Policy & Practice Briefs to Eliminate Child Care & Preschool Exclusion

An NCECF & TREP Project Collaboration

Strengthen the Capacity of Early Care and Learning Educators to Eliminate Exclusion

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As detailed in our *first End Early Care and Learning Expulsion brief,* children in child care and preschool programs--including those as young as 2 years old--experience suspension and expulsion. There are many different ways that young children can be excluded: some programs explicitly expel children, others exclude students by repeatedly asking parents to pick their child up early, or requesting that students transfer out due to the school's "inability to support" the child. As is the case in K-12 schooling, the *U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights data* informs us that race is a strong predictor that a student will be removed from their preschool classroom. Black children represent 18.2% of preschool enrollment, but 43.3% of children suspended one or more times from their preschools.

Childcare and preschool suspension and expulsion is *harmful for children's development and often only serves to increase their behavioral challenges.* They miss out on opportunities to learn self-regulation skills, and can begin to view themselves, teachers, and learning environments negatively.

As policy makers work to improve the quality of early childhood education, it is important to understand racial and socioeconomic disparities in children's access to high quality care. High quality early care and education programs *are characterized by programmatic factors* like professional development supports for staff, in addition to small class sizes, low rates of staff turnover, and low child-staff ratios. However, not all children have the same access to programs that use these practices. In response, states should target quality improvement resources to reach children who have low access to high quality early care.

Research in North Carolina shows that access to high quality early learning environments is associated with the socioeconomic status of the community in which children live. Neighborhoods with higher concentrations of families who are Black, live below the poverty line, and qualify for public assistance, are more likely to have early childhood education centers that *score lower on a quality rating assessment*. Centers that received the highest quality ratings were located in neighborhoods categorized by both concentrated advantage and high levels of Head Start funding. Access to high quality early childhood education is often diminished for children in disadvantaged families who could benefit from it most. EdNC examined the *January 2023 report of licensed child care centers across North Carolina* and found that child care centers in majority-Black counties are less likely than centers in other counties to accept child care subsidies, which provide financial assistance to families that may not otherwise be able to afford child care for their young children.

These counties, in which at least 50% of residents identify as Black, also *have a greater proportion* of home-based, rather than center-based, child care options than counties where Black residents are not in the majority. Home-based care centers may be preferable to families for many reasons, including higher staff-child ratios, a cultural match, flexible hours, and greater affordability, both *in North Carolina* and *across the country*. However, home-based providers *often face difficulty* in accessing state funding and receiving training and support from quality improvement initiatives.

North Carolina county map

■ Majority-Black counties
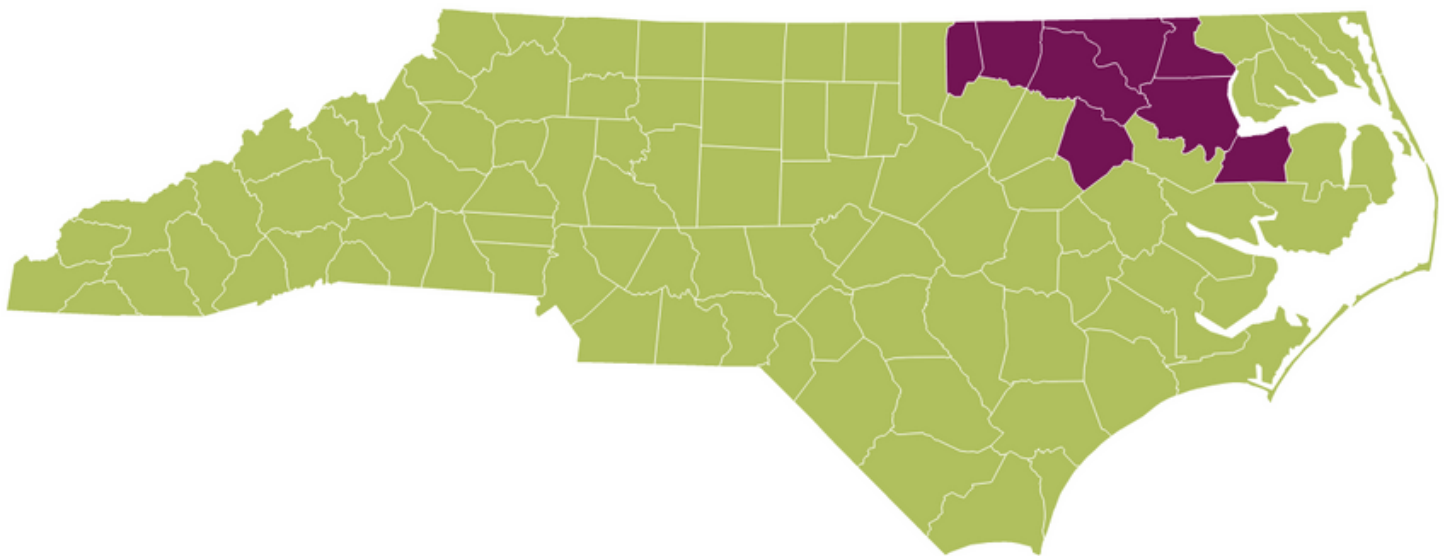
"Majority-Black" means more than 50% of residents identify as Black or mixed race

Map: Katie Dukes • Source: EducationNC • Created with Datawrapper

Preventing Exclusion Through Staff Professional Development

By age six, 70% of children have experienced a single traumatic event or repeated moderate traumatic events that disrupt their ability to regulate their emotions. This dysregulation often shows up as challenging behaviors. Too often, caregivers respond to these behaviors with punitive discipline, which does not teach children the skills needed to express their distress and ask for help in prosocial ways.

Learning to view challenging behavior through the lens of nonverbal communication can help child care and early childhood educators to respond in ways that are developmentally supportive and minimize exclusionary discipline.

Research informs us that passing laws that restrict suspension and expulsion must be coupled with investing in building the capacity to effectively prevent and respond to challenging behaviors. For example, Maryland passed a statute that prohibited suspension and expulsion in prekindergarten through second grade while also mandating the use of non-punitive behavioral interventions. The implementation of this statute was supported by increasing access to training on evidence-based approaches like Conscious Discipline, which emphasize positive interactions and preventing challenging behavior. Early educators reported that those resources were invaluable in helping to reduce their reliance on exclusionary discipline.

All states can include provisions to increase technical assistance and professional development that help early care and learning staff in developing the knowledge and practices needed to respond appropriately when children communicate their emotional distress through their behaviors.

To build staff capacity, North Carolina's Division of Child Development and Early Education _has allocated over $133 million in funding_ from 2022 to 2025 for institutions across the state to develop context-specific professional development around trauma informed practices, with the goal of improving the workplace environment for staff and the experiences of young children in schools. One example of these professional development programs is the _ITTI Care Project at Duke University_, which provides trauma-informed training and coaching for educators in center and home child care, with an emphasis on promoting a positive workplace to ensure educator and child well-being.
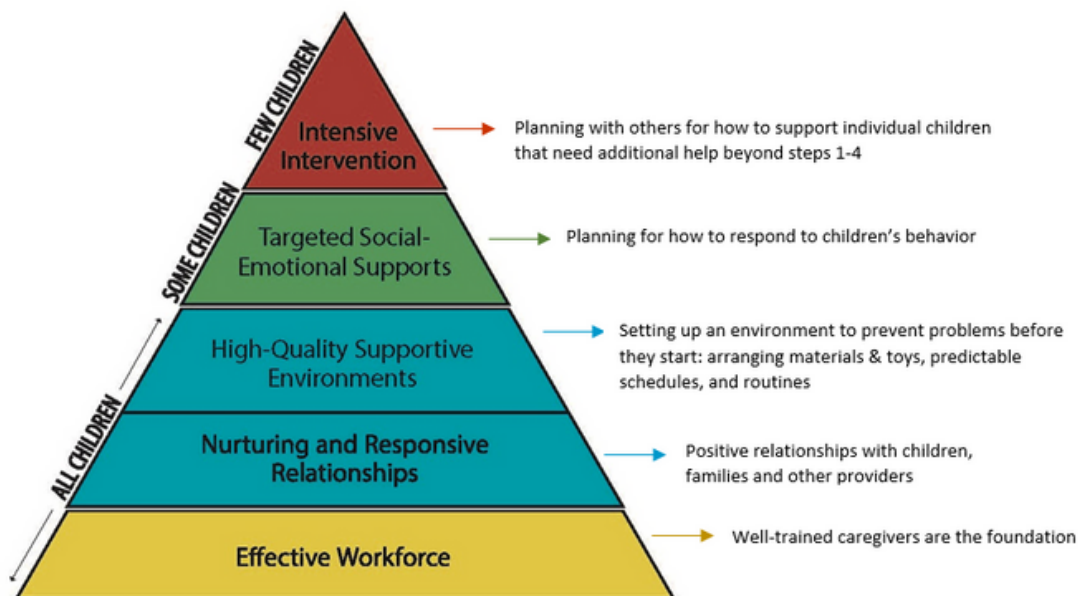

Image sourced from Monandock United Way

The Pyramid Model is a Tool for Reducing Exclusion

Additionally, along with many other states, North Carolina has invested in professional development for early educators based on the _Pyramid Model_. This is because evaluation studies indicate that the pyramid model has an overall positive influence on reducing exclusion from early learning environments.

The Pyramid Model _uses a multi-tiered approach_ to train specialists in developmentally supportive behavior management practices, who then train other early care staff. It also _focuses on socio-emotional competencies, parental involvement, and use of data tracking systems_. When implemented with fidelity it has resulted in improved outcomes for specialists, staff, and students. Children in the classrooms of early educators who received pyramid model professional development _exhibited a significant improvement_ in social skills and challenging behaviors, compared to children in the classrooms of educators receiving non-pyramid model professional development sessions.

Research shows that student social skills increase and both student challenging behaviors and staff use of exclusionary discipline decrease following school-wide implementation of the Pyramid Model. In 2009, _Colorado invested in the Pyramid Model_ and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (ECMHC, which will be discussed further in our next brief in this series). _Participating educators reported better outcomes_, including higher use of developmentally appropriate responses to students' challenging behaviors, and schools saw an overall reduction in student exclusion from care.

Challenging Behaviors are Often Developmentally Appropriate. Early Educators Can Respond with Support.

While the overall reduction in student exclusion is clear, whether building staff capacity using the Pyramid Model reduces racial disparities in early exclusion remains unstudied. This oversight is significant, given the *large and well-documented disparities in exclusion from early learning environments*. Although *research in this area* consistently reports overall reduction in educators' negative perceptions of children's behavior and overall reduction in student exclusion, it stops short of analyzing outcomes by race. Narrowing racial disparities in exclusion should be a critical component of how North Carolina makes informed decisions about continued investment in professional development based on the Pyramid Model.

While many children's behaviors may be challenging for child care staff and early educators to respond to, the best outcomes result when adults are mindful that many challenging behaviors *are developmentally appropriate*. While young children are learning to name and manage their emotions, their responses to change, discomfort, or distress may challenge staff and educators' capacities to respond supportively.

Rather than viewing challenging behaviors as disobedience or disrespect, educators can understand children's actions through the lens of dysregulation and nonverbal communication, and respond with actions that *provide co-regulation* and *teach self-regulation*.
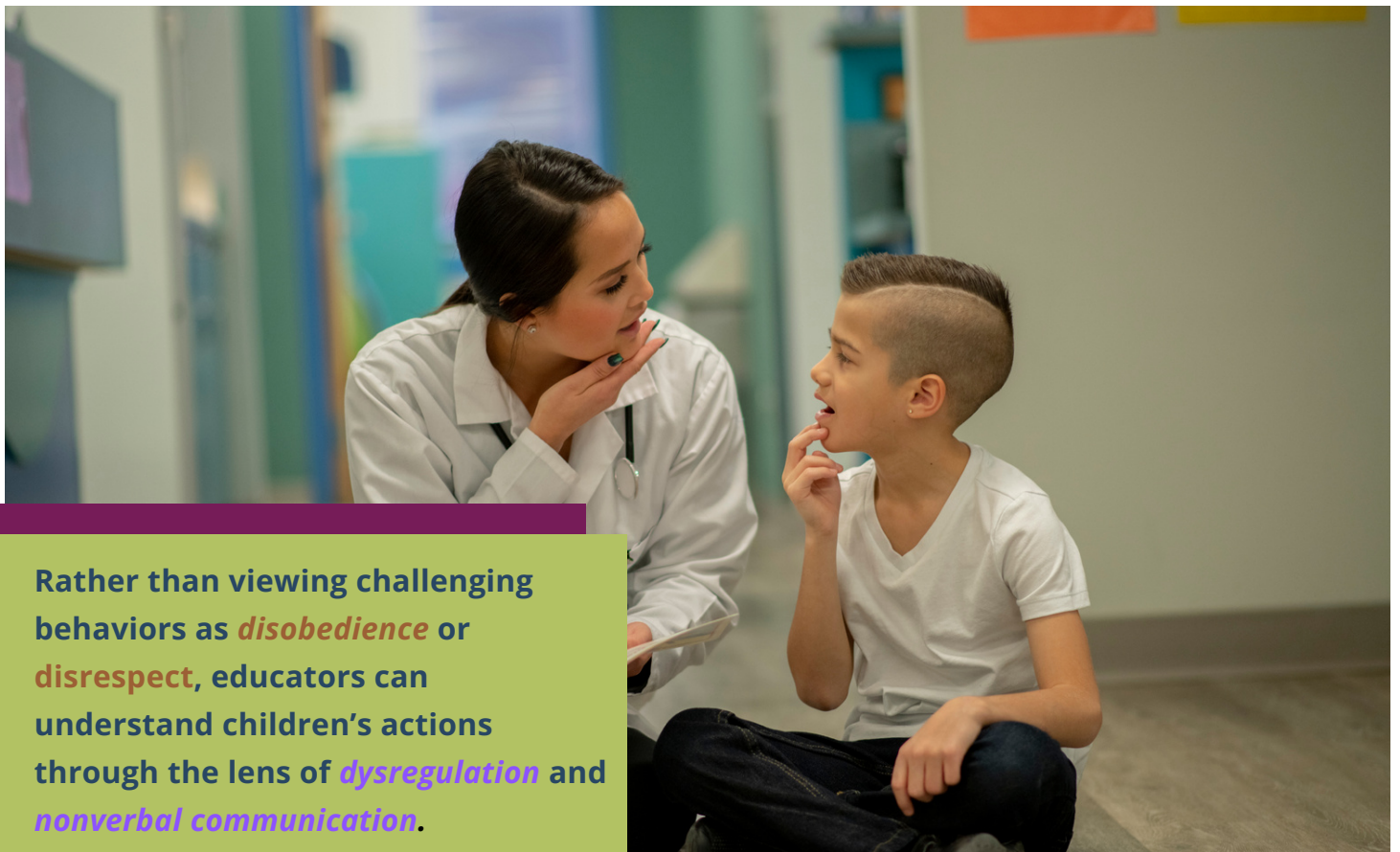
Rather than viewing challenging behaviors as *disobedience* or *disrespect*, educators can understand children's actions through the lens of *dysregulation* and *nonverbal communication*.

Tips for preventing challenging behaviors and responding to them successfully:

Early care and learning educators can use the following strategies and links to supplemental resources to **BE PREVENTATIVE** by reducing behavioral dysregulation and **BE RESPONSIVE** by being developmentally supportive when challenging nonverbal communication occurs:

1   **Create a predictable classroom environment.** Use _consistent routines_, and make and post a visual schedule for children to see what they can expect from the day. Set up the physical space with stations or dedicated spaces for different activities, such as a reading rug, a play station, and a snack table.

2   **Set clear expectations for children's behavior.** Use _strategies_ like describing what you want to see from the child ("Let's walk with our buddies down the hallway"), provide appropriate and limited options ("Do you want to play with the blocks or the dolls?"), and set up first/then statements to give a timeline of events ("First we will clean up our stations, then we can move to the table for snack time").

3   **Develop and maintain relationships with caregivers and family members.** _Warm, responsive interactions_ with caregivers will both increase the sense of safety that a child feels at school, and establish relational trust with family members that can let you know if there are any particularly exciting or troubling events happening outside of school that can inform the way you interact with the child in school.

4   Once a child has begun to escalate, **search for recent changes in the environment** (class transitions, new people in the room), the child's physiological state (hunger, needing to use the bathroom), or your emotional state (increased stress, tiredness) that _may be the underlying cause_. Often, once the trigger/cause is clear, the solution will become clear as well.

5   **Focus on de-escalation instead of consequences and punishment** while the child's emotions are intense and agitated. Once you have ensured that the behaviors are not creating a safety issue for the child or other children, the only goal should be _bringing the child back to a calm and regulated state_. Once they are calm you can revisit the situation to teach alternative ways of expressing their needs and utilize _logical consequences_ for their behavior.

6   **Use tally sheets and checklists to inform your decision-making** about how to respond to challenging behavior. _Simple tools_ like tally sheets or checklists can show if there are patterns in which students' behaviors, what times of the day, and what activities or transitions are particularly difficult. Taking a step back to count what kind, when, and where challenging behaviors occur may enable you to come up with solutions when you have more space to think through the best response.

One of the most important developmental tasks of early childhood is learning how to manage discomfort and distress and express physical and emotional needs in prosocial ways. Child care and early learning educators play an important role, alongside parents and other family members, in building these capacities in children. Both center- and home-based providers need access to professional development that can provide them with knowledge and actionable skills to meet children's social and emotional learning needs.

In the next brief, we will discuss how early childhood mental health consultation services can reduce exclusion by getting child care providers and preschool teachers timely support from a mental health professional to fill knowledge gaps, suggest strategies, and provide referrals for early intervention.

The **North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation** (NCECF) promotes understanding, spearheads collaboration, and advances policies to ensure each North Carolina child is on track for lifelong success by the end of third grade.

The **Trauma Responsive Educational Practices (TREP) Project** aims to create schools and classrooms that can meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of students coping with toxic levels of stress and trauma.