



Frequently Asked Questions: Suspension and Expulsion

This is one in a series of inclusion-focused frequently asked questions (FAQs) for educators and special education staff. Below you'll find answers to FAQs about Suspension and Expulsion in Infant and Toddler settings.

What is suspension and expulsion?

A suspension is the temporary removal of a child from the learning setting. Expulsion is the permanent removal of a child from the setting. Suspension and expulsion typically occur as a response to a child whose behaviors challenge or overwhelm the adults in that setting. This may be due to a lack of education or skills for dealing with the particular behavior, expectations not appropriate to the child's developmental level, a lack of understanding of the child's social or cultural background, overwhelming classroom conditions, high educator-child ratios, or a misunderstanding or failure to meet the child's individual needs.

"Soft" suspensions or expulsions — such as telling a family that their child is not yet ready for group settings, sending a child home early due to an incident related to behavior, and situations that cause a family to withdraw their child from the program — also classify as suspension and expulsion. For infants and toddlers with disabilities, this is particularly concerning because it delays progress toward their Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) goals.

What is challenging behavior?

Behaviors that challenge adults involve behavior patterns that are perceived as interfering with learning and/or socialization. These behaviors may involve a tendency to either withdraw or act out. While some behaviors that challenge adults are developmentally normal and can be addressed in context through adult guidance, others may require further behavioral assessment or specialized psychological health intervention.

In infants and toddlers, behaviors that challenge adults may look like significant amounts or intensity of crying, aggression, or defiance that exceed developmentally normative expectations. It is important to keep in mind that all of these behaviors are normal for infants and toddlers, who are still developing self-regulation skills.

What does available data show about suspension and expulsion in early learning settings?

Children in early learning environments are suspended and expelled three times more frequently than school-age children.

What populations are most affected by suspension and expulsion?

While suspension and expulsion data specific to infant and toddler settings is not currently available, we can refer to data about early learning environments in general. Suspension and expulsion rates in early learning environments disproportionately involve children who are Black and male. Boys are suspended and expelled from early learning environments at a rate three times higher than girls. Additionally, while children who are Black make up approximately 20% of the population of children enrolled in public early learning programs, they are involved in nearly 50% of suspensions and expulsions. Therefore, children who are both Black and male are expelled at significantly higher rates than other children in early learning settings.



What is disproportionality?

Disproportionality occurs when an inordinate number of children identified as having disabilities or engaging in behaviors that challenge the adults in those settings are children who are members of a minority group. This indicates that children who do not truly fall into these categories are being misidentified as such, likely due to a lack of cultural responsiveness within the program, and/or inappropriate assessment and accommodation strategies.

Why do infants and toddlers use challenging behavior?

Infants and toddlers often use behaviors that challenge adults to communicate a need when they do not have the normative skills for doing so. Typically, children engage in behaviors that challenge adults because they have found it to be an effective way to communicate a need or desired outcome, or avoid an unpleasant or unfamiliar situation.

What are the key considerations for educators to reflect on when confronted with behaviors that they find challenging?

- Does the perceived behavior stir up a personal response for the educator?
- How might the educator's personal response impact perceptions, decisions, and actions taken in response to the behavior?
- What skills and systems does the educator have in place for interpreting and working with behavior in their setting?
- Are there colleagues who can observe the behavior to offer new perspectives about what the child is trying to communicate and how to meet the child's needs?
- How can the infant's or toddler's educators, family, and other caregivers to implement an effective guidance plan for addressing the behavior?
- What behavior and psychological health specialists might be helpful to support the child through the behavior?

What factors might influence adults' responses to particular behaviors?

What one adult views as challenging or inappropriate behavior from a child, another may consider contextually appropriate. Certain behaviors may exceed a particular adult's experience or comfort level, or stir up a visceral response specific to that adult. Before an adult qualifies a behavior as challenging, it is important to first consider personal norms, cultural lenses, or other potential implicit biases that may influence this perception.

What is implicit bias?

"Implicit bias" refers to the subconscious beliefs or stereotypes that influence our ideas, attitudes, decision-making, and actions. The implicit biases we carry develop over the course of a lifetime, and are formed by in-group norms, life experiences, and media consumption, and typically favor what is familiar or "normal" to ourselves as individuals. While implicit biases are largely involuntary, they are malleable and can be reshaped through conscious effort and reflection.

How can adults work to uncover and address implicit biases?

Adults can work to uncover implicit biases by reflecting and acting on the following questions:

- Is there something in my values or past that makes this behavior a particular trigger for me?
- Is there something about this child's cultural background that conflicts with aspects of my own?
- Am I making any unfair assumptions about the child's intentions?
- Am I treating this child in a way that offers equitable opportunities?
- What has the family shared with me regarding this child's behavior?
- Is this behavior an issue at home?
- If there is a difference between the behavior at home and school, what are some possible reasons this might be true?



- What factors, such as the classroom environment or my particular relationship with the child, may be influencing these behaviors?
- Might another adult be able to observe and provide new perspectives about my interactions with the child, or the child's experience in the classroom?
- Where can I find more resources to understand and address implicit bias?

How can educators who feel challenged by an infant or toddler's behaviors seek to support the child?

Collaborate with the education team to:

- Help the child learn a functional communication system (e.g., expanded verbal language, sign language, cue cards).
- Help the child learn social skills to navigate situations in which the behavior typically occurs.
- Guide and support the child when trying new social and communication skills and learn alternative behaviors, and provide positive encouragement.

Where can I learn more about behaviors that challenge adults, suspension and expulsion in infant and toddler settings?

[ECLKC - Understanding and Eliminating Expulsion in Early Childhood Programs](#)

[Zero to Three - Challenging Behaviors](#)

[Pyramid Model Innovations - Backpack Connection Series](#)

What do the [Head Start Program Performance Standards](#) say about suspension and expulsion?

- Head Start programs focus on ways to keep children in the program, including when behaviors that challenge adults are involved.
- Head Start programs specifically prohibit expulsion of any children enrolled in Head Start services. Suspension is limited to extraordinary circumstances, and only after taking a series of specific, documented preventative actions.
- If a serious safety threat exists that cannot be addressed with other modifications, a temporary suspension may become necessary. To do so, a program must:
 - Involve a mental health professional, parents, and appropriate community resources to determine if a temporary suspension is necessary and support the child in returning to full participation in the program as soon as possible
 - Develop a written plan
 - Continue providing services, including home visits
 - Determine if it is necessary or appropriate to involve the local Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) agency
- A program must explore and document all possible steps to address challenging behaviors, including:
 - consulting a mental health professional
 - involving parents
 - providing appropriate services and supports to children with disabilities
 - if the child has an IFSP or IEP, consulting the responsible agency
- If, after exploring and documenting all possible steps and consulting the child's family, teacher, IDEA implementation agency, and a mental health professional, it is determined that a child's continued enrollment presents a serious safety threat to the child or other



enrolled children, the program must work to identify and facilitate the child's transition to a more appropriate placement.

- View the full [Head Start Program Performance Standard 1302.17 - Suspension and Expulsion](#) policy text.

What does federal law and policy say about suspension and expulsion?

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Title III: Public Accommodations and Commercial Facilities

- This act mandates that children and adults with disabilities have equal opportunity to participate in all public programs and services.
 - Children with disabilities and their families cannot be excluded from such programs unless their presence would pose a direct safety threat to other participants, or require fundamental changes to the program.
 - Reasonable modifications to policies and practices must be made in order to integrate children, parents, and guardians with disabilities.
 - Reasonable and appropriate support services must be provided to children or adults with disabilities in order to facilitate their participation in a public program or service.

Policy Statement on Expulsion and Suspension Policies in Early Childhood Settings

- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education issued a joint policy statement with specific recommendations for preventing and limiting expulsion and suspension practices in early childhood settings at local and state levels.

References

Gilliam, W. S., & Shahar, G. (2006). Preschool and child care expulsion and suspension: Rates and predictors in one state. *Infants & Young Children*, 19(3), 228-245.

Guidance Document on Expulsion and Suspension Policies in Early Childhood Settings.

https://medicine.yale.edu/childstudy/zigler/publications/Gilliam%20and%20Shahar%20-%202006%20Preschool%20and%20Child%20Care%20Expulsion%20and%20Suspension-%20Rates%20and%20Predictors%20in%20One%20State_251491_5379_v3.pdf

Fox, L., Smith, B., Hemmeter, M., Strain, P., & Corso, R. (2015, October). Using the pyramid model to address suspension and expulsion in early childhood settings. Pyramid Model Consortium.

https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/docs/ECPBISwebinar_3_pyramid_to_address_suspension.pdf

Office of Head Start Informational Memorandum on Expulsion and Suspension Policy.

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/im/acf-im-hs-16-01>

Preventing Suspensions and Expulsions in Early Childhood Settings: A Program Leader's Guide to Supporting All Children's Success.

<http://preventexpulsion.org/>

Reducing Suspension and Expulsion Practices in Early Childhood Settings (ACF).

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ecd/child-health-development/reducing-suspension-and-expulsion-practices>

Suttie, J. (2016, October 28). Four ways teachers can reduce implicit bias. Greater Good Magazine.

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/four_ways_teachers_can_reduce_implicit_bias

Understanding and Eliminating Expulsion in Early Childhood Programs.

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/publication/understanding-eliminating-expulsion-early-childhood-programs>