

Preliminary Report from the Preschool and Child Care Expulsion Study

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Child care expulsion is a problem largely invisible to those outside the field of childcare. However, rates of child care expulsion are higher than K-12 expulsion (Gilliam 2006). While some large scale studies have determined rates and correlating factors (for profit, teacher stress), we know little about the on-the-ground, lived experience of this phenomenon. Our hope is to begin to get a better picture of how preschool expulsion comes to happen and begin to unearth a better understanding of the phenomena and implications for prevention and intervention.

The preliminary findings in this report are based on interviews with 30 child care providers in three counties in southeast Michigan. The interviewees came primarily from child care centers (one family provider is included). The centers varied widely in the communities they served. Some enrolled primarily families with DHS vouchers; others did not take DHS vouchers. Some were in cities, and some in rural areas. Nine worked in centers that were NAEYC accredited. Most served babies through preschoolers. Many had aftercare or summer programs as well. Interviewees had an average of 17 years of experience in child care.

Preliminary Findings

TIMING: The time from the observance of difficult behavior to expulsion varies tremendously among cases we heard about. Asking a child to leave can take anywhere from one week to one year. Length of time from the onset of difficult problems to expulsion seems to increase with the length of time a child has been with a particular provider. In other words, if a provider has had a child since infancy and problems develop at age 4 then time to expulsion is longer than if the child started with the provider at age 3. Two of the shortest cases we heard about took place in a about a week, the week these children started with providers.

CAUSES: A number of behaviors either individually or in combination with one another are cited as the reason for expulsion and can be sorted into four general categories: *violence towards others* (biting, aggressive acts, kicking), *disruptive behaviors* (lack of impulse control, outbursts, being destructive to property), *inappropriate behavior/play* (sexualized behavior, touching of others privates, play with violent themes) and an *inability to function independently* (hypersensitivity, difficulty focusing, clinging).

PROCESSES AND PROCEDURES: The process or procedure for removing a child varies by and within providers. Most providers treated each as an individual case and few had formal or detailed procedures about expulsion. Nonetheless most providers followed a general process.

Child care professionals draw on their knowledge from working with hundreds of children and families to define normative and non-normative behavior. When problems with a child first emerge, child care providers try to determine what triggers the difficult behavior and then to remove the triggers. Children who are expelled and those who are not often have similar behaviors but with several key differences. For children who are able to remain in the classroom, teachers identify the trigger to the behavior as well as successful strategies for redirection, managing, or coping. In short, a definition of the problem has been found as well as a solution. An enormous amount of time and hard work goes into this process of trying to discover triggers and the strategies that improve behavior. (See Box at the side)

Successful strategies for managing challenging behaviors are almost always classroom strategies, and while they may require help from parents at home, in-classroom fixes are what set a child back on track. When a teacher and center are unable to unlock behavioral patterns or triggers, and/or find strategies to resolve the behavior, providers require greater and greater participation from families and others in problem solving.

Providers indicated that one of the largest predictors of expulsion is how much a family cooperates with child care professionals. When families are not cooperative, the path to expulsion accelerates. Conflicts over the definition of the problem and its fix often emerge in relationships between providers and families and also contribute to expulsion. When multiple strategies to address the behavior have been tried and failed, the problem is redefined as unfixable.

Providers' Techniques for Determining Triggers and Managing Difficult Behaviors

- observe (teachers and/or directors)
- observe & write only what you see
- individual lesson plans
- behavior charts
- add a teacher for one on one
- saddling
- whiteboard meetings
- sticker charts → rewards
- redirection
- monitor the sensory diet
- weighted vest
- lotion
- define daily goals
- give warnings about transitions
- ABCs
- shadowing
- gather information from other children
- playing with, giving special attention
- sit with director for one on one
- test hearing
- test speech
- call parents to inform
- call parents to pick up
- meet with parents
- outside evaluations, consultations with social workers, Early On, others
- meet with child's doctors, therapists, other teachers
- follow guidelines from outside doctors, therapists, and others

STRUCTURAL ISSUES: There is a clear tension between individual and group needs in child care centers. While providers understand that “all children are different” and make every effort to accommodate these differences, a child who is “too different” can cause considerable stress on a center’s resources. Problems emerge when an individual child begins to command too much of a scarce resource (the teachers time and attention) and detracts from the functioning of the group. Individualized approaches are often used with children who are struggling, but a child ultimately has to be able to follow the structure, rhythm and routines of a day. Children who require too much one-on-one attention may be asked to leave in part because working with them strains resources of time, attention, and energy.

Similarly, the accounts we collected seem to suggest that behavior problems escalate in children when moving from toddler classrooms to preschool classrooms. Some children may have difficulty in these larger environments with higher children-to-adult ratios and larger numbers of children. Some children who were expelled were said to have done better in home daycare with smaller ratios.

Financial stresses and pressures can also factor into child care expulsions. Employing extra staff to help manage a child, retaining excellent teachers and staff, and taking into account other parents’ concerns means that directors must include financial factors in some decisions about asking a child to leave

EMOTIONAL COSTS FOR TEACHERS: When working with a difficult child, teachers often felt powerless to alter the situation, stressed and frustrated. Some said these situations made them “dread coming to work in the morning.” Teachers felt that their efforts with difficult children often went unrecognized or were dismissed by parents (and occasionally by directors). Teachers expressed a need for more support when dealing with children with difficult behaviors.

Teachers and directors expressed sadness and regret around the loss of many of these children. Some were still saddened by the cases months after they were “resolved.” Many continued to be concerned about the well-being of the children they had previously cared for.

Implications and Suggestions

When expulsion finally occurs, many providers report that the process has both dragged on for a long time but can also feel sudden. Child care providers note that there is a need to know more about how to have difficult conversations with parents in a straightforward, clear manner that parents hear. Further, providers note that sometimes children whom they have worked intensively with will leave without there being any actual goodbye or end to the relationship. Some worried that children would get the wrong message without a “good goodbye.”

Based on our interviewees’ stories and concerns, we recommend that child care providers 1) consider how to have difficult talks with families and 2) have procedures in place for a “good goodbye” with children that have been asked to leave.

Difficult Conversations

- Frame all issues with the child in terms of observable behaviors rather than interpretations or global assessments about the child. E.g. “Tom often hits other children,” rather than “Tom often misbehaves.” Offer parents concrete examples of what you see and experience but stick to just the facts.
- Make sure to include something positive about the parent and/or child during the discussion.
- At the same time, say what you mean. Don’t use coded language. E.g. “Tom hit three other children today” and not “Tom had a rough day today.”
- Listen, Affirm, Respond, and Ask Questions (LARA) in conversations with parents. E.g. “I hear that you don’t see a problem at home (Affirm), I see something different at school (Respond). Why do you think we might be having such different experiences of Tom’s behavior (Ask a Question)?”
- Make sure to get the parents understanding of the situation, especially when it is different from your own.
- These are always uncomfortable conversations for everyone. State that you understand the information is hard to hear and may make parents anxious, angry, sad, or scared. Allow a space for these reactions. Ask parents what might make the conversation easier for them.
- Try again when parents have had a chance to process the information you’ve given them.
- Think of these conversations as many small ones rather than one or two big ones.
- Ask parents how you can all work together effectively. “How can we best work together to address these issues” rather than telling them what you need them to do.
- Don’t expect change to happen immediately.

Having a Good Goodbye

- Goodbyes are important for all children and caregivers and become even more important when there has been conflict and tension. In these cases, when parents may leave or pull a child out in anger, it may be necessary to explain to the parent that it is important for the child to hear a goodbye from the child care provider so that he/she understands it was their behavior that was the problem and that the providers wish them well.
- If your school or center has an established goodbye ritual for children who are leaving under normal circumstances, try to follow that as closely as possible. If that is not realistic or you do not have an established ritual, create one for goodbyes when children have been asked to leave.
- Whenever possible say goodbye to the child in person. If this is not possible, sending a card, perhaps along with the child's artwork or other things, can be a good goodbye gesture.
- Share with the child one thing you will miss about him or her.
- When you can't think of anything about the child that you will miss, share an activity that you will miss doing together. E.g. we will miss having you at circle time.
- Ask the child what s/he will miss about being at the center or school.
- Make a goodbye card together where you write down the things you have discussed or draw a picture together. Write goodbye [child's name] or goodbye [school's name] at the top.
- If the above is not possible, try and make sure the child has something to take home from the classroom (e.g. pictures that s/he has drawn).
- Whenever possible, create the opportunity for the child to say goodbye to his or her peers.
- Whenever possible give the child and family one additional day to come to school so that it is not an abrupt departure. Prepare the child for "tomorrow being your last day in school or at your center." In practice, this is hard to achieve as parents often do not want to bring their children back and schools do not want the child back, even for a day. However, it can sometimes be helpful for all involved when all parties can agree to it.