of a child's behavior.

Pennsylvania Context

As a response to the federal policy statement, the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) released an announcement to provide further guidance to OCDEL funded programs. The announcement, which went into effect on July 1, 2017, focuses on appropriate behavior support practices, inclusive family engagement that respects cultural and individual preferences, and collaboration among early childhood and other social service programs locally and across the state. The Keystone STARS Performance Standard EC.2.5 requires that the program adopts policies, practices, and supports regarding suspension and expulsion in order to maintain a STAR 2 rating. Programs need to provide a copy of process and policies regarding evidence of practice on a STARS quality visit.

In addition to the policy announcement, OCDEL created supporting documents for developing and implementing a plan. Guidelines include alignment with the federal policy, professional development and technical assistance, strong family partnerships, tracking data, universal screenings, and access to additional support. The most recent OCDEL procedure went into effect on August 1, 2020 to request assistance with a child who has unique needs or is displaying a challenging behavior. The state constantly monitors and adapts to find ways to support providers and the children they serve. Trying Together aligns with and supports OCDEL's recommendations to address teachers, administrators, programs, and policymakers.



Responding to the Developmental Needs of Children

The [National Association for the Education of Young Children \(NAEYC\) Code of Ethics](#) provides professionals with guidance and core values for their daily work with young children. While individuals have responsibilities as professionals working with young children, the system must support them. Policy changes should be accompanied by thoughtful planning and strategies at individual program levels. High-quality early childhood education provides an opportunity for children to grow—socially, emotionally, cognitively, and physically—during the most significant period of brain development. The ECE field plays an important role in providing equitable opportunities before children reach elementary school. Suspensions and expulsions in birth-through-five settings take away this opportunity. In order for all children to thrive, practices and procedures must be equitable and culturally responsive. Individual teachers will need to reflect and confront biases, programs will need to support professional development, and policymakers will need to ensure there are adequate investments and resources in the system to support the early learning field.

The ELRC model provides access to information, services, and resources to promote high-quality early childhood education. ELRC Quality Coaches provide support and technical assistance to programs. Communication and collaboration are key for supporting young children's behaviors as they strengthen their social and emotional skills. Whether a program needs help writing a plan or teachers need support in the classroom, ELRC Quality Coaches offer their expertise.

Trying Together supports policies that respond to children in ways that are intentional, developmentally appropriate, culturally competent, gender responsive, and trauma informed. The following pages offer recommendations for all stakeholders to consider, especially for early learning program administrators and teachers. Each recommendation considers alignment with Keystone STARS, Head Start, Pre-K Counts, ECERS, and/or CLASS. Many early learning programs may already be prioritizing some of the proposed strategies. Trying Together recommends the following strategies to prevent and reduce exclusionary discipline.



Recommendations:

1. Establish developmentally appropriate expectations and policies.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) refers to the framework and approach based on the knowledge of how young children learn. DAP recognizes and supports each child's optimal learning and development in cognitive, physical, social, and emotional skills. Educators and caregivers must meet children where they are – including culturally, linguistically, and in ability.

Classroom expectations, rules, and environments must reflect DAP to create a high-quality environment that decreases the chance for negative behaviors. The U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Education recommend that discipline procedures reflect developmentally appropriate behavioral expectations and consequences. Adults are responsible for setting developmentally appropriate expectations and interactions with children—whether they are preventative or reactive to a particular behavior. Most often infants, toddlers, and pre-kindergarteners need to be taught social and emotional skills. Just as children are not punished for needing to develop a specific cognitive skill, they should not be punished for needing to develop a social or emotional skill.

Biting is a typically developing behavior often heard about in toddlers that creates an issue in the classroom. This behavior is a way toddlers express their needs, as they likely do not have enough words to express how they are feeling. In a developmentally appropriate approach, children are taught more appropriate ways to express their needs and feelings. Teachers should work with the family to help the child develop the social and emotional skills needed to replace the biting. Early childhood educators and caregivers also have a responsibility to communicate this knowledge of DAP with all families to help their understanding that every individual child is an important part of the learning community.

ALIGNMENTS

STARS: EC.2.2; SQ.3.4.4; EC.3.4.1

Pre-K Counts: 405.42

Head Start: 1302.31

ECERS-R: Interactions - #31 Discipline

CLASS: Positive Climate, Behavior Guidance, Behavior Management

2. Address cultural competency and implicit bias.

Research confirms discipline has a disproportionate impact based on race, gender, and ability. Addressing cultural awareness and implicit bias strengthens the effectiveness of professionals to implement inclusive, positive practices. This effort requires a shift in culture to acknowledge racial, cultural, language, gender, and disability biases. Trying Together has compiled a list of [anti-racism resources](#) to support educators and caretakers in their personal reflection and growth.

The importance of individual reflection and professional growth opportunities for early childhood educators cannot be overstated. Professional development, training, and coaching that address bias and cultural responsiveness must be made available for early care and education professionals. In Pennsylvania, OCDEL commits to providing [resources such as professional development and technical assistance to promote cultural understanding and positive relationships with families](#).

Locally in Pittsburgh, the [Positive Racial Identity Development in Early Education \(P.R.I.D.E.\) Program](#) began as a result of an environmental scan to identify existing knowledge, practices, and resources available in Pittsburgh that support positive racial identity development in early education. All aspects of the program are designed to provide the important adults in children's lives with the knowledge and skills to support the development of positive racial identity in young children.

ALIGNMENTS

STARS: EC.2.4; EC.2.5; SQ.3.4.3; EC3.4.1; EC.3.4.4

CLASS: Positive Climate, Teacher Sensitivity, Regard for Child Perspectives

3. Emphasize the importance of positive interactions.

Young children thrive from stable, supportive relationships with adults who love, teach, and care for them. Suspensions and expulsions not only limit the possibility for a child to engage in supportive interactions with educators, but they also threaten a child's development and may be the result of a lack of positive relationships between educators, families, and children. A child's learning, growth, and a sense of belonging develop as a result of the supportive, everyday interactions they share with caring adults.

Regionally, Trying Together leads the [Everyday Interactions Matter professional development initiative](#) to help early childhood educators learn and grow from their own practice. The program promotes self-reflection with a strengths- and practice-based approach to improve the quality of interactions between adults and children. Everyday Interactions Matter programming supports educators in making a shift towards valuing positive, everyday interactions as the foundation of healthy child development.

ELRC Quality Coaches are also available to support educators in strengthening their interactions with young children through providing technical assistance in the classroom. Technical assistance offers educators a chance to collaborate on supportive techniques for interacting with the children in their care, with the goal of promoting positive relationships and attuned caregiving based on the specific needs of the children.

ALIGNMENTS

STARS: SQ.3.4.5; FC.3.4.3

Head Start: 1302.31

CLASS: Positive Climate, Teacher Sensitivity, Regard for Child Perspectives

ECERS-R: Interactions - #32 Staff-child interactions

4. Strengthen family engagement.

Research shows children benefit when families and teachers work together.⁹ Establishing positive relationships with children and families requires that educators have an understanding of the backgrounds of the children and families they serve. This can help educators better understand the motive of a child's behavior, how to address it in the classroom, and with their parents and guardians. Consistent communication with families is a marker of a high-quality program. [Message from Me](#) helps facilitate children's communication about daily learning experiences in their classroom with the important adults in their lives. The program supports the development of a child's language and social skills and serves as a communication tool for sharing positive behaviors and expectations with parents and guardians.

Families can play a role in developing expectations and procedures around discipline. Reciprocal partnerships between families and the program provide a solid foundation that includes the family in a positive way from the beginning rather than only contacting a family if a problem arises. Parents and guardians are more likely to be engaged and helpful if they feel supported and understood.¹⁰

As families enroll in early learning programs, they should be made aware of the policies and procedures that support the staff, children, and culture. The importance of communication with families cannot be overstated – especially if a behavior concern arises. Teachers should share observations with family members so that the adults can collaborate to support young children as they develop. While there are times that a behavior may not improve, the communication and collaboration must continue in order to assess and connect the child and family with appropriate support.

ALIGNMENTS

STARS: FC.2.3; FC.3.4.1; FC.3.4.2; FC.3.4.4; FC.3.4.5

Pre-K Counts: 405.47

Head Start: 1302.34; 1302.46; 1302.50-52

ECERS-R: Parents and Staff - #38 Provisions for parents

5. Increase mental and behavioral health professionals.

Infant and early childhood mental health is impacted by the development of healthy social and emotional skills that provide a foundation for children to express and regulate emotions, form close and secure relationships, and learn. Infant Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) consultation is an evidence-based program in which mental health consultants support educators and families to build skills that promote healthy social emotional development and prevent or address negative behaviors. The [Pennsylvania IECMH](#) consultation offers education and resources, coaching and modeling, and professional development events tailored to the needs of the child care program, as well as referral information for children who need more specialized services.

An evaluation of the Pennsylvania IECMH Consultation Project found the program has positive impacts on children and teachers including improved teacher-reported child behavior, reduced teacher stress, and prevention of expulsions from early childhood programs. The report recommends hiring more mental health consultants to increase services to providers, families, and children.¹¹ In addition to the positive benefits for the children, professionals also benefit from IECMH as they have an additional professional in the room and the opportunity to learn new strategies for supporting the children in their care. Arkansas, Colorado, and Ohio have already expanded their Early Childhood Mental Health programs in efforts to reduce and eliminate suspensions and expulsions in early childhood settings.¹²

The Rapid Response Team in York and Adams counties collaborates to meet the immediate needs of children in their region. The team includes early intervention and mental and behavioral health specialists. The model provides ongoing coaching to early learning programs to support young children in efforts to eliminate the possibility of expulsions and suspensions. The ELRC Region 5 Local Leadership Council is prioritizing these efforts by leveraging existing partnerships to explore how a rapid response team could serve early learning programs in Allegheny County.

ALIGNMENTS

STARS: EC.2.3; SQ.3.4.4; SQ.3.4.9; FC.3.4.1

Head Start: 1302.17; 1302.18; 1302.33; 1302.45; 1302.46

6. Utilize developmental screening tools and implement support services appropriately.

Research-based developmental screening tools provide the opportunity to identify potential problems or areas where children need support and/or further evaluation. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends routinely screening children from birth through age three.¹³ Formal and informal assessments and observations are critical to support the development of physical, cognitive, social, and emotional skills. The results and observations gathered from screening tools can help all adults in a child's life make informed decisions that meet the needs of the child. Early identification of developmental delays allows children to receive the support and services which can help them reach their full potential.

While every child reaches developmental milestones at different times, cognitive, social, emotional, or physical development that doesn't occur in the expected time for a typically developing child may need increased services or support. Since further evaluation requires parental consent, ongoing communication with a family about their child's development is critical.

Early childhood education professionals and families can [request assistance for a child by filling out a survey or contacting their local ELRC](#) (if they already have an established relationship). The purpose of this new process is for educators and families to work together to find ways to support a child and find solutions that don't involve the removal from a program.

ALIGNMENT

STARS: EC.2.3; SQ.3.4.7

7. Provide opportunities for physical activity and play.

Physical activity is a critical piece in healthy child development. During the first five years of life, gross motor development occurs as young children begin to learn whole body movement and large muscle control. Physical activity and play offer the space and time for children to gain skills like balance and coordination, strength and endurance, and body awareness that will enable them to perform everyday functions. Additionally, opportunities for movement and play allow time for child-directed activities and for children to apply and learn cognitive, social, and emotional skills.

Research has shown that physical activity helps improve attention and on task behavior.¹⁴ Creating a culture and environment where play and physical activity are integrated throughout the day can serve as a preventative measure for potential negative behaviors.

ALIGNMENTS

Head Start: 1302.31 (e)(4)

ECERS-R: Program Structure - #35 Free play

8. Collect and monitor data on behaviors and consequences.

The U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Education encourage programs to set their own goals, monitor data to assess progress, and modify practices to meet fairness, equity, and improvement goals. While collecting data on discipline is not a preventative measure, it can help shed light on problems and inform decisions for future practices to support children and keep them in the classroom. Administrators should consider regularly monitoring how they are responding to child behaviors and the consequences used. Rather than the child as the focus on the data, the adults should reflect on the data that highlights their choices as professionals and how they can make adjustments and modifications to best support the developmental needs of their children.

ALIGNMENT

STARS: EC.3.4.2; EC.3.4.3



9. Promote professional growth opportunities.

Educators are the foundation of high-quality, developmentally appropriate early learning experiences. Thus, it is essential that educators are supported to strengthen and develop their knowledge and skills to best support the children they care for and educate. This support comes from not only individual programs but also the regional and statewide systems that sustain early childhood quality and infrastructure.

There are many professional growth opportunities that support the continued improvement of cultural competence and implicit bias, social and emotional skills, and the other prior recommendations in this white paper. Trying Together offers professional learning opportunities that relate to many of the recommendations outlined in this paper. The Quality Initiatives team can also work with a program or center to [provide custom professional development](#). The PA PD Registry also has various online and in-person opportunities that can be found using the search tool.

Additionally, coaching, mentoring, and technical assistance plays a role in supporting educators to move away from classroom/program removal. The ELRC can provide Quality Coaches to support the needs of teachers, build connections with community partners, and help children and families access additional services including Early Intervention.

ALIGNMENTS

STARS: SQ.3.4.1; SQ.3.4.3; SQ.3.4.4; SQ.3.4.5; SQ.3.4.9

Pre-K Counts: 405.44, 405.26

Head Start: 1302.92

ECERS-R: Parents and Staff - #43 Opportunities for professional growth



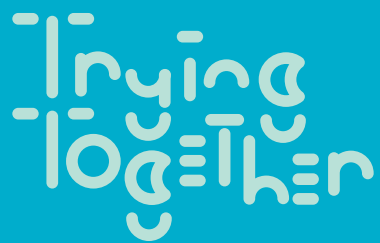
Moving Forward

The elimination of suspensions and expulsions in early childhood settings must simultaneously occur with policies that increase resources and support for educators. In addition to advocating for necessary policy changes and increased investments, Trying Together will ensure early childhood professionals have access to the tools, resources, and professional growth opportunities necessary to reduce and eliminate the use of exclusionary discipline. Trying Together is committed to all children learning in environments that promote equity and justice through developmentally appropriate and culturally-responsive policies and practices.



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