



# Using the Pyramid Model to Address Suspension and Expulsion in Early Childhood Settings

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## The Problem

A recent report from the Office of Civil Rights described some alarming data about young children (United States Department of Education, 2014):

- 5,000 preschoolers were suspended at least once in 2012 and of those, nearly 2,500 were suspended a second time.
- African American children, who were 18% of the preschool population, comprised 48% of children suspended more than once.
- Boys represented 54% of the preschool population, 79% of preschool children suspended once and 82% of preschool children suspended multiple times.

While data that provide information on why these trends are occurring are limited, there is an indication that the following factors might contribute to the suspension and expulsion of young children. These data were gathered from a national survey of public preschool programs conducted in 2005 (Gilliam, 2005):

- Higher teacher child ratios related to teacher reports of expulsion. Teachers who had fewer than eight children per adult in the class were less likely to report expelling a child (7.7%) than teachers who reported having 12 or more children per adult (12.7%).
- Length of school day was related to rates of expulsion with 7.1% of teachers in half-day programs reporting expulsions compared to 13.2% of teachers in full-day programs.
- Teachers who had access to on-site behavior support were less likely (8.0 %) to report expulsions than teachers who had no access (14.3%).

## Effective Intervention

There is a growing body of research that indicates how social emotional competence and challenging behavior can be effectively addressed within early childhood programs (e.g., Domitrovich, Moore, & Greenberg, 2012; Dunlap & Fox, 2014; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2009). Researchers recommend that programs implement a multi-tiered system of supports that includes universal promotion of children's social emotional competence, prevention supports for children at-risk of social emotional delays and challenging behavior, and the delivery of effective intervention for children who have persistent challenging behavior. The evidence-based components that should be included within programs are:

- High quality early learning environments and teaching practices;
- Focus on family engagement, support, and collaboration;

- Use of social emotional screening and assessment to ensure the most timely and appropriate support;
- Implementation of evidence-based social emotional curriculum and targeted teaching practices; and
- Implementation of assessment-based individualized interventions for children with persistent challenging behavior or social emotional needs.

## Taking Action

In recognition of the severity of the problem, the US Departments of Education and Health and Human Services issued a joint policy statement in 2014 to raise awareness of the problem and to make recommendation for states and programs (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education, 2014). According to that policy statement, taking action to address suspension and expulsion and issues related to addressing behavior challenges should focus on ensuring that early care and education programs are using evidence-based practices and approaches. Unfortunately, there is a persistent discrepancy between research on practices and the implementation of these practices in community-based early childhood programs. Far too often, programs have focused on providing training to teachers in practices without being systematic about the implementation supports that are needed so that practitioners can use evidence-based approaches (Metz & Bartley, 2012). The field of implementation science has demonstrated that the variables influencing effective implementation are as important as the variables influencing effective interventions (Fixsen, Blase, Horner, & Sugai, 2010).

## The Pyramid Model

The Pyramid Model for Supporting Social Emotional Competence in Infants and Young Children (Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, & Strain, 2003) is a multi-tiered system of support that identifies the evidence-based practices for early educators to use to promote young children's social and emotional development and prevent and address challenging behavior. The Pyramid Model organizes evidence-based practices that include universal promotion practices for all children, practices for children who need focused social-emotional instruction and supports, and individualized

behavior support practices for children with significant social skill deficits or persistent challenging behavior.

Early Childhood Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) or program-wide implementation of the Pyramid Model or refers to a systemic effort within a program to provide the implementation supports needed for the Pyramid Model practices to be implemented with fidelity. In program-wide implementation, a leadership team develops the supports and infrastructure needed to ensure that adoption of the Pyramid Model can occur within classrooms and services can be provided to children and their families. The leadership team, with representation from program administrators and practitioners, is focused on the ongoing process of supporting the implementation of the Pyramid Model and using data-based decision-making to guide implementation efforts and monitor outcomes.

The program-wide effort ensures that programs are attending to both the use of evidence-based practices (i.e., Pyramid Model practices) and the development of the infrastructure to support the durable implementation of those practices. In a recent survey of programs (Fox & Hemmeter, 2015) that are implementing the program-wide approach with fidelity, they report the following outcomes:

- Growth in child social and emotional skills;
- Increases in social interactions between children;
- Decreases in overall disruptive behavior in the classroom;
- Increases in child engagement in learning opportunities;
- Reductions in child challenging behavior;
- Teachers and other program staff have improved capacity to teach social and emotional skills;
- Teachers and other program staff have improved capacity to effectively address children's challenging behavior;
- Teachers are more confident and competent in their support of families to promote their child's development of social and emotional skills;
- Teachers are more confident and competent in their support of families to support their child with challenging behavior;

- Teachers and other program staff express feeling supported by the program to address the behavioral needs of children in the program; and
- Program staff have more positive relationships with families around issues related to challenging behavior.

Importantly, 95% of the programs report no expulsions of children in the past year and only 24% report that they assisted a family in helping the child transition to another program that might more fully meet the child's behavior support needs.

### **Critical Components of the Pyramid Model Program-Wide Approach**

The following are the components of the Program-Wide approach

**Leadership Team** – The leadership team meets monthly and guides the implementation of a program-wide approach. The team is comprised of a program administrator, representation from the teaching staff, an individual who can provide coaching and support to teachers, and the behavior specialist or mental health consultant. The team ensures the following are in place: a process for providing individualized behavior supports to children with behavior challenges; professional development and support to teachers; a plan for family engagement and support; and a process for using data to make decisions to guide implementation.

**Staff buy-in** – All staff (e.g., cook, teaching assistants, and teachers) agree that they are willing to participate and become involved in the implementation. The leadership team monitors and supports staff buy-in on an ongoing basis.

**Family engagement** – A variety of mechanisms are used to establish partnerships with families by sharing information, providing families with information and support in guiding children's development of social and emotional skills, and collaboratively teaming to support individual children.

**Program-wide expectations** – The adoption of program-wide expectations provides a shared focus and shared language for describing behavior expectations to children, staff, and families. Program-wide expectations are posted in the program and classrooms and are

provided to families. Staff members acknowledge engagement in the expectations by providing developmentally appropriate feedback and reinforcement to children.

### **Classroom implementation of the Pyramid Model** –

Teachers are supported to understand and implement the Pyramid Model practices in their classrooms. A fidelity tool is used to identify teacher strengths and needs followed by action planning to identify goals for supporting teachers in reaching fidelity criteria.

### **Staff professional development and support plans** –

All staff have the training and coaching/support needed to effectively implement the Pyramid Model practices. The leadership team also develops strategies to provide ongoing support to staff as they implement the model. Data that are gathered on implementation fidelity and behavior incidents are used to identify teachers who might need additional support or guidance.

**Behavior support procedures** – The leadership team develops policies and procedures for providing support to staff to address challenging behavior. This includes providing a mechanism for support in crisis situations, developing a problem solving process for children with emerging challenges, and providing a system for identifying children who need a behavior support plan developed through a team process. A behavior specialist is trained and available to provide consultation and guide the process to develop individualized behavior support plans for children who have persistent challenging behavior.

**Data decision-making** – Data decision-making is a pivotal component of the program-wide approach. The leadership team uses data to inform decisions about teacher and child support needs, plan professional development, monitor implementation progress, understand behavior incidents, and monitor outcomes.

## Summary

In summary, the components of PW Pyramid Model implementation are a match to many of the joint policy statement recommendations (USDHHS & USDOE, 2014) including:

- The development of clear policies and procedure about preventive child guidance and discipline practices including how support will be provided to individual children who are at-risk for, or have challenging behavior;
- Ensuring that early educators have the knowledge base and skills to promote social emotional competence and prevent challenging behavior;
- Implementing procedures to collect and use meaningful data that is used for data decision-making, monitoring fidelity of implementation of evidence-based practices, and providing effective intervention to children with behavior support needs;
- Providing training and support to teachers on promoting social emotional competence and preventing challenging behavior; and
- Strengthening partnerships with families and community to provide effective support for promoting children's social and emotional competence and addressing challenging behavior.

## Resources for Implementation

- Pyramid Model Consortium – [www.pyramidmodel.org](http://www.pyramidmodel.org)
- Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning – <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/>
- Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Interventions – [www.challengingbehavior.org](http://www.challengingbehavior.org)
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education Policy Statement on Expulsion and Suspension Policies in Early Childhood Settings  
– <http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/earlylearning/initiatives.html#discipline>  
– <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ecd/child-health-development/reducing-suspension-and-expulsion-practices>

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The Pyramid Model Consortium  
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