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# Teachers' Perceptions of Childcare and Preschool Expulsion

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## Abstract

- High rates of preschool expulsion in the U.S. represent a threat to children's development and wellbeing.
- A small body of research offers the basic correlates of childcare expulsion, yet researchers know little about *how* expulsions in early childhood education happen.
- This study is the first to focus on how teachers and childcare directors make decisions about expulsion.
- We found a patterned process to childcare expulsion through interviewing teachers: Teachers search for causes and solutions to challenging behaviors. When interventions fail, overwhelmed teachers shift their focus from "struggling" children to "bad families." Once the explanation of behavior changes from within to outside of the child, expulsion is imminent.

## The Issue

The growing recognition that early childhood represents a critical moment in development has led to an increased focus on the role that early educational experiences play in shaping children's trajectories. High quality early childcare and preschool promote school readiness and enhance socio-emotional development (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001; F. A. Campbell, Pungello, Miller-Johnson, Burchinal, & Ramey, 2001; Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson, 2002). Therefore, expanding access to high quality early education has been an important public policy initiative in the United States (U.S.) However, high rates of preschool expulsion in the U.S. challenge this goal, placing children at risk for continued educational difficulties in primary and secondary school and potentially disrupting their socio-emotional and cognitive development (Meeks & Gilliam, 2016). Further, the burden of preschool expulsion is not borne equally. Children who are members of racial and ethnic minority groups experience significantly higher rates of expulsion, which contributes to and reflects larger patterns of social inequality (Gilliam 2006). Currently, preschoolers are expelled at close to three times the rates as children in grades K-12 (Gilliam & Shahrar, 2006), making preschool expulsion an urgent public health and public policy issue (Meek & Gilliam, 2016).

## The Study

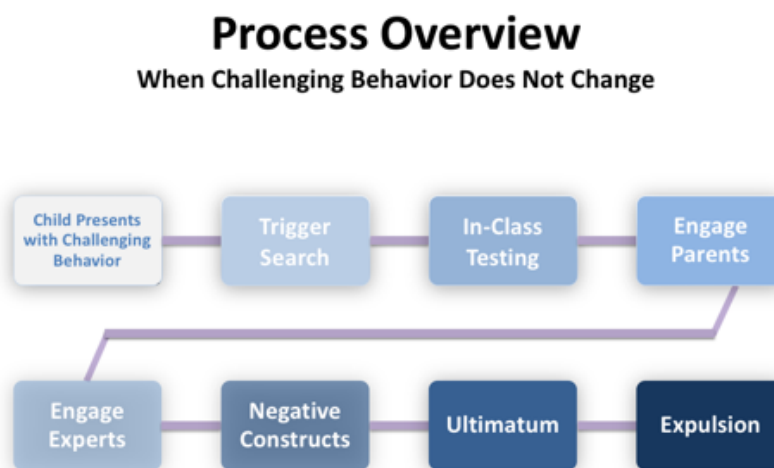
Given that challenging behaviors are developmentally appropriate in preschool (Campbell et. al. 2001) we wanted to understand how teachers distinguish between challenging behaviors that can be "worked with" versus ones that result in expulsion. Our study included data from semi-structured qualitative interviews with 30 childcare providers, preschool teachers, and childcare and preschool directors in a

state routinely ranked in the middle for childcare quality (Child Care Aware, 2015). Our aims were to (1) identify how preschool and childcare teachers understood behavior that warranted expulsion and (2) examine their decision-making related to expulsion. We collected narratives of expulsion from each teacher interviewed as well as counter narratives (stories about children in the same classroom who had a challenging behavior but were not expelled) in order to understand how the circumstances for children who were expelled differed.

## What We Found

We found that childcare expulsion is not a single event but a multi-level process that followed a general pattern. This pattern is represented in the figure below.

**Figure 1. Process Overview: When Challenging Behavior Does Not Change**



After a child presents with a challenging behavior, providers tried to identify triggers for challenging behaviors. In general, for children who were expelled, their triggers were harder to identify. Teachers would test a range of hypotheses (e.g. transitions cause tantrums) and then work to provide interventions accordingly (e.g. give the child extra time around a transition). However, for children on the road to expulsion, these interventions often did little to alleviate the behavior, leading teachers to feel frustrated and ineffective.

Next, teachers would engage parents to try to understand what was happening in the classroom. Whether these interactions were a step toward or away from expulsion depended on the parents' response. The more providers perceived the parents to be collaborative, the better the chance that expulsion would be prevented. When teachers understood parents to either not "take the problem seriously" or be uncooperative, the path toward expulsion accelerated.

Similarly, outside evaluations could either interrupt or facilitate the path toward expulsion. When evaluations uncovered medical problems or supported teachers, they offered new effective strategies which eliminated the need for expulsion. However, sometimes outside evaluations could work to hasten expulsion, especially when the recommendations for classroom practices were to unrealistic to follow (e.g. sticker charts that involved upwards of 30 stickers per day).

When a child's challenging behavior persisted despite interventions, teachers became increasingly frustrated and exhausted.

The same behavior became described as dangerous. As teachers clashed with parents over what was to be done, teachers' accounts suggested that they began to see the problem not residing in the child but in the "home environment." Once providers saw the problem as one that extended beyond the domain of childcare, they understood it as a problem that was outside their ability to intervene.

After a period of time, a line in the sand would be drawn: improved behavior within a short period of time or expulsion. We did not hear any stories where the ultimatum worked and an expulsion was prevented. Thus, ultimatums functioned solely as a tool to facilitate exits.

## Implications

Expulsion is an adult behavior that can be changed (Meek & Gilliam, 2016). Understanding expulsion as a process highlights the need to address the risk for expulsion at multiple points rather than at one time. The data presented here indicates interventions designed to target the teacher-parent relationship, especially those that are challenging may serve to reduce expulsions. Further, understanding expulsion as a process highlights the need to address the risk for expulsion at multiple points rather than at one time.

Research suggests Early Childhood Mental Health Consultations (ECMHC) are an effective- intervention for reducing expulsion (Anthony et. al., 2009; Perry, Allen, Brennan, & Bradley, 2010,) that should be expanded. ECMHC support teachers by providing information on developmentally appropriate expectations, the role that trauma plays in challenging behavior, non-punitive behavioral management, and the effective engagement of parents. ECMHC are likely to be a highly effective intervention precisely because it targets many points on the path to preschool expulsion.

## Sample Tweets

- Study examines processes for preschool expulsion #preschool expulsion @dorisdukefellows
- Supporting relationships between parents and teachers may reduce the risk of preschool expulsion #childwellbeing, #preschoolexpulsion @dorisdukefellows
- Early Childhood Mental Health Consultations (ECMHC) may help interrupt the path to expulsion #preschoolexpulsion @dorisdukefellows

## Link to Published Paper:

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/chso.12228/full>

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<sup>1</sup> Emily Bosk is the primary author of this blog post which is based on a published paper by all three authors.

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