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Strengthening Early Childhood Education

Dr. Deborah Bruns, Dan Holder, Christine Gibson

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The early years of a child's life are crucial for laying the foundation for future success in learning, health, and overall well-being. Schools play a vital role in fostering development by integrating evidence-based social-emotional learning (SEL) strategies into daily activities. Preschoolers' developmental tasks include peer interaction, emotional regulation, and understanding social rules. The Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) provides targeted interventions for children facing delays or deficits. Collaboration between families, schools, and communities is essential, with an emphasis on two-way communication, training, involvement opportunities, and staff support. Ensuring culturally responsive approaches and eliminating biases are key priorities for promoting positive outcomes in early childhood education.

INTRODUCTION

The beginning years, ages 3-8 of a child's life are critical for building the foundations for learning, health, wellness, and success in school and thereafter. Children's brains are developing rapidly during these years, influenced by a range of experiences that youngsters share with their families, caregivers, school-based professionals, peers, and their communities. Teaching developmental and functional skill sets should be the primary focus. Implementing culturally informed and evidence-based interventions can facilitate learning in all domains.

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SKILLS

Schools should use evidence-based SEL strategies and curricula to integrate these skills into daily activities, routines, and instruction with a focus on explicit teaching, classroom environment, and play-based practice to help young children generalize skills. Culturally responsive approaches also are essential when determining behaviors to explicitly teach and assist schools to become safe, predictable, positive, and equitable learning environments for all children.

Developmental tasks for students aged 3-8 should include:

- Developing skills for peer interaction.

- Managing emotional responses across settings, adults, and peers.

- Demonstrating prosocial behaviors and interactions.

- Beginning to form friendships with peers and connections with adults.

- Seeking assistance, when necessary.

- Understanding basic emotional expressions, situations, and experiences and ways to manage them -- with and without adult assistance.

- Gaining skills to solve interpersonal problems.

- Acquiring knowledge of social rules, including taking turns and requesting assistance.

These skills are evaluated in Outcome 1 of the Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center's Childhood Outcomes framework.[i]

If a child demonstrates a delay or deficit, implementation of the MTSS framework is warranted. MTSS support assists with developmental and teaching behavioral skills with positive, motivating interventions and a range of age-appropriate strategies.

The use of Functional Behavioral Assessments (FBAs) and resulting Behavioral Intervention Plans can address behavioral needs. Completion of FBAs must be individualized and be culturally responsive. Data collection during the FBA process is used to identify the function, or purpose, of the behavior and identify evidence-based practices to help the child learn replacement behaviors. The team may decide to conduct an FBA if a student's behavior creates a safety risk for the child, peers, and/or adults, or if trauma has been reported.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Various strategies can be employed to enhance culturally responsive behavioral support and boost parent and community involvement in early childhood education. Establishing ongoing communication channels between schools and families is essential for building trust and fostering engagement. Schools should inquire about families' preferred communication methods and provide materials accordingly. Additionally, offering multiple opportunities for family involvement — such as volunteering in the classroom, attending school events, and participating in parent-teacher conferences and advisory committees — can increase reciprocal communication. Recognizing that families have diverse relationships with schools and varying time constraints is crucial; therefore, it is important to avoid passing judgment on those who participate less frequently. Ensuring that opportunities for involvement are available to families of children from prekindergarten through age 22 also is vital.

COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

Collaborating with community organizations can help schools reach out to community members who may not be directly connected to the school. For example, schools can partner with local libraries, community centers, mental health providers, and other organizations to offer resources and programs for families and children.

TRAINING AND RESOURCES

Offering training and resources to parents and community members can help them better understand the importance of and ways to support their children's learning. For example, workshops on child development, literacy, and social-emotional learning can give parents and community members the knowledge and skills to support their children's development in all domain areas, including behavioral skills.

STAFF SUPPORT

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' "Policy Statement on Expulsion and Suspension Policies in Early Childhood" (2020), all early childhood staff (school-based professionals, paraprofessionals, and support staff) should be equipped with the resources necessary to conduct the following:

- Understanding and implementing early childhood workforce competencies and evidence-based interventions and approaches, including early childhood mental health consultation and positive behavior intervention and support strategies, that prevent expulsion, suspension, and other exclusionary discipline practices.

- Accessing free resources to support programs, school-based professionals, and providers in addressing children's social-emotional and behavioral health; strengthening family-program relationships; increasing developmental and behavioral screening and follow-up; and eliminating racial/ national origin/ ethnic, sex, or disability biases and discrimination in early learning settings.

Responding to Challenging Behavior in Early Childhood Public Act 100-0105 (2018) lists the following steps early childhood programs receiving Illinois state funds should follow with respect to behavior that is deemed to be challenging in both persistence and severity:

- Behavior Analysis -- Document that steps are taken to ensure that the child can participate safely in the program, which includes:

  - Observations of behavior.

  - Evidence-based intervention strategies that address behaviors.

  - Communication that involves parents/guardians.

- Parent Support and Resource Linkages -- Provide parents with a variety of community resources that may benefit the family and child.

- Transition Planning -- Consider developing a thorough plan for transitioning a student to a setting that better meets the child's unique needs. In such case, "both the current and pending programs shall create a transition plan designed to ensure continuity of services and the comprehensive development of the child."[ii]

Beyond the steps above, the Act more broadly encourages the promotion of training activities, technical support, and professional development resources for staff on topics, including:

- Social-emotional development and behavioral health

- Family engagement with diverse populations

- Trauma and trauma-informed care

- The impact of implicit bias

- Cultural competence

Further, districts may consider contracting with early childhood mental health consultants as access has been shown to "reduce or prevent expulsion and suspension in early care and education programs."[iii]

It is essential to note that the Public Act does allow for the "temporary removal of a child from attendance in group settings."[iv] This is only allowed in the event it is determined there

is a "serious safety threat to a child or others."[v] Removal from "group settings," however, does not necessarily equate removal from the school. Research shows that even temporary removals of fewer than 10 days from school have been "significantly and negatively associated with student's achievement test scores" later in their school career.[vi]

ZERO TOLERANCE AND EARLY CHILDHOOD DISCIPLINE

Many trends that are evident in K-12 settings also have appeared in early childhood discipline data, but zero tolerance has only recently become an area of statewide and national focus. In fact, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) Office for Civil Rights only first began including school-based prekindergarten in its 2011-12 dataset.[vii] Even in 2015, when Illinois passed Senate Bill 100 eliminating zero-tolerance policies and recommending no-exclusionary discipline before suspension, many early childhood programs receiving state funding were not run by a school district and therefore did not fall under SB 100's coverage.[viii]

It was not until 2018, following the release of a joint statement by ED and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, that Public Act 100-0105 went into effect "due to evidence that expulsion practices in the preschool years are linked to poor child outcomes and are employed inconsistently across racial and gender group."[ix] This Act specified that expulsions of students in early childhood programs that receive funding from ISBE are expressly prohibited.[x]

Among other things, the joint report cited a finding that "over 10% of preschool school-based professionals in state-funded prekindergarten programs reported expelling at least one preschooler in the past year -- a rate more than three times higher than estimates for school-based professionals of K-12 public school students."[xi] This same report highlighted the negative impacts of exclusion for students in early childhood, noting that expulsion creates a stressful and negative experience for both young children and their families.

Expulsion removes the essential opportunity to benefit from social-emotional and behavioral development support from the most at-risk children by excluding them from needed early childhood programming. This is especially problematic for young children given that "a child's early years set the trajectory for the relationships and successes they will experience for the rest of their lives, making it crucial that children's earliest experiences truly foster – and never harm – their development."[xii] Children who are expelled are "as much as 10 times more likely to drop out of high school, experience academic failure and grade retention, hold negative school attitudes, and face incarceration than those who are not."[xiii] Please see U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Policy Statement on Expulsions and Suspensions for the complete policy statement.

Illinois legislation aimed at reducing exclusionary discipline in early childhood settings was passed, but an extensive literature review found that research conducted concerning decisions."[xiv] Most alarming, the same paper notes that students in early childcare remain more than three times as early childhood exclusion "has not been systematically synthesized to inform policy and funding likely to be expelled from early childhood settings as students in Grades K-12.

KEY TERMS

Trauma

An event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically and emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. [xv]

BEHAVIOR INTERVENTION EXAMPLES

FIRST, THEN

First-Then strategy is a visual support tool used to help individuals understand and navigate tasks or activities by presenting them in a clear and structured manner. It is commonly used with individuals who benefit from visual cues and require additional support in following a sequence of events or completing tasks. The First-Then strategy involves presenting two distinct components: the "First" component represents the current task or activity that needs to be completed, while the "Then" component represents the subsequent task or preferred activity that will follow once the first task is finished. The strategy helps individuals understand the concept of "first do this, then you get that" and can assist in promoting compliance and motivation.

Examples of First, Then:
First, a student completes math problems. Then, the student engages in a preferred activity.

ENVIRONMENTAL/ACTIVITY MODIFICATION

Changing or manipulating the environment in order to promote the use of a desirable behavior or reduce unwanted or challenging behaviors. The teacher sets up the environment for the student to utilize a skill that has been recently taught. Changing the setting to set up the learner for success.

Examples of Environmental Modification:
A student is going to start a writing activity, the teacher purposefully removed the pencil from the student's desk to facilitate communication. The student's need of the pencil and its removal by the teacher promotes the student to ask for a pencil.

BEHAVIOR INTERVENTION EXAMPLES

REDIRECTING STUDENT

Redirection refers to shifting the student's attention, behavior or focus from an undesired behavior or distraction and towards an alternative or preferred behavior, activity, or task. It helps to prevent or address disruptive or off-task behavior and encourage engagement in productive activities. Redirection typically involves providing gentle guidance or cues to the student. This can be done through verbal prompts, non-verbal cues, or brief physical redirection (such as a touch on the arm or shoulder) to direct their attention or behavior. Redirection is most effective when delivered in a positive and supportive tone. It should focus on guiding the student towards the correct behavior rather than criticizing or reprimanding them for the undesired behavior. Positive reinforcement and encouragement can also be used to reinforce the desired behavior. Redirection is most successful when the teacher or caregiver establishes clear expectations and communicates them to the student. By setting clear guidelines and providing reminders, students have a better understanding of what is expected of them and are more likely to respond positively to redirection.

Examples of redirecting students:

A teacher interrupts a student from walking out the door by physically guiding them to make a turn before the door, and states, "Here, come with me. I want to show you something."

Teacher verbally engages student to help him/her focus on task and away from peers.

Non-examples of redirecting students:

A teacher physically prevents a student from engaging in a challenging behavior by holding them in a restraint that limits movement of the body (arms, legs, hands). Note: This is example is a not a proactive, prevention-based strategy but rather a restrictive intervention. Restraint should only be used when there is serious imminent danger and other lesser restrictive interventions have been tried.

Teacher verbally reprimands a student.

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Early Childhood pt 1: Building a supportive environment for young children video:

RESOURCE LINKS

» [Illinois Pyramid Model Implementation Guide](#)

» [Roadmap to Effective Intervention Practices: Statewide Implementation of the Pyramid Model](#)

» [Pyramid Model Behavior Incident Report Systems](#)

» [Starnet](#)

» [A Preschool LRE Initiative | Early CHOICES](#)

» [Policy Statement on Expulsion and Suspension in Early Childhood](#)

This is not an endorsement nor an exhaustive list of possible resources. Please consult with your individual district, Regional Office of Education, and the Illinois State Board of Education for additional resources. [Illinois State Board of Education](#)

CREDITS

Authors:

Dr. Deborah Bruns, Professor, Southern Illinois University

Dan Holder, Assistant Superintendent of Pupil Personnel Services, Parent, Freeport School District #145

Christine Gibson, Director of Autism and Behavioral Support Services, SEL Coordinator, Belleville School District #118, IAASE Representation

Behavior Assessment Training Project Staff:

Dr. Daniel Brown, BAT Project Manager, Southern Illinois University

Michelle Connet, BAT Project Coordinator, Southern Illinois University

Anurag Yendamuri, SERC Media Specialist, Southern Illinois University

Angie Hargrave, Undergraduate Researcher, Southern Illinois University

Jillian Hulcher, Undergraduate Researcher, Southern Illinois University

Nhi Nguyen, Undergraduate Researcher, Southern Illinois University

Addison Wainscott, Undergraduate Student Worker, Southern Illinois University

Madison Warnick, Undergraduate Student Worker, Southern Illinois University

Additional Contributors:

Melanie Ernst, Assistant Director, Autism Professional Learning and Universal Supports Project, Illinois State University

Dr. Miranda Johnson, Clinical Professor of Law, Director of Education Law and Policy Institute, Loyola University Chicago – School of Law

Brandon Wright, attorney, Miller, Tracy, Braun, Funk & Miller, Ltd.

Publication Design Direction:
Corey Tester

Publication Concept Design:
Corey Tester and Melissa Boyster

Custom Bat Illustrations:
Lauren Clark

Video Production:
NextThought

Stock Illustrations:
Iryna Petrenko — stock.adobe.com

ENDNOTES

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