

Early Childhood Expulsions and Suspensions Undermine Our Nation's Most Promising Agent of Opportunity and Social Justice



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Introduction

High quality early care and education programs for children birth through four-years old have been shown to produce meaningful positive impacts in the lives of young children, especially for children of low-income families dealing with the stressors and lack of enrichment opportunities that all-to-often accompany financial disadvantage (Gilliam, 2009; Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, & Thornburg, 2009). The primary goal of early care and education is to promote overall school readiness, especially for those most at-risk for educational challenges.

Unfortunately, there are some young children who simply do not benefit from early care and education programs—those restricted from attending because they are suspended or expelled due to challenging behaviors. Within a social justice framework, students of color would have equal access to educational opportunities, as well as equal protection from having those same opportunities later denied. Presently, African-American preschoolers are the least likely to gain access to high-quality early care and education (Barnett, Carolan, & Johns, 2013) and African-Americans, especially boys, are by far the most likely to lose their access due to expulsions and serial suspensions (Gilliam, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2014, 2016). This brief presents the latest information regarding early childhood expulsions and suspensions with a special emphasis on how continuing gender and race disparities violate the civil rights of many of our youngest learners and contribute to our nation’s costly achievement gap by locking our boys and African-American children out of educational opportunities and diminishing the ability of early education to provide the social justice remedy it was designed to produce.



What Do We Know about Early Childhood Expulsions and Suspensions?

Expulsion is the single most severe disciplinary sanction that any educational program can impose. The capital punishment of schools, expulsion represents a total breakdown of an education program to meet the needs of a child. Early expulsions and suspensions predict later expulsions and suspensions, and students who are expelled or suspended are as much as ten times more likely to drop out of high school, experience academic failure and grade retention, hold negative school attitudes, and face incarceration (American Psychological Association, 2008; Lamont et al., 2013; Petras, Masyn, Buckley, Jalongo, & Kellam, 2011). These disturbing associations suggest that the entry point to the “school to prison pipeline” is opened long before the first day of kindergarten.

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At a December 2014 White House Early Education Summit, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education (HHS & ED, 2014) issued a rare joint position statement calling for the elimination of preschool expulsion and suspension, as well as early childhood disciplinary policies that are free of bias and discrimination. This joint departmental statement was prompted by a March 2014 report from the ED’s Office of Civil Rights (OCR; ED, 2014), showing that 6% of school districts with preschool programs reported suspending at least one child from public-school prekindergartens.

Although the OCR findings are alarming and garnered much media attention, the problem of early education expulsion had been known for about a decade. The first national study of the rates of preschool expulsion and suspension in state-funded prekindergarten classes (Gilliam, 2005) found strikingly similar results. Ten percent of all teachers reported having permanently expelled at least one child in the prior year because of challenging behaviors. The rate of expulsion in these prekindergarten programs, serving 3- to 4-year olds, was found to be more than three times as high as for students in grades K through 12 combined. Even more troubling, the expulsion rate is far higher for young children in child care centers outside of state prekindergarten systems. Thirty-nine percent of child care providers in Massachusetts reported at least one expulsion in the prior year, for an expulsion rate more than 13 times higher than K through 12 (Gilliam & Shahar, 2006). An unpublished survey of child care providers in Detroit, Michigan found similar rates (Grannan, Carlier, & Cole, 1999).

Even infants and toddlers are at high risk for child care expulsion, with 42% of infant/toddler child care centers across Illinois reporting at least one expulsion in the past year (Cutler & Gilkerson, 2002). Based on estimated rates of expulsion and recent census data on the numbers of young children enrolled in various types of early care and education settings (Laughlin, 2013), the annual number of preschool expulsions across the nation may well exceed 300,000.

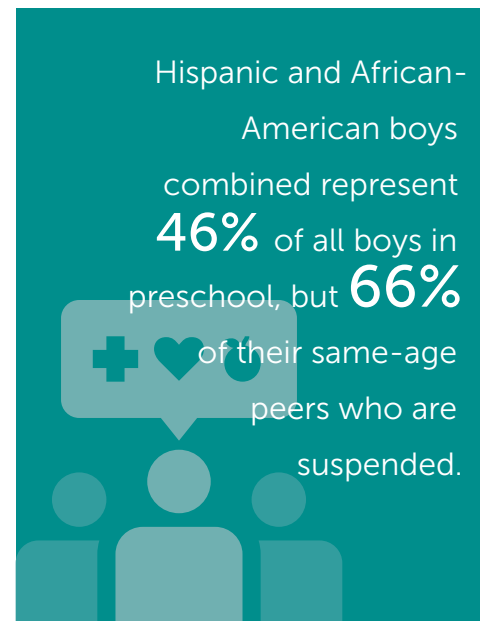
Which of Our Children Are at Greatest Risk?

Early childhood expulsions and suspensions are greatly disproportionate to boys and African-American children. The 2014 OCR data collected across virtually all prekindergarten programs operating in U.S. public schools showed that “black children make up 18% of preschool enrollment, but 48% of preschool children suspended more than once.” Hispanic and African-American boys combined represent 46% of all boys in preschool, but 66% of their same-age peers who are suspended. Similarly, boys represent 54% of the preschool enrollment, but 79% of children suspended once and 82% of children suspended multiple times. In a 2016 follow-up data collection by the OCR, racial disparities were even greater, with black preschoolers being 3.6 times as likely to be suspended as white preschoolers (ED, 2016).

These gender and race disparities were strikingly similar to those found nearly a decade earlier than the 2014 OCR data. In the first national study of preschool expulsion and suspension, preschool boys were expelled at 4.5 times the rate of girls, and African-Americans were expelled at twice the rate of their non-black peers, with disparities in suspension even greater (Gilliam, 2005). It doesn't require complicated statistics to see that boys and African-American preschoolers are at far greater risk for early education suspensions and expulsions. This increased risk of early disciplinary exclusions further exacerbates educational disparities and undermines the ability of early education to provide a social justice remedy.

Why Are Our Preschoolers Being Expelled?

Preschool expulsions and suspensions are not child behaviors; they are adult decisions based in part on teachers' feelings about whether the resources and supports available to them are adequate to meet the needs of children with challenging behaviors. Indeed, several non-behavioral factors present an increased risk for expulsion. These include program factors (e.g., group sizes, child-teacher ratios, and the availability of



consultants and support staff to assist teachers with managing challenging behaviors), as well as teacher factors (e.g., teacher depression and job stress). Smaller group sizes and lower child-teacher ratios have long been shown to predict more positive caregiving interactions and better overall early care and education quality (Clark-Stewart, Vandell, Burchinal, O'Brien, & McCartney, 2002). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that larger group sizes and larger numbers of children per teacher are robust predictors of preschool expulsion. Preschool expulsions also are significantly more likely in prekindergarten classrooms open for extended hours (eight or more hours per day) and with teachers who report high levels of job stress. Furthermore, preschool teachers who screen positive for depression expel at about twice the rate of those who do not (Gilliam, 2008; Gilliam & Shahar, 2006). These correlations alone suggest that factors other than child behaviors contribute to the high rates of expulsion and suspension in our nation's early care and education programs. Interestingly, preschool teacher educational level, credentials, and years of experience show no relationship at all to expulsion or suspension rates.

Other factors may contribute to these higher rates of preschool expulsion relative to K-12 expulsion. Preschool rates may be higher because early education is voluntary, whereas in most K-12 grades school attendance is compulsory. Because preschool attendance is almost never legally mandated, preschool expulsions have virtually no legal implications. Therefore, many early childhood programs do not have established policies against expulsion, and the procedures for expelling preschoolers are typically informal in nature and follow no due process guidelines.

Many early care and education programs lack the resources to help their workforce appropriately manage developmentally typical challenging behaviors and children who may need additional supports like early intervention and health or mental health services. Empirically identifying the contributors to early expulsion and suspension will enable researchers and policymakers to target investments and interventions more precisely and effectively.

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Why Are Our Boys and Our African-American Preschoolers at Greatest Risk?

Relative to their white peers, African-American elementary students are more than twice as likely to be referred to the principal's office for challenging behaviors and significantly more likely to be expelled or suspended, even when the behavioral infractions are similar (Skiba et al., 2011). These racial disparities are independent of socio-economic class,

suggesting that race is a stronger driver for disparities than the economic challenges that are often associated with race (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002).

Several factors may account for these disparities. Recent research suggests that compared to their sisters, boys are more susceptible to the ill-effects of poverty, trauma, broken homes, stressed communities, and low-quality schools, with the results being a greater likelihood for truancy, poor academic achievement, behavioral problems, school drop-out, and crime (Autor, Figlio, Karbownik, Roth, & Wasserman, 2015). Even when the degree of stress and the amount of familial supports are the same, boys tend to show more adverse reaction than their sisters (Bertrand & Pan, 2011). Also, children of color and those from low-income families have less access to high-quality early learning programs (Barnett et al., 2013). They are over-represented in unlicensed and unregulated child care settings and are more likely to attend lower-quality and under-resourced preschool programs, elementary and secondary schools (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2006). When they do gain access to early childhood education, they are more likely to be pushed out through exclusionary practices like suspension and expulsion. This is particularly true for young boys of color. Children of color and children from low-income families have less *front door* access to high-quality early learning programs and are further denied access by being pushed out the *back door* at disproportionate rates.

However, none of these factors, alone or in combination, seem to account for all of the gender and racial disparities in preschool expulsion and suspension rates. During the past five years, a considerable amount of research has been conducted regarding the role of implicit bias, particularly concerning race. In a series of laboratory experiments and field studies, researchers found that university undergraduate students rated black children as young as age 10 years old significantly less innocent and more culpable than other children. They also estimated that black children were, on average, 4.5 years older than they really were (Goff et al., 2014). Also, in a series of studies with police officers and college students, when the experimenter invoked concepts of crime or delinquency, participants were more likely to direct their eye gaze toward black faces, as opposed to white faces (Eberhardt, Goff, Purdie, & Davies, 2004), suggesting an implicit bias to associate “crime” with black individuals. More recently, the automatic association between race and perceived threat of aggression has been shown even when the black face was that of a five-year old boy (Todd, Thiem, & Neel, 2016). These implicit biases appear to develop early in life. In a study of children 5- to 10-years old, children were asked to rate the amount of pain they would feel in ten different situations (e.g., biting their tongue, hitting their head). Children were then asked to rate the amount of pain they believed two other pictured children might feel, one black and one white. By age 7 years, racial biases began to emerge, with children feeling that the black child would feel less pain. By age 10 years, the biases were robust (Dore, Hoffman, Lillard, & Trawalter, 2014).



Black children are regarded as significantly less innocent and more culpable than other children.

More specific to teachers, in carefully-designed studies, race has been shown to impact teacher interpretation of the severity of behavior problems and lead to teachers detecting behavioral problems more frequently (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). However, the directionality of the bias is sometimes hard to predict. For example, in one study, white middle school and high school teachers were each provided a poorly-written essay to grade. The student name on the essay was randomized to suggest it was authored by either a black, white, or Latino student. Students of color were assigned higher grades. This “positive feedback bias” suggested that teachers were demonstrating an expectancy bias, whereby black and Latino students are expected to be capable of only lower quality essays and are, therefore, given a higher grade, while white students are expected to write better essays and are, thereby, given a lower grade (Harber et al., 2012).

At present, no studies have been published regarding potential for implicit bias in how preschool and child care teachers appraise and detect challenging behaviors in young children, and how implicit bias may account for the increased risk of expulsion and suspension in preschool boys and African-Americans. Nonetheless, recent research suggests that implicit bias may be reduced through interventions designed to address biases directly (Devine, Forscher, Austin, & Cox, 2012; van Nunspeet, Ellemers, & Derks, 2015), raising the question of whether evidence-based bias-reducing interventions should be a normal component of early childhood teacher training.

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Why Do Racial Disparities in Preschool Expulsion Matter So Much?

Disparities in educational opportunities begin at a very young age, and preschool expulsion and suspension rates provide clear examples. The disproportionate expulsion and suspension of African-American preschoolers create two terrible problems.

First, it undermines our national early education return on investment.

We know from decades of early education research that low-income children benefit the most from high-quality early education (Pianta et al., 2009). We also know that children of color are, unfortunately, more likely to live in low-income families and communities (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, & Aber, 1997). Therefore, disproportionately expelling and suspending our children of color sabotages the investment potential of early education and makes no sense for sound policy or national investment strategies.



Second, it creates a clear violation of social justice by excluding the very students that early education programs were created to serve.

The most cited studies of the effectiveness of early education used to establish the basis for our national public investment in early education were conducted on overwhelming African-American child samples. The single most commonly-cited study showing the long-term effects and return on investment from early education is the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study, a study of 123 preschoolers living in low-income homes in Ypsilanti, Michigan—all were African-American (Schweinhart et al., 2005). The two other oft cited studies of the positive effects of early education are the Carolina Abecedarian Study (Campbell, 1994) and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers Longitudinal Study (Reynolds, Temple, White, Ou, & Robertson, 2011), with samples that are 98% and 93% African-American, respectively. Simply stated, we have used data belonging to black children to build the case for early education opportunities for all of our children, and then turned our collective attention elsewhere when those same children are disproportionately excluded from the programs their data were used to create.¹

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Where are the Promising Directions?

In the past year, federal, state and municipal governments have sought to eliminate preschool expulsions and suspensions. Proposed rule changes to the federal Head Start Performance Standards (2015) “either prohibit or severely limit” suspensions and “explicitly prohibit” expulsions in all Head Start programs, as well as require programs to “engage a mental health consultant, collaborate with parents, and utilize appropriate community resources should a temporary suspension be deemed necessary because a child’s behavior represents a serious safety threat for themselves or other children.” The proposed rule changes also seek to address potential bias in these decisions by requiring that “the determination of safety threats should be based only on actual risks and objective evidence, and not on stereotypes or generalizations.” In June 2015, Connecticut became the first state to pass legislation prohibiting suspensions and expulsions in preschool, although the law only applies to programs in public or charter schools and has notable exceptions for possession of firearms (Connecticut Public Act 15-96). Even so, laws limiting the ability to expel and suspend are only a necessary first step.

One way to address gender and race disparities in preschool expulsion and suspension is through better preventive programs for all children. Early childhood mental health consultation (ECMHC) is one such promising intervention. ECMHC is a multi-level preventive intervention that teams mental health professionals with early care and education professionals and families to improve child health and development in the social-emotional and behavioral domains. Research suggests that

¹ This point was first made in testimony during an April 14, 2015 Congressional appropriations budget hearing (Gilliam, 2015).

ECMHC is effective in increasing children’s social skills, reducing children’s challenging behavior, preventing preschool suspensions and expulsions, improving child-adult relationships, and identifying child concerns early so that children get the supports they need as soon as possible (Hepburn, Perry, Shivers, & Gilliam, 2013). In addition, the model has been found effective in reducing teacher stress and burnout, both of which have been shown to be associated with increased risk of expelling and suspending young children (Gilliam & Shahar, 2006). Early childhood teachers who report regular access to mental health consultants are half as likely to report expelling a young child than teachers who report no such access, yet only about one in five teachers report regular access to such supports (Gilliam, 2005). Increased attention to ECMHC as a promising model was one of the primary aims of the 2014 HHS and ED joint position statement and is further encouraged by states through language included in the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act of 2014 (CCDBG, 2014), the federal law funding subsidized child care in the U.S., as well as national best-practices guidelines for child care centers (American Academy of Pediatrics & American Public Health Association, 2013).

Much of this considerable movement has been happening at the policy level, and most of it within the past two years. Although these recent policy developments are pushing the previously invisible issue of early childhood expulsion and suspension into light, continuing effort will be needed to turn policy into practice through the diffusion of scalable and cost-effective solutions. To date, there exist no interventions which present conclusive evidence of reducing or eliminating the race or gender disparities in early childhood expulsions and suspensions. One positive step is the Diversity-Informed Mental Health Tenets developed by the Irving Harris Foundation (St. John, Thomas, & Noroña, 2012). This document provides clear guiding principles by which early educators and interveners may explore and discover their implicit biases and deliver more equitable services to all children. Although this is an encouraging start, we need to know far more about the potential role of implicit biases in our early childhood programs, how those biases may place and keep children at risk of losing essential educational opportunities, and how we may develop effective methods for achieving more equitable and sensitive early education and care services.



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Where Must We Go From Here?

The mid- and long-term consequences of expulsions and suspensions from early childhood settings have not been studied. Research on exclusionary discipline in the K-12 system indicates that suspensions and expulsions can precipitate a number of adverse outcomes across development, health, and education. Expulsion and suspension early in a child’s educational trajectory predicts expulsion and suspension later, and

students who are expelled or suspended are as much as ten times more likely to drop out of high school, experience academic failure and grade retention, hold negative school attitudes, and face incarceration (Raffaele-Mendez, 2003). Early expulsion and suspension may have additional adverse consequences such as hindering social-emotional and behavioral development, delaying or interfering with the process of identifying and addressing underlying issues (which may include exposure to trauma, developmental delays or disabilities, or mental health issues), negatively impacting parents' views on both their young children's potential and schools as safe and accepting places, and causing added family stress and burden (Van Egeren, et al., 2011).

Although an emerging body of evidence is showing ECMHC to be a cost-effective method for reducing the behaviors that often lead to preschool expulsions and suspensions, only one ECMHC program has been studied in rigorous random-controlled evaluations—Connecticut's Early Childhood Consultation Program (ECCP). ECCP is a federally-recognized model of early childhood mental health consultation that pairs mental health consultants with classroom staff in order to create a cost-efficient method for facilitating early childhood teachers' skills in managing challenging classroom behaviors and creating an environment for developing children's social-emotional functioning. Two separate statewide random-controlled evaluations have shown ECCP to produce significant decreases in preschool teacher-rated challenging behaviors, and a smaller-scale pilot random-controlled study in infant/toddler child care centers is showing promising evidence of reducing challenging behaviors in toddlers and increasing family-provider communication (Gilliam, 2014; Gilliam, Maupin, & Reyes, 2016). At present, ECCP is the only form of early childhood mental health consultation with evaluative methods that are rigorous enough to show a clear impact of the program at reducing the challenging behaviors that are most likely to result in early childhood expulsions and suspensions. More effort needs to be focused on supporting ECMHC and developing better mechanisms for scaling this and other models of positive prevention.

Improved methods of measuring the mental healthiness of early childhood environments may also lead to better-focused interventions and teacher trainings which may help early childhood educators deliver more socially-emotionally facilitative programs. Likewise, more needs to be understood regarding the factors that contribute to teachers' decision-making processes regarding early expulsions and suspensions. Emerging evidence suggests that early childhood teachers consider a variety of factors when weighing the decision to expel or suspend (Gilliam & Reyes, 2016). These factors include: (a) the perceived severity of classroom disruption; (b) the degree to which the teacher fears s/he may be held accountable if a child is harmed; (c) the amount of stress the challenging behavior creates for the teacher; and (d) the degree of hopelessness the teacher may feel about whether the behaviors will improve. Evidence suggests that the perceived severity of classroom disruption is the factor most likely to lead a teacher

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to seek outside assistance, whereas the degree to which the teacher fears s/he may be held accountable if a child is harmed is the factor most predictive of whether that teacher will seek expulsion as a remedy.

If teachers view boys and children of color as more capable of harming others, as previously-discussed research has suggested they may, what impact might this have on expulsion and suspension disparities? Through a better understanding of teacher decision-making factors, more effective interventions may be developed. Currently, no published research has directly examined the degree to which intentional or unintentional biases about boys and children of color may contribute to the elevated risk of preschool expulsions and suspensions. Are preschool boys and children of color more likely to be the target of teachers' attention when they anticipate a challenging behavior? Do early childhood teachers have different behavioral expectations based on gender and race? If so, what impact might this have on children's classroom behaviors and teachers' responses to them? More needs to be known about all of the factors that place boys, African-Americans, and especially African-American boys, at such elevated risk of early childhood disciplinary exclusions, including the potential role of implicit bias.

Racial disparities in preschool expulsions and suspensions are civil rights matters involving our nation's youngest learners and should no longer be tolerated. More than sixty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, we are still struggling to ensure that our children of color are afforded equal access to educational opportunities. The intended purpose of early education is to help close the school achievement gap by promoting equitable access to the school readiness opportunities afforded by high-quality early education. Access means affording all our children the opportunity to enter through the front door of early education, and it also means keeping them from being pushed out the back door. Whether due to inequitable distribution of quality and resources in our early education programs, policies that fail to protect access for all of our children, implicit bias, or a combination of any or all of these factors, we are failing our African-American preschoolers—especially our African-American boys—in the very same programs that their data were used to create. High-quality early education is one of our nation's best remedies for providing a more socially just society. However, until we are able to solve the problem of disparities in early exclusionary practices, our most promising social justice remedy will remain an unfortunate part of the social problem it was designed to address.

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