Expelling Expulsion:
Using the Pyramid Model to Prevent Suspensions, Expulsions, and Disciplinary Inequities in Early Childhood Programs

Rosemarie Allen
& Barbara J. Smith

Suspension and Expulsion in Early Childhood

The United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Department of Education (ED) recently released a joint Policy Statement to address the issue of early childhood suspensions and expulsions. The purpose of the Policy Statement is to (a) raise awareness about exclusionary discipline practices in early childhood settings, (b) bring attention to racial and gender disparities in disciplinary practices, (c) provide information regarding the long-term negative impacts for children who are suspended and expelled from preschool, and, (d) make recommendations for states and local programs.[1] Preschool children are suspended up to three times more than students from kindergarten through 12th grades.[2] In 2014, the United States Department of Education released the results of its 2012 Civil Rights Data Collection, which, for the first time included preschool data. The results showed that approximately 5,000 preschoolers were suspended at least once in 2012 and of those, nearly 2,500 were suspended a second time.[3] African American children, who comprise only 18 percent of the preschool population, make up nearly half of all preschool suspensions. American Indian and Native-Alaskan students represent less than 1% of the student population but up to 3% of suspensions and expulsions.[4]

State- and local-level studies also reveal high numbers of young children suspended or expelled from early childhood programs. A Colorado study conducted in 2006 found that 10 children per 1,000 were expelled from early childhood programs. The study also found that the percentage of children expelled from family child care homes was up to 69 per 1,000 for providers who had less than six years experience and 26 per 1,000 for those with more than six years experience. This study did not, however, include data on race.[5] A 2009 survey of Boulder County, Colorado early care and education providers showed children of color comprised the largest group of expelled children, at 13 per 1,000.[6] The New Hampshire Child Care Expulsion Survey conducted in 2011 revealed 10 children per 115 were expelled, but did not include racial demographics.[7] In Michigan, the expulsion rate for preschoolers was 27 per 1000 students, which was 34 times the state's kindergarten through 12th grade rate of expulsion.[8] In North Dakota, 20% of providers expelled children from child care facilities. Notably, of those expelled, 53% were infants and toddlers and 31% were preschool children. This study did not include data on race.[9] A survey conducted in Illinois reported that more than 40 percent of the State's child care programs had suspended infants and toddlers.[10] Connecticut's suspension study for the 2011-2012 school year revealed that 75% of the children under the age of seven who were suspended were either Black or Hispanic.[11]

The joint Policy Statement from HHS and ED includes several recommendations that encourage early childhood programs to decrease the number of children suspended and expelled. These recommendations include implementing prevention and intervention strategies and ensuring equitable practices that are free of bias and discrimination.[12] Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) is highlighted as a multi-tiered system of practices that promotes the social emotional needs of children.[13] PBIS has been noted for reducing the use of suspensions and expulsions in educational settings.[14] As noted in the joint Policy Statement, the Pyramid Model for Promoting Social Emotional Competence in Infants and Young Children is an application of the PBIS framework that is specifically designed to meet the needs of very young children.[15] In 2011, a follow up study to the 2006 Colorado suspension study found expulsion rates were reduced. The survey also found an increase in appropriate practices to promote social emotional competence and prevent challenging behavior. Between 2006 and 2011, the state of Colorado initiated a statewide training program for the Pyramid Model that included these practices.[16]

The Pyramid Model and Culturally Responsive Practices

The Pyramid Model is a set of evidence-based practices that promote social emotional competence in young children that shows promise as an evidence-based framework to reduce disproportionate discipline practices in preschool.[17] When culturally responsive practices, which are naturally embedded in the Pyramid Model, are intentionally emphasized during training, coaching, and implementation, racial disparities in discipline may be reduced. The multi-tiered system of support provides strategies and techniques at the universal promotion level, where the needs of most children are met. The secondary prevention level provides additional support for specifically teaching social skills, and the tertiary intervention level includes intensive individualized supports to the few children who have persistent challenging behavior.

Nurturing and responsive relationships are the foundation of the Pyramid Model.[18] Strategies at this universal level include
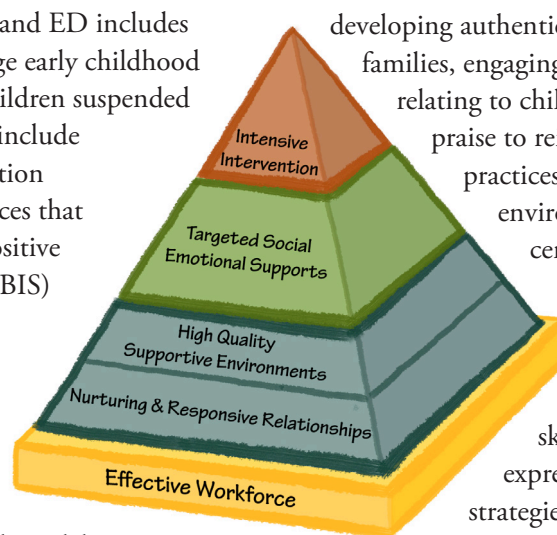
developing authentic relationships with children and their families, engaging in child-initiated conversations, relating to children on their level and using specific praise to reinforce positive behavior.[19] Universal practices also include designing a supportive environment with, (a) distinct learning centers, (b) a consistent daily routine, and (c) a few simple, positively stated rules.[20] Secondary Pyramid Model strategies incorporate the intentional teaching of social and emotional skills including understanding and expressing emotions, self-regulation strategies, social problem solving, and friendship skills.[21] At the tertiary level a team is assembled to conduct a functional behavior assessment (FBA) and to develop an individualized positive behavior support plan that includes prevention, teaching, and reinforcement strategies.[22]

Building positive relationships with children, families, and co-workers is the foundation of the Pyramid Model and a prerequisite for all other practices that promote social emotional competence.[23] Partnering with families is critical in ensuring culturally responsive practices are reflected in the teaching and reinforcing of behavior expectations. Positive relationships with colleagues promote an awareness of the cultures that are brought into the classroom and an understanding of differences that might influence how behaviors are perceived.[24] Walter Gilliam, national expert on preschool suspensions, explained, "I've never seen a suspension or expulsion where the teachers and parents knew and liked each other."[25] Cultural congruence between the child's home and school is the cornerstone of culturally responsive practices.[26] Developing a child-centered, culturally relevant, affirming, and supportive environment decreases the incidents of challenging behaviors in early childhood settings.[27] The Pyramid Model, with an emphasis on these culturally responsive approaches, reflects best practices for (a) preventing and addressing challenging behaviors, (b) reducing preschool suspension, and (c) balancing racial inequities in exclusionary discipline practices. The Pyramid Model practices are aligned with culturally responsive practices as shown by the examples in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Alignment of Culturally Responsive Practices and the Pyramid Model[28]

Universal Promotion Level	Secondary Promotion Level	Tertiary Promotion Level
Pyramid Model: Building relationships with families is a prerequisite for promoting social emotional competence in children. (Fox, Lentini & Binder, 2013).	Pyramid Model: Provides "intentional and systematic instruction of social skills and emotional competencies (e.g., friendship skills, problem solving, communicating emotions, anger management)" (Hemmeter, Fox, Jack & Broyles, 2007 p. 340).	Pyramid Model: Collaborative approach in developing an FBA and the use of data to determine the effectiveness of the intervention (Brown, Odom, & McConnell, 2008).
Culturally responsive practices are rooted in meaningful, positive, culturally affirming relationships between families, staff members and children (Edwards & Raikes, 2002; Gay, 2002).	Culturally responsive practices include intentional teaching of social skills, raising student expectations and acknowledging the positive behaviors of children in the context of their culture (Howard, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1994).	Culturally responsive practices ensures collaborations with families and community members and a system for reviewing data points that drive discussions about race and equity (Eber, et al., 2010).

Implicit Bias Impacts Perceptions of Challenging Behavior

One of the barriers to effective implementation of culturally responsive practices is implicit bias.[29] Everyone has attitudes and stereotypes that are influenced by early experiences. Implicit bias is defined as unconscious beliefs and stereotypes that impact interactions, behaviors, and feelings toward others in an unconscious way.[30] It has been shown that biased perceptions and implicit racial attitudes toward students of color are directly related to disproportionality in discipline.[31] There is evidence that disproportionality in disciplinary practices is impacted by teachers' responses to perceived behaviors that are based on racial stereotypes and implicit bias.[32] Teachers who view children of color as dangerous and difficult to control are more likely to use punitive disciplinary measures such as suspensions and expulsions. Teachers must be made aware of the role of implicit bias in their perceptions of young children and the inequities that result from biased decision-making.

The Dangers of Adopting Color Blind Ideology

Issues of equity are often avoided by adopting a color blind ideology.[33] Asserting that skin color does not matter allows teachers to deny the existence of implicit bias and its impact on disproportional discipline. Color blind ideology promotes racial inequities by silencing racial discourse and asserting practices without regard to skin color.[34] Racial blindness promotes the fallacy that teachers are beyond bias and racism, ignores racial disparities, and places blame on the behaviors of children of color.[35] In order to ensure racial equity, educators must (a) engage in discourse on the impact of race, privilege, and power on teaching and learning, (b) conduct equity audits to determine if policies are aligned with values and beliefs, (c) discuss expectations of conformity versus acceptance of the cultural norms of children and families,[36] and (d) collect and review data using an equity lens to confirm equitable practices.[37] It is impossible to implement culturally responsive practices without analyzing the impact of race, power, and bias in classroom interactions.[38]

Conclusion

In order to effectively reduce implicit bias and enhance the implementation of culturally responsive practices embedded in the Pyramid Model, teachers must engage in a journey of self discovery that (a) makes them aware of their own biases, (b) capitalizes on their good intentions, (c) provides documentation of racial disparities, and (d) shows how bias contributes to racial disproportionality.[39] Effective implementation of culturally responsive practices requires a transformation in the way teachers perceive and respond to the cultural norms of children of color.[40] Educators must have access to professional development activities that include knowledge of (a) implicit bias and its impact on decision making, (b) culturally responsive practices and how to implement the practices in the classroom, (c) the role of critical reflection in challenging assumptions, and interpreting, understanding, and reframing experiences, and (d) strategies for preventing and addressing challenging behaviors.[41] The Pyramid Model, a PBIS framework for early childhood settings, is an effective approach for addressing challenging behaviors that may lead to suspensions.[42] When culturally responsive practices, which are naturally incorporated in the Pyramid Model, are highlighted during training and coaching and intentionally applied in classrooms, suspensions and racial disparities in discipline may be greatly reduced.

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