

Policy & Practice Briefs to Eliminate Child Care & Preschool Exclusion

An NCECF & TREP Project Collaboration



Challenging Behaviors Happen;
Exclusion from Care & Learning
Environments is Not the Answer

Micere Keels & Ana Vasan



Everyone loses when children are excluded from early care and learning environments.

We Now Have *15 years of research* documenting something that still shocks most people who have never experienced it for themselves: Each day, *over 250 children are suspended or expelled from preschool* in the United States. Although we primarily hear about exclusionary discipline practices in high schools, children in child care and preschool programs—including those as young as 2 years old—experience suspension and expulsion at alarmingly high rates. Children in child care and preschool settings are expelled at a rate *three times higher* than high schoolers.

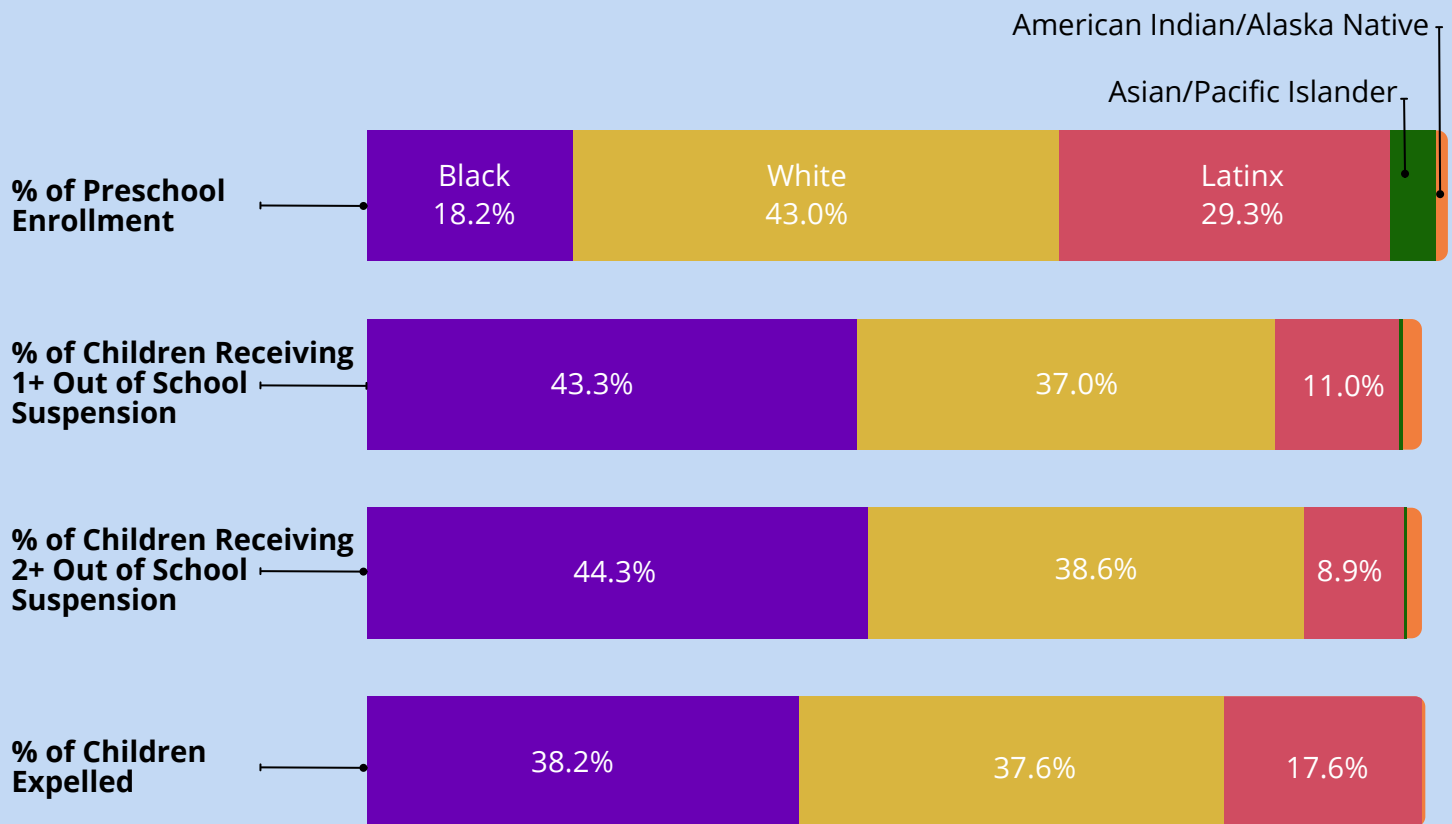
Some of the early reports on preschool exclusion showed that North Carolina is among the states with a *high rate of expulsion*, with 13 per 1,000 children expelled from the state funded pre-kindergarten program, compared to the national average of 7 per 1,000 children. In contrast to this high rate of pre-kindergarten expulsion, North Carolina has a dramatically lower rate of only 2 per 1,000 students expelled in the K-12 system. This pattern suggests that part of the problem

may be the *resources available to early educators* for supporting children exhibiting behavior challenges and the *guidelines that govern the use of exclusion as a disciplinary measure in preschools*.

Similar to the disparities in K-12 discipline practices, 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. As shown on the next page, Black children represent 18.2% of preschool enrollment, but 43.3% of children suspended from their preschools.



Percent of Preschool Children Experiencing Exclusionary Discipline by Race, 2017-18



Source: U.S. Education Department, Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection, 2017-18 State and National Estimations, released June 2021, available at <https://ocrdata.ed.gov/estimations/2017-2018>.

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. Exclusion also causes substantial harm to family economic stability because parents may lose their jobs while navigating the long waiting lists among the few alternatives for care.

In many cases, the increased household financial and emotional stress leads parents to adopt harsh and punitive parenting practices, which then increases young children's display of behavioral challenges. Thankfully, *evidence-based policies and guidance* coupled with

professional development can reduce the use of punitive exclusionary discipline in schools.

How and Why are Children Excluded from Early Childhood Programs?

Unlike K-12 schools, the ways that preschool and childcare programs monitor and document disciplinary practices are not systematically regulated, causing variation in how different centers address challenging behavior among their students.

For example, suspensions from preschools can range *from 3 to 20 days, or even the remainder of a semester*-- suspension length is largely at the discretion of administrators and educators at individual schools.

Additionally, there are many *different ways that young children can be excluded from early care and learning programs*: while 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. These inconsistencies make it difficult to systematically monitor exclusionary discipline in child care and preschool settings. Despite the fuzziness of how exclusion is used, researchers have begun to identify the *program-specific and educator-specific factors* that are associated with the disparate overuse of suspensions and expulsions.



Not all exclusion in early childhood happens through the formal processes of suspension or expulsion: Some childcare centers exclude students by repeatedly asking parents to pick their child up early, or requesting that students transfer out due to a school's "inability to support" the child.

Some of the *most important findings* in the research on early childhood exclusion are that:

- » There are **race and gender disparities in who gets suspended or expelled** from their early childcare centers, with Black children and boys being the most likely to experience exclusion.
- » These **disparities are not explained by differences in children's behavior**, suggesting a need for interventions that focus on making non-exclusionary pathways accessible to educators, rather than changing young children's behavior.
- » Exclusion does not improve children's behavior challenges, it instead **creates additional negative consequences** that exacerbate existing racial and socioeconomic inequities.

The need to focus on building staff capacity is exemplified by the responses from early childhood educators who participated in the *Care and Learning Coalition (CandL) listening sessions*. One participant said:

“*I want to see someone who can come in and work with behavior problems with students and with teachers so we can better understand students. ... We need to have that support, so we know what type of students we're dealing with.*”

When early childhood educators' capacities for behavior management and self-regulation are limited, they may resort to suspending or expelling their students. Preschool teachers who report experiencing symptoms of depression and higher rates of job stress are *more likely to expel their students*. Teachers who expel young students also *report greater difficulty* in understanding and responding to children's challenging behaviors in the classroom and *perceive children's parents and caregivers as uncooperative* partners in behavior management.

Reducing Preschool Discipline Disparities is Necessary to Create an Equitable Education System

High quality child care and preschool experiences increase young children's readiness for K-12 schooling, by teaching many of the foundational social and academic skills that are

needed to succeed in the classroom. This preparation is *especially important for children* whose socioeconomic and/or environmental contexts create barriers for them to access high-quality public education. As children undergo rapid physical and cognitive development from birth to age five, they are extremely sensitive to experiences that will shape their growth and life trajectories. *Preschools and other early childhood education centers can provide the social support and educational opportunities* necessary to interrupt the adverse effects of racial and socioeconomic inequality.

However, Black children and children from low-income households are *more likely to attend under-resourced preschools and unlicensed child care centers*. These types of centers are *frequently categorized* by the *program-specific factors that are linked to greater use of suspensions and expulsions*, such as large class sizes and low teacher-student ratios.



The early start to racially biased discipline has far-reaching negative effects.



Racial disproportionalities in exclusionary discipline mean that the promise and benefits of high-quality early childhood education remain inaccessible for many of the children *who have been shown to benefit most* from it.

The Black children that do gain access to high-quality early childhood education are much more likely than their peers to be pushed out of their preschools. Black preschool students *make up half of all children expelled from preschools*, resulting in an extreme disproportionality in their exclusion, relative to their peers of other racial/ethnic backgrounds. These children then face compounding barriers in both getting into and staying enrolled in programs that will ready them for educational success.

The implications of this pushout for later school access are *severe and far-reaching*: suspension and expulsion for young learners has been linked to *later suspensions, expulsions, dropping out of high school, and incarceration*.

Suspending and expelling young children creates an emotional and financial burden on parents, who must arrange for alternate childcare and rearrange or even stop work to care for children. The parental stress that results from constantly having to arrange for alternate childcare, often with little notice, *may lead parents to remove their child from an unsupportive preschool environment*, leading to another form of student exclusion.

Evidence of preschool teachers displaying racial and gender bias comes from *research examining which children's behaviors they watch and how they interpret the behaviors they observe*. This research shows that teachers expect more challenging behaviors from Black students, and Black boys in particular, and watch them more closely for misbehavior than they do other students. The result is that the same behavior is more likely to be interpreted as needing a disciplinary response when exhibited by Black children, especially Black boys, and more likely to go unnoticed when exhibited by White children. *The effects of these implicit biases on decision-making about student discipline* appear to be exacerbated when teachers are stressed and lack support from their administration.

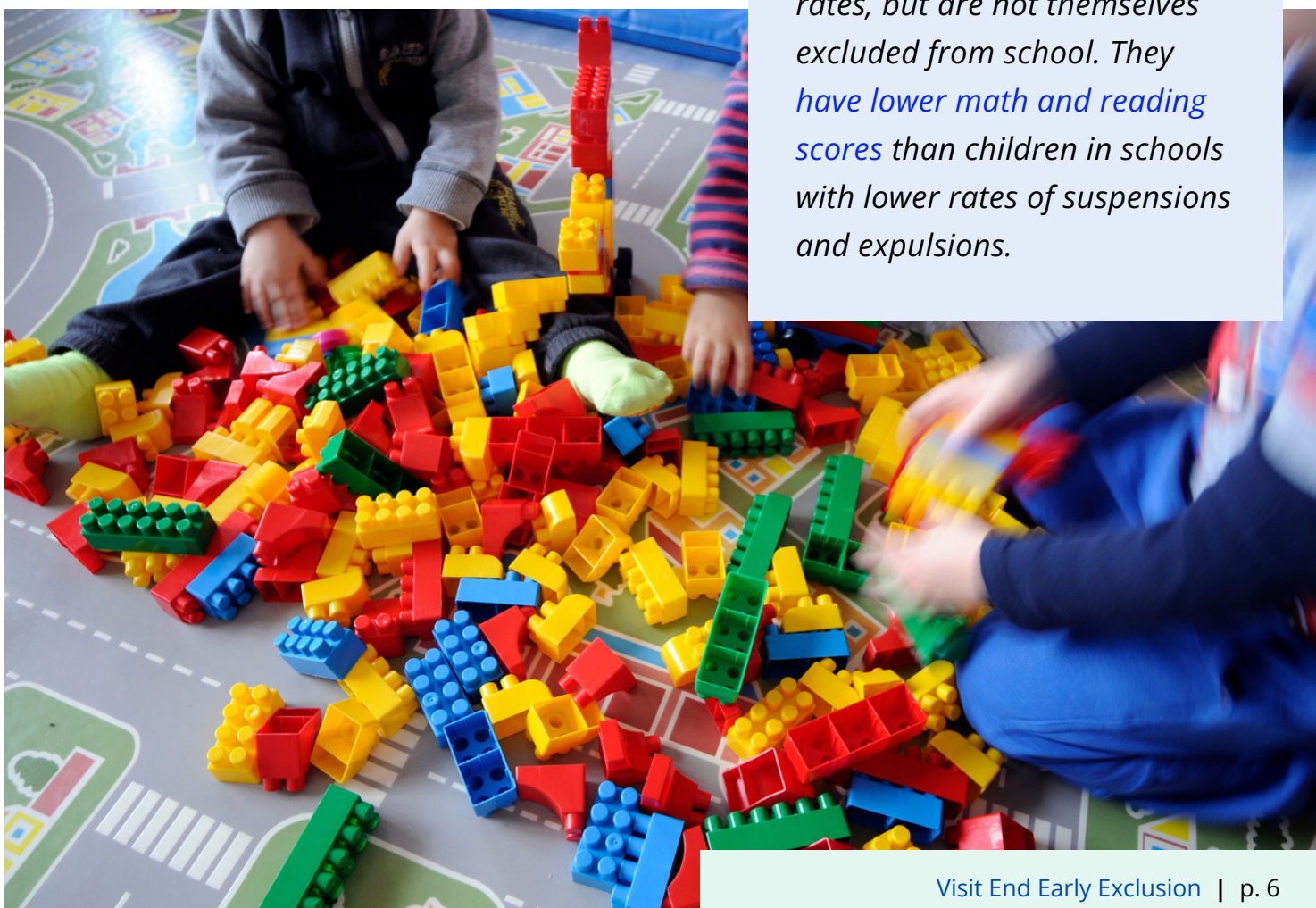


Racial disparities in early experiences of exclusion are particularly troubling because they are associated with *learning and achievement challenges throughout all subsequent years of schooling*. As children progress through school, the *racial gap in academic achievement is widened* by racial disparities in both who is given disciplinary consequences, and how exclusionary those consequences are. Research shows that racial disparities in discipline and racial disparities in achievement are *“two sides of the same coin.”*

The flip side of the coin is that *academic challenges can be the underlying cause* of escalating behavioral challenges. For example, when young children experience difficulty with reading and literacy skills, they may feel frustrated and anxious, leading them to *engage in disruptive behaviors*. Children who display off-task, externalizing, or internalizing behaviors in response to reading difficulty *are often met with exclusionary consequences, rather than instructional support*, which exacerbates their lack of access to effective literacy instruction.

Children who experiences difficulty with literacy during preschool and the early grades will likely experience educational challenges throughout their years of schooling. It is therefore critical that we eliminate exclusionary discipline in order to put all children on a path toward educational success.

School exclusion is harmful for all students, including children who attend schools with high suspension and expulsion rates, but are not themselves excluded from school. They have lower math and reading scores than children in schools with lower rates of suspensions and expulsions.



Promising Interventions for Reducing Exclusion While Narrowing Racial Disparities

Many states, including North Carolina, have taken on the challenge of reducing and hopefully eliminating child care and preschool suspension and expulsion, which has *increased over the past 15 years*. North Carolina's Coalition for Inclusion, Not Expulsion was created in 2022 as a statewide effort to "tackle suspensions, expulsions, and exclusionary practices in early care and education across our state, with a specific focus on eliminating disparities for Black and Brown children and families." Members of the coalition are learning from *five promising models for eliminating racially disproportionate preschool exclusion* and are in the midst of developing evidence-based policy recommendations.

We know that *the likelihood of expulsion decreases significantly with access to classroom-based mental health consultation*. Mental health consultation involves dispatching a psychologist, psychiatrist, or social worker to a classroom, either in response to an acute issue, or for regularly scheduled visits. A mental health professional then provides the teacher with strategies to use in the classroom to manage challenging behavior.

This resource is *more effective at reducing classroom removal rates when teachers have ongoing access* to a mental health professional (eg., they have an office in the school and interact regularly with teachers). Along with access to a mental health consultant, a strong working relationship with a supervisor, as well as perceived availability of behavioral supports, are *linked to lower use of classroom removal*.

Unfortunately, *access to mental health consultation is limited, and preschools that serve more Black and low-income students tend not to receive these services*. Most early childhood educators do not receive ongoing training in fostering children's social-emotional growth.

A supportive work environment *has also been linked to low suspension and expulsion rates* in preschools. In schools that have successfully maintained low rates of both use and disproportionality of exclusionary discipline, *educators are more experienced and report more positive feelings about their schools*, indicating that a non-exclusionary school climate is beneficial for both students and their teachers.

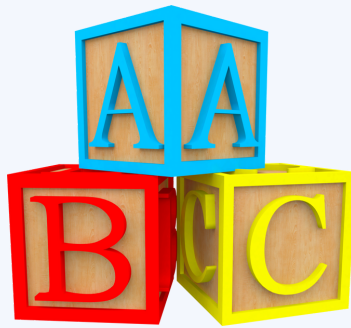
While increasing support to early childhood educators has been shown to reduce the overall use of exclusionary discipline, narrowing racial disparities has to be a targeted part of policy, guidance, and interventions. Research informs us that *changes in discipline policies that do not explicitly address race are not sufficient* to ameliorate racial disparities.



While awaiting the outcome of [North Carolina's five promising models for reducing child care and preschool exclusion](#), we can look to and learn from [schools that have successfully reduced exclusion](#). These schools are more likely to have:

- Racially diverse staff among teachers and administrators
- Higher level of experience for classroom teachers and school leaders
- Positive overall school climate for teachers and students

Reducing the disparate and overuse of exclusion in early care and preschool settings requires that we [gain a better understanding of how and how often young children are excluded](#), and translate research findings into policies and practices that can be implemented in the average child care program and preschool classroom. Over the coming months, we will release a series of practice briefs that provide evidence-based guidance and strategies to help build the capacity of early care and preschool educators to be supportive rather than punitive in response to children's behavioral challenges.



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.