

Addressing Early Childhood Expulsions in Maine

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MAINE CHILDREN'S ALLIANCE

A study commission looks for solutions to the problem of young children being suspended and even expelled for disruptive behavior.

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Science tells us that stable, consistent experiences and relationships early in life shape the architecture of the developing brain.¹ Since all future development is based on the strength of early foundations, a goal of the Maine Children's Alliance (MCA) is to ensure that all Maine children aged birth to eight have the opportunities for the positive experiences and relationships that are the building blocks of future success. Over the past year, MCA has focused on a growing problem: expulsion of very young children from school.

The Troubling Increase in Expulsions of the Very Young

In Maine, as in the country as a whole, there have been increased reports of children exhibiting challenging behaviors in the classroom and, as a result, child expulsion from those settings. Recent studies have indicated that children are being expelled from early care and education settings at alarmingly high rates. In 2005, the first nationwide study to focus specifically on preschool expulsion found that preschoolers were expelled at more than three times the rate of K–12 students.² Maine had the second-highest preschool expulsion rate in the country, with 14.73 preschool expulsions per 1,000 children enrolled.³

This phenomenon is particularly troubling given that research suggests that children who are suspended or expelled in the early school years may be more likely to experience negative educational and life outcomes.⁴ The consequences fall especially heavily on minorities: the Office for Civil Rights found that African-American children make up 18 percent of preschool enrollment, but 48 percent of preschoolers suspended more than once.⁵ Further, while Hispanic and African-American children combined represent 47 percent of all children in preschool, they represent 68 percent of preschoolers suspended multiple times.⁶ The gender disparity is also large: boys account for 79 percent of preschoolers suspended once and 82 percent of preschoolers suspended multiple times.⁷

Because of the troubling facts regarding expulsion in early care settings, the US Department of Health and Human Services and the US Department of Education released a joint policy statement,

“Policy Statement on Expulsion and Suspension Practices in Early Learning Settings.” This statement encourages states to establish policies on expulsion and suspension of young children, applicable across settings, that promote children's social, emotional, and behavioral health and eliminate or severely limit the use of expulsion, suspension, and other exclusionary discipline practices.⁸ In addition, the Child Care Development Block Grant Act of 2014 requires states to provide consumer education information to families, the general public, and where applicable, providers. This information must include their policies regarding the social, emotional, and behavioral health of young children, which may include policies on expulsion of preschool-aged children.⁹ Finally, the proposed Head Start per-

formance standards set forth policies that limit the use of suspension and prohibit Early Head Start and Head Start programs from expelling children because of their behavior.¹⁰

Core Social and Emotional Skills

- Regulating behavior
- Developing empathy
- Building and maintaining relationships
- Coping and managing emotions



Efforts by the Maine Children's Alliance

In early 2015, in response to stories of increased expulsions, MCA invited stakeholders together to explore issues surrounding social and emotional development in children. The goal of both the initial meeting and subsequent meetings was to generate ideas for policies that could address and support the social and emotional development of young children, especially those who are already at a high risk of failure in social and academic environments. We know children's executive-function skills are affected by their relationships and early environment. Science also tells us that severe or repeated exposure to hardship or traumatic events—such as poverty, violence, abuse, or neglect—can cause toxic stress responses in children who lack supportive adults in their lives, with lifelong effects on health, learning, and behavior.¹¹ But we also know that timely and appropriate interventions can ameliorate these effects and change the course of children's development.

As a result of those important conversations and related advocacy efforts, the Maine Legislature's Education Committee established a study commission on the following charge:

This resolve creates the Study Commission on the Social Emotional Learning and Development of Maine's Young Children to promote the social emotional learning and development of young children and reduce expulsions in early child care and education settings in the State by making an inventory of policies, rules, funding and services regarding early child care and education in the State and making recommendations, including suggested legislation, to strengthen the support for young children's social emotional learning and development and to address young children's behavioral needs.¹²

The Committee has asked the Maine Children's Growth Council and Maine's Department of Education to gather additional data on the social and emotional development of children and to develop appropriate policy recommendations. MCA is working with the Growth Council and the Department of Education on this effort, which is also supported by three national early-childhood research organizations: the Ounce of Prevention Fund, the National Center for Children in Poverty at Columbia University, and Zero to Three. This exploration includes gathering information through a survey of Maine's licensed childcare providers, Head Start, and preschool teachers regarding the social and emotional needs of young children in early care settings. In addition to asking questions about the child care setting (center-based or family care, rural or urban, staffing ratios, etc.), the survey asks about the prevalence of challenging behaviors that interfere with a child's ability to play, learn, and get along with others and the practices used to address the behaviors. The results of this survey will provide Maine-specific information about exclusionary practices, staff perceptions of the prevalence of child behavior problems, and available supports to promote young children's social and emotional health and address behavioral problems.



Several characteristics of early care settings and child care programs are associated with an increased likelihood of expulsion, including large class size, high student-teacher ratios, longer program duration, poor teacher-student interaction, and teacher job stress.¹³ As the study commission's work proceeds, considerations for developing policies on expulsion and suspension of young children will include early childhood mental health consultation (ECMHC) models and professional development opportunities for providers and teachers. An evaluation of early childhood consultation programs found ECMHC to be an effective means for reducing the disruptive classroom behaviors that are likely causes of preschool expulsion.¹⁴ Early intervention is more likely to change behaviors, thereby avoiding exclusions from the classroom settings where children can learn the skills they need for success in school and life.

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Endnotes

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- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Maryam Adamu and Lauran Hogan, "Point of Entry: The Preschool-to-Prison Pipeline" (report, Center for American Progress, October 2015), <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/08000111/PointOfEntry-reportUPDATE.pdf>.
- 5 "Data Snapshot: School Discipline" (Civil Rights Data Collection Issue Brief no. 1, US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, March 2014), <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crdc-discipline-snapshot.pdf>.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 "Policy Statement on Expulsion and Suspension Policies in Early Childhood Settings" (policy statement, US Department of Health and Human Services and US Department of Education, December 2014), <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/policy-statement-ecce-expulsions-suspensions.pdf>.
- 9 See the Office of Child Care "CCDF [Child Care and Development Fund] Reauthorization" page for a link to FY 2016–2018 Final Plan Preprint for States and Territories, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/occc/ccdf-reauthorization>.
- 10 "Head Start Performance Standards" (proposed rule, Administration for Children and Families, June 2015), <https://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2015/06/19/2015-14379/head-start-performance-standards#h-31>.
- 11 "Excessive Stress Disrupts the Architecture of the Developing Brain" (working paper no. 3, National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, January 2014), http://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2005/05/Stress_Disrupts_Architecture_Developing_Brain-1.pdf.
- 12 "Resolve, To Establish the Study Commission on the Social Emotional Learning and Development of Maine's Young Children," 127th Maine Legislature, http://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/bills/bills_127th/billtexts/SP039001.asp.
- 13 Walter S. Gilliam, "Implementing Policies to Reduce the Likelihood of Preschool Expulsion" (Federal Child Development Policy Brief Advancing PK–3 no. 7, 2008), <http://fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/ExpulsionBriefImplementingPolicies.pdf>.
- 14 Walter S. Gilliam, "Early Childhood Consultation Partnership: Results of a Random-Controlled Evaluation" (report, Child Study Center, Yale School of Medicine, May 2007), http://www.chdi.org/files/3814/1202/7645/evaluation_of_cts_early_childhood_consultation_partnership.pdf.