North Carolina Preschool Exclusionary Discipline Pilot Study

Final Report

WAKE COUNTY
Smart Start

UNC | SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
Jordan Institute for Families

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Background

High-quality early care and education programs (e.g., preschool) can greatly benefit healthy child development and, in turn, promote a host of positive downstream effects on health and well-being.[1–5] Unfortunately, a staggering number of young children (ages 3-5 years) are deprived of preschool's beneficial effects because they are suspended or expelled from preschool settings for disciplinary reasons.[6] The use of exclusionary discipline* in preschool is much more common than in grades K-12, despite a lack of evidence that exclusionary discipline is an effective strategy for addressing problematic child behavior.[6–8] A national study estimated that in 2016 over 190,000 preschool children, or 250 children a day, were excluded from learning.[6,9] Studies consistently find that Black children are about 3 times as likely to experience exclusionary discipline compared to White children. [6,7,10–13] Eliminating exclusionary discipline from preschool practice is essential to promoting racial equity at a critical stage of child development.[14]

A growing body of research on exclusionary discipline is now informing policy and practice strategies seeking to correct the injustices and inequities that current practices and systems perpetuate.[6,15] However, within the state of North Carolina specifically, we still know very little about the size of the problem, the burden on children and families, reasons why exclusionary discipline is used, and most importantly, how to achieve more equitable outcomes.[6] This pilot study was designed to be a first step to fill a need for actionable research for partners seeking to transform systems that perpetuate racial disparities in exclusionary discipline. Specifically, the results of this study are intended to directly inform the ongoing efforts of the *North Carolina Coalition for Inclusion, Not Expulsions* launched in 2022.

Education Equity and Outcomes of Black Children. Relative to their White counterparts, Black children may be at greater risk for exclusionary discipline due to both "front door" and "back door" forces.[14] First, Black children are much less likely to have "front door" access to high-quality preschool due to interrelated issues, including persistent socioeconomic differences, the history of race-based educational segregation, and ongoing systemic racism. Although policy efforts like the federal Head Start program have sought to address the inequitable access to high-quality early education, Black children are overrepresented in lower quality, unlicensed, unregulated, and under-resourced schools. [14–17] Second, at the "back door," Black children are more likely to be "pushed out" via exclusionary discipline even after they enroll in high-quality programs.[3] Recent research suggests that implicit bias among preschool teachers and administrators may help to explain disproportionate rates of exclusionary discipline Black families experience.[7,11,18–20]

High-quality early childhood programs improve numerous short- and long-term outcomes for the children they serve.[2,5,16,21] These programs can lead to improvements in intelligence and reasoning, as well as enhanced academic and social functioning later in life.[22] Early childhood programs are also linked to a lower likelihood of placement in special education, a lower likelihood of being retained in a grade, and an increased likelihood of high school graduation.[21,23] Early childhood programs have been shown to positively impact the devastating school-to-prison pipeline, such that students who have participated in high-quality programs are less likely to come in contact with the juvenile justice system.[14] Health outcomes may also benefit from a child's participation in early childhood programs, as some of these programs provide much needed direct intervention via services such as meal provision or even basic health and wellness screenings, which may in turn reduce the risk for conditions such as asthma [24] and ultimately, reduce the mortality rate among young children.[25]

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*We use the term "exclusionary discipline" for brevity and is intended to be inclusive of suspension (temporary removal) and expulsion (permanent removal) from early care and education settings. Whether temporary or permanent, our focus is on the use of exclusionary discipline, which involves removing a child from instructional settings, peer interactions, and other activities. Zinsser and colleagues (2022) conducted a systematic review of early childhood exclusionary discipline and defined the term "to encompass various ways children can be removed from a child care or preschool arrangement for behavioral reasons" and note that the school-based terms "suspension" and "expulsion" are rarely used in practice.

Clearly, when a child is suspended from a high-quality preschool, the loss of instructional time and the numerous daily positive experiences offered in that setting can have enormous consequences for child well-being. Perhaps most importantly, exclusionary discipline can potentially have damaging effects on a child's developing sense of self through stigmatization, isolation, and feelings of hopelessness.[15,26] Although research is lacking, it is possible that suspension diminishes parental confidence and self-efficacy and could therefore damage the parent-child relationship. A recent study found that parents who navigated the exclusionary discipline process experienced deterioration in their mental and physical well-being.[27] Further, despite the clear and abundant benefits of participating in high-quality preschool, families who are excluded from these programs may not reap the benefits.

The only available source of data to understand trends over time in exclusionary discipline and racial disparities comes from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (OCR). The OCR began collecting survey data regarding school-based, public preschool programs in 2011. The most recent available data is from the 2017-2018 survey. During that year, 29% of children enrolled in preschools in North Carolina were identified as Black or African American. Regarding exclusionary discipline, the survey asked about both "expulsion" and "out-of-school suspension." In 2017-2018, there were 89 children statewide identified as "receiving one or more out-of-school suspension," of which 48 (54%) were Black or African American. One simple metric for understanding disproportionality between groups is to divide the proportion within the subgroup experiencing the outcome by the proportion within a population, sometimes referred to as a disparity ratio. The figure below shows the proportion of preschool enrollment and suspended children who were identified as Black or African American and the disparity index for each OCR data available. According to this survey, zero children have been <u>expelled</u> from public preschool settings in North Carolina, thus, this data is not displayed. For the past three surveys, Black children have been consistently overrepresented by a factor of almost 2:1 among children who were suspended. However, there are many limitations of the OCR data, namely that the data are not updated annually, only reflect public prekindergarten (not private providers or other early care and education settings), and are based on superintendent report, not parent report.

Figure 1. One or More Out-of-School Suspensions
Source: U.S Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights
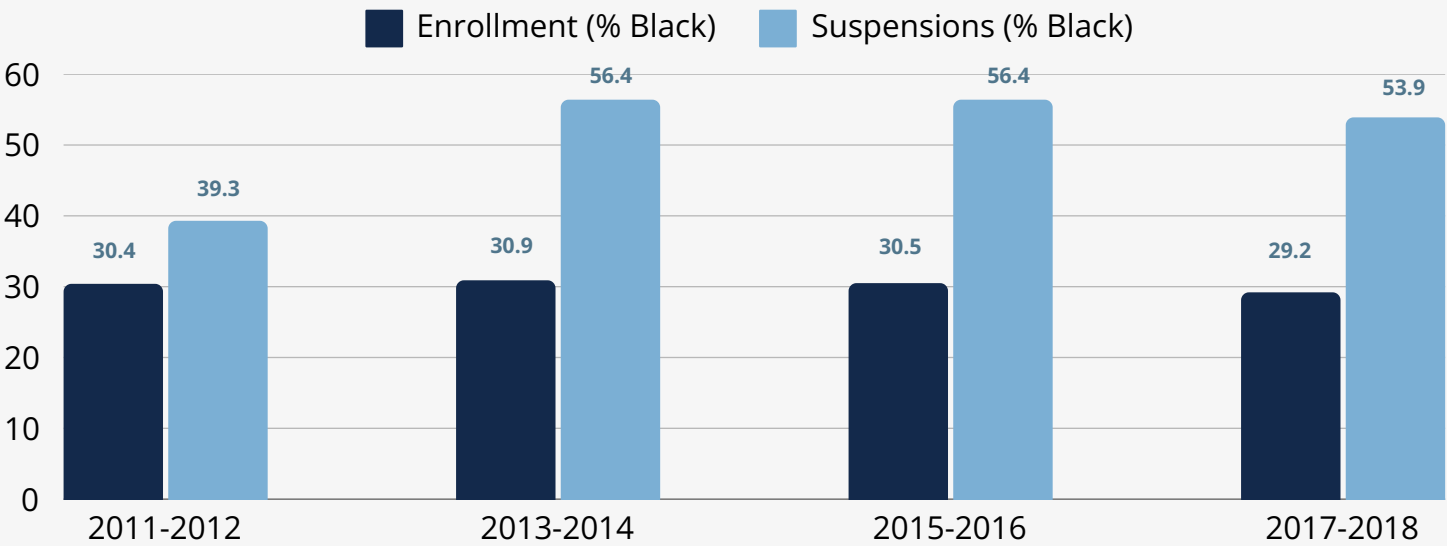
The limitations of the available national data were highlighted in a January 2020 data roundtable held at Wake County Smart Start supporting the ongoing work associated with the Preschool Development Grant† to design user-centered early childhood data systems. The desire to have data specifically about the experiences of children in North Carolina emerged as a major priority from this roundtable, and the initial seeds for this pilot study were planted. In addition to collecting and monitoring data provided by public programs, initial planning began to develop a data collection strategy to gather information directly from parents and collect richer stories about their experiences. The pilot study was initially created to determine whether survey and interview methods were a feasible approach for gathering additional information about the experience of families.

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†The full report of the 9 early childhood data user roundtables held in 2020 can be found at https://jordaninstituteforfamilies.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/PDG-ECE-Data-Roundtables-Report-Public-Final-051420.pdf

Aims of the Current Study

The overarching aim of this pilot feasibility study was to determine whether the study design and data collection procedure could be accomplished on a smaller scale (four to six counties) before attempting a larger, statewide study. We wanted to collect the type of data that could be used to quantify the prevalence of exclusionary discipline and measure the disparity between Black children and other races or ethnic groups. Further, we also wanted to learn from the lived experiences of families who have faced exclusionary discipline as well as preschool providers that grapple with addressing challenging behaviors. The two specific aims of the study were:

Aim #1: Pilot a survey to estimate the frequency of preschool exclusionary discipline and differences by race and ethnicity.

Aim #2: Describe the experiences of Black families who have had a child subjected to exclusionary discipline and the experiences of preschool providers addressing challenging behaviors.

Methods

This study used principles of community-based participatory research to guide the process. Specifically, we convened a research community advisory board (CAB), consisting of 20 individuals with a diverse variety of professional and lived expertise, five times throughout the study process. The group met prior to the study launch to refine study aims, questions, and design, then multiple times throughout study implementation, and again at the end of the study to review and interpret findings. The names and affiliations of CAB members are listed at the beginning of this document. The four study sites were Smart Start Local Partnerships that were recruited by the study team by direct outreach from one of the study leads, the director of the Wake County Smart Start. Three additional sites that agreed to participate in the pilot were Smart Start of Mecklenburg County, Randolph Partnership for Children, and Martin-Pitt Partnership for Children. The sample for this pilot study was not intended to be representative of the entire state of North Carolina, as the focus of the study was on developing and testing the methodology and not generalizability of the findings.

To accomplish our study aims, we used a concurrent equal emphasis mixed-methods (i.e., QUAL + QUAN) pilot study design drawing a sample of parents‡ and providers of young children in preschool settings in five counties in North Carolina. [28] Mixed methods research designs are generally pragmatic and flexible in nature and can be used when exploring complex phenomena that cannot be understood using only one source of information. [28,29] While the explicit purpose of the study was to assess the feasibility of survey methods to measure the prevalence of exclusionary discipline, we also assume that a survey or other exclusively quantitative method is not adequate for understanding the experiences and meaning of exclusionary discipline to families and providers. We consider both the quantitative (survey) and qualitative (interviews) data equally important; data were collected and analyzed independent of each other, rather than sequentially.

The study protocol and associated documents were reviewed and considered exempt by the UNC Office of Human Research Ethics' International Review Board. Our study design and timeline were adjusted several times in 2021 and 2022 in response to the COVID-19 public health emergency in consultation with the CAB.

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‡ Regarding terminology used throughout this report: "Parent", "provider", and "preschool" are terms we intended to define very broadly. A **parent** could be any caregiver or guardian responsible for the care of a child and not necessarily a biological parent;

Quantitative Survey Methods

We began by reviewing the existing literature to identify existing measures, questions, or indicators that would be candidate items in the pilot survey. We identified five existing data collection examples: 1) the U.S. Department of Education OCR survey, 2) the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction guidance for reporting incidents in early childhood settings, 3) the National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH), 4) The Black Child Development Institute-Charlotte's program evaluation survey, and 5) the University of Illinois at Chicago's Study of Families Opportunities and Choices after Children's Early Exclusion (FOCCEE). The federal and state examples were primarily used for data tracking and monitoring by a government entity and were not designed for research purposes or as parent surveys. The NSCH item is parent-report but only included a single item: In the PAST 12 MONTHS, were you ever asked to keep your child home from any child care or preschool because of their behavior (i.e., hitting, kicking, biting, tantrums, or disobeying?) However, the Charlotte evaluation and the FOCCEE study included multiple, detailed indicators developed and tested in similar contexts. After discussions with the developers of these measures and the advisory board, a draft set of survey items were developed and refined based on CAB feedback to balance comprehensiveness with participant burden.

The final, full survey can be found in the Appendix, and covers topics such as: (a) child and parent demographic characteristics; (b) child behavior and behavioral concerns; (c) disciplinary actions and response, and (d) perceptions of discrimination. The target sample size for the survey was 400, with 100 surveys collected from each of the four study locations. In-person administration was conducted using an iPad, and paper/pencil versions were also available. The pilot survey was initially only available in English, but a Spanish version was developed based on feedback from the CAB. Spanish translation of survey materials was provided and verified by CHICLE Language Institute. Univariate and bivariate statistics were used to describe the sample and for comparisons between race/ethnic groups.

Inclusion criteria for the study was intentionally broad: any parent or guardian of a child who was enrolled in an early childhood program in the past five years was eligible. A mix of convenience and snowball sampling strategies were used to target parents engaged in services with local partnerships in the pilot counties and to encourage participants to recommend other families for the study. The research team consulted with the CAB to determine the most ethical and equitable strategies to recruit survey participants via in-person recruitment and through social media channels. Due to safety considerations related to the COVID-19 public health emergency, initial recruitment efforts were more "passive," (i.e., emailing links to parents, flyers available at front desks). When social distancing policies were relaxed, we hired and trained family outreach coordinators at each site to recruit participants directly.

Qualitative Interview Methods

Qualitative interviews were conducted with parents of children who experienced exclusionary discipline and with preschool providers. Because we wanted to focus on the experiences of Black families who have experienced exclusionary discipline, the parent interviews were only offered to families who identified as Black or African American and who reported having a child who experienced exclusionary discipline from an early childhood program in the last five years. Individuals who were currently working as early care and education providers or directors were eligible for the provider interviews.

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provider refers to a teacher, director, or other staff who cares for the child within the early care and education setting; preschool was used to refer to any early care and education setting, public or private, and home or center-based.

Participants were recruited via the survey and participants who met the inclusion criteria were asked to provide their consent for contact and their contact information if they were willing to participate in the qualitative interviews. Additional participants were recruited through family outreach coordinators using direct outreach to families and providers via snowball sampling. Overall, 14 parent interviews and 12 provider interviews were conducted, and the final sample size was determined considering data saturation and redundancy.[30,31]

Along with input from the CAB, the qualitative team developed the initial semi-structured interview guide. The guide was based in the theoretical approaches of grounded theory and phenomenology to develop theory and understanding through analyses of data to capture the essence of a lived experience.[28,32–34] Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim then coded. Research team members developed a codebook using relevant theories and research that informed our project's key aims and our interview guide. Throughout analysis of the data, coders refined the existing codebook to add new codes or delete irrelevant ones. Once no new codes emerged and a cluster of themes were identified, coding and analysis was determined to be complete.
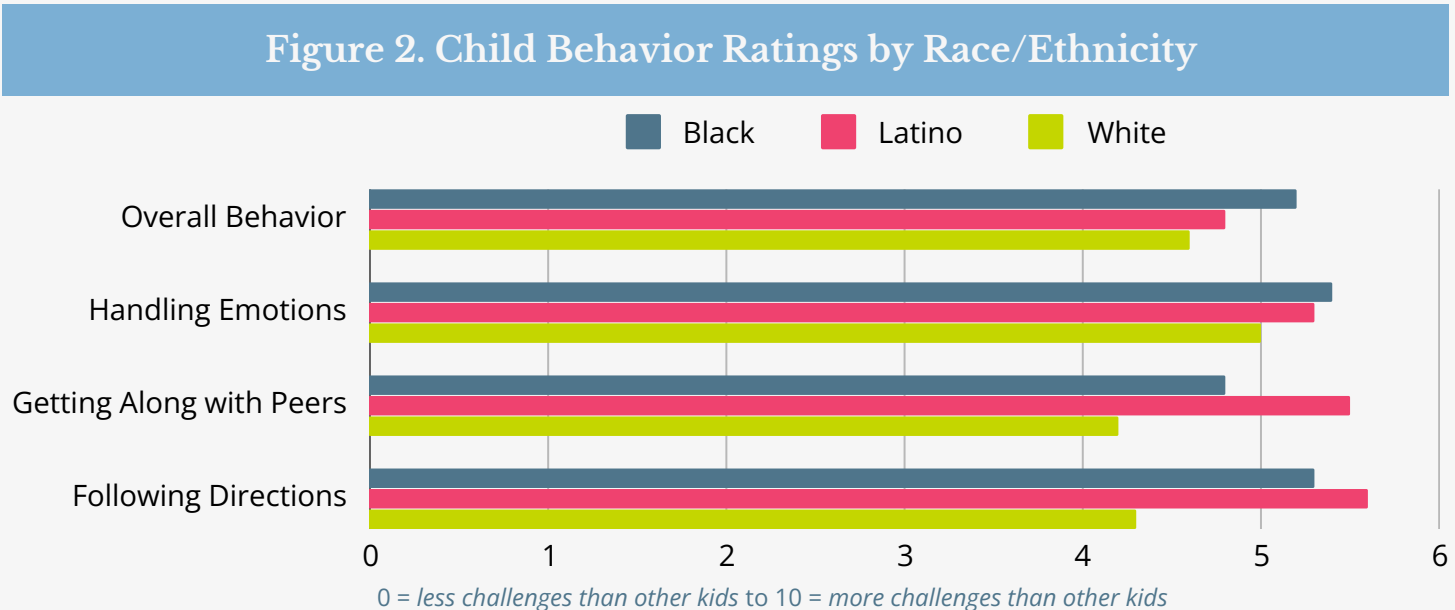
Results from Parent Surveys

Overall, 407 surveys were collected from the four sites with 323 English and 84 Spanish surveys collected. The response rate is unknown because it was not possible to track how many individuals viewed the flyers or online recruitment links through passive recruitment, and we did not track how many individuals were approached to take the survey in person. The survey was designed without forced requirement of any responses; 89 surveys with no recorded responses beyond consent were collected but deleted before analysis began. This resulted in 78% of collected surveys (N = 318) available for data analysis. An additional 22 respondents did not select any race/ethnicity option for their child, resulting in a final analytic sample of N = 296 for items comparing race/ethnicity. Of this final sample, most respondents identified their relationship to the focal child as "mother" (77%), followed by "father" (10%) and "grandparent" (6%). Child gender identity reported by the parent was 55% "Boy", 43% "Girl" (43%), and 2% selected "Prefer not to Answer." No respondents indicated "non-binary" or "other" for child gender.

Race and Ethnic Identity. Measurement of child race and ethnicity was discussed in depth with the CAB. The survey (see Appendix) allowed respondents to check multiple responses for the item asking about race and ethnic identity. Although most respondents selected a single race or ethnicity, the group discussed how best to code surveys in which multiple race/ethnicity groups were selected. For example, out of 173 parents who identified their race as Black, 11 also indicated Latino ethnicity, and six indicated White race. Two approaches were taken: 1) we created a separate "multiple race or ethnicity" group, and 2) respondents who indicated "Black" and another race or ethnicity, were coded as "Black" regardless of any other indicated racial or ethnic group. These two approaches generally did not affect the overall composition of the sample with either 55% or 59% of the parent sample identified as Black, depending on whether "multiple race or ethnicity" (7% of the total sample) was included as a category.

As a sensitivity test, we ran all analyses using both approaches to categorize race and ethnicity, and findings were similar for both approaches. We did not ask about other aspects of social identity, such as immigration generation, nativity, national or regional identity, etc. The remaining sections of this report present results categorizing race/ethnicity into three groups: 1) **Black, n = 176** (including any other race/ethnicity); 2) **Latino , n = 87** (including any other race except Black); and 3) **White, n = 33** (including any other race/ethnicity except Latino or Black).

Child Behavior. Because exclusionary discipline is ostensibly a reaction to problematic or challenging child behaviors, we asked parents to report their own perceptions of their child's behavior. We asked respondents to assess their child's behavior when they were attending the early childhood program in the following areas: overall child behavior, handling their emotions, getting along with other kids, and following directions. The rating scale was visually anchored with 0 = *less challenges than other kids*, 5 = *about the same as other kids*, and 10 = *more challenges than other kids*. The intent behind this question was to assess whether any identified differences in disciplinary responses could be at least partially explained by differences in child behavior, at least as perceived by the parent.

Respondents rated overall behavior at the midpoint (M = 5.00, SD = 2.50), *getting along with peers* rated towards less problems (M = 4.90; SD = 2.47), *handling emotions* (M = 5.32, SD = 2.25) and *following directions* (M = 5.27; SD = 2.41) were, on average, closer to more challenges. On average, parents of White children reported less challenges in all behavior categories compared to parents of Black or Latino children (see Figure 2). However, results of ANOVA analysis using Tukey's HSD test found no significant differences by race/ethnicity for *overall behavior* (F = 1.02; p = .36) or *handling emotions* (F = 0.48; p = .62). However, there were statistically significant differences in parent ratings for *getting along with peers* (F = 3.58; p = .03) and following directions (F = 3.14; p = .04). Post-hoc comparisons show that the significant differences were found between Latino and White groups (as shown in Figure 2), but no significant differences between Latino and Black or between White and Black parent-reported behaviors in these two outcomes.


Figure 2. Child Behavior Ratings by Race/Ethnicity

0 = *less challenges than other kids* to 10 = *more challenges than other kids*

Preschool Disciplinary Action. Regarding disciplinary action for behavior, the survey was designed to first ask a broad question about discipline, then more detailed items were provided regarding different types of expulsion including "soft" expulsion. The following survey item was used to broadly assess whether the child received any disciplinary action related to behavior, inclusive of suspension and expulsion:

Did your child receive disciplinary action while attending an early childhood program because of their behavior? Disciplinary action can include the following: receiving documented warning or incident reports, being sent home early or temporarily suspended, being formally expelled, pushed out or encouraged to leave because of their behavior.

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§ Based on input from the CAB, the survey included the race and ethnicity category "Latino/a/x or Hispanic." Recent scholarship has suggested the gender-inclusive term "Latine" as an alternative to Latinx.[35] Although we recognize the limitations of this monolithic and gendered term, we use the term "Latino" in this document to refer to parents or children categorized in this group.

Figure 3 below shows the proportion of parents who reported experiencing each disciplinary action category by race/ethnicity. For any disciplinary action, there were significant differences (X^2 = 23.4, p < .001) with higher disciplinary action reported by Black parents (35%) compared to White (16%) and Latino (8%) parents. Put differently, Black children were 59% of the sample, but were 83% of the respondents who reported experiencing discipline for behavior.

The next item asked parents to select one of four specific options to assess their experience of expulsion: *warnings but not expelled, told my child could not come back, advised to find another program,* and *the program made it impossible to stay*. Significant differences by race/ethnicity were found for all four options. The specific item *warnings but not expelled* was most reported and differed by race/ethnicity (X^2= 12.24, p < .01) with Black parents (24%) reporting this disciplinary action, followed by 15% of White and 7% of Latino parents. The option *told my child could not come back* was uncommon but also statistically associated with race/ethnicity (X^2 = 7.79, p = .02). The 11 respondents who reported this experience all identified as Black (6%). The response *advised to find another program* was only reported by 5 respondents and was not associated with race/ethnicity (X^2 = 0.76, p = .68). The last option, *the program made it impossible to stay,* was associated with race/ethnicity (X^2 = 13.1, p < .01), but most likely to be experienced by Latino families (13%) relative to Black (3%) or White (0%) families.

Figure 3. Experiences of Disciplinary Action and Expulsion Options
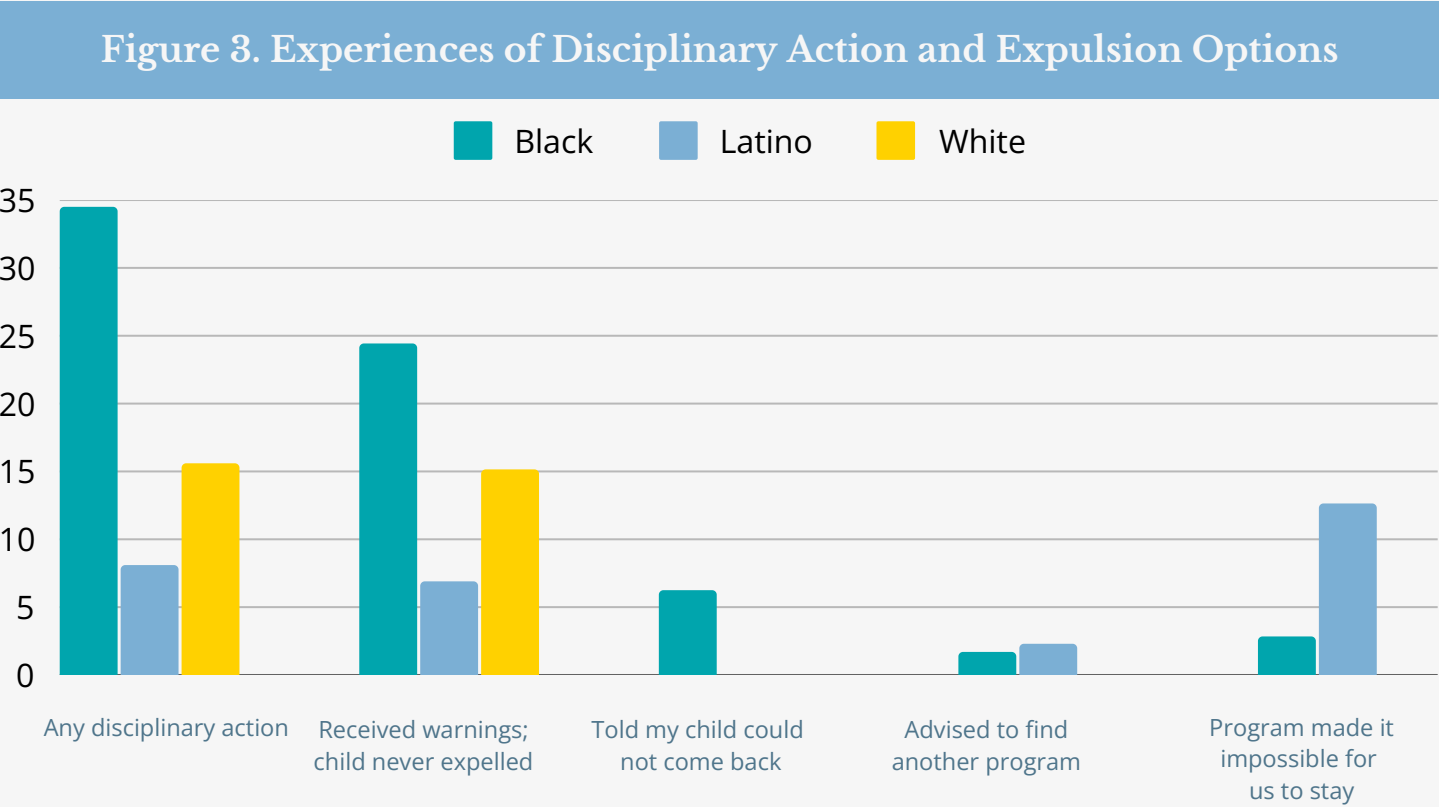
The next survey items were provided to parents who endorsed experiencing disciplinary actions to capture more detail regarding the disciplinary response and the child behavior concerns that contributed to the disciplinary action. The subgroup of survey respondents who experienced any disciplinary action included 71 parents of 59 Black, 7 Latino, and 5 White children. Tables 1 and 2 provide the proportion for each child race/ethnic subgroup that endorsed each action or behavior, with the option to select all that apply. However, due to small sample sizes, any comparisons or trends should be interpreted with caution. For this reason, bivariate statistics are not provided for the association between child race/ethnicity and specific disciplinary actions and behaviors.
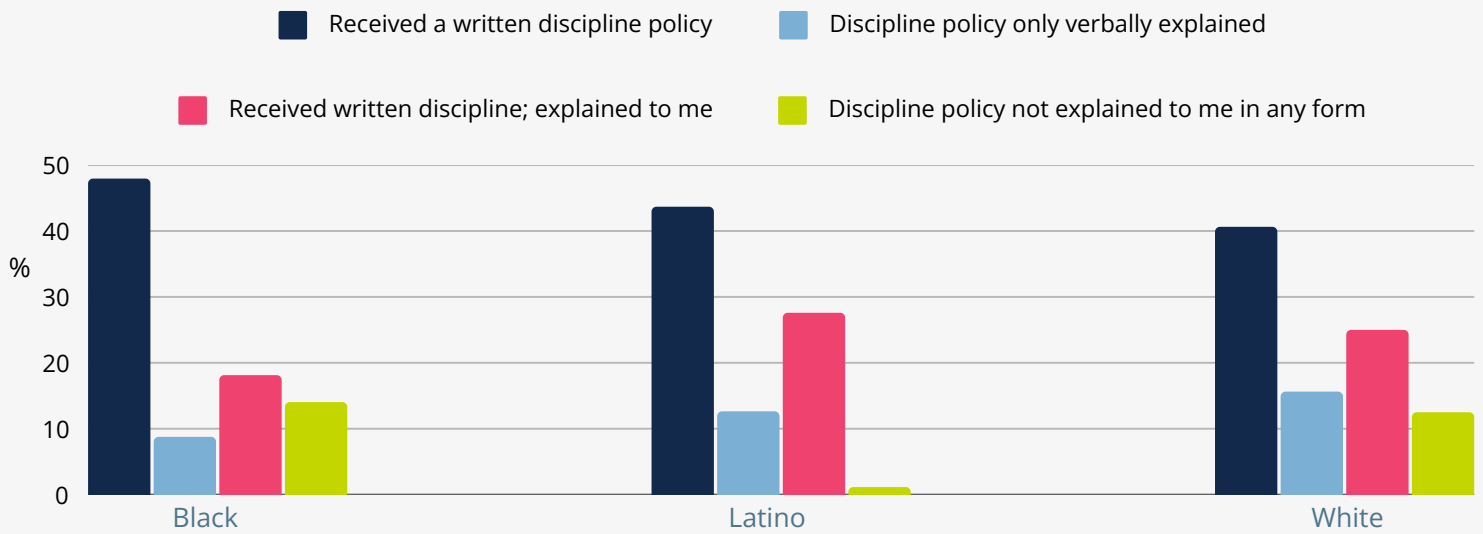
Table 1. Specific responses to behavior problems among respondents who received disciplinary action(%)

	Discipline Subgroup (n=74)	Black (n=59)	Latino (n=7)	White (n=5)
Your child was sent to the directors' office	58%	61%	43%	40%
The program called you to pick up your child early	49%	52%	50%	20%
Your child sat out or missed an activity or field trip	50%	50%	75%	20%
The program temporarily suspended your child	23%	25%	14%	0%
You felt pressured by the program to take your child out	7%	8%	0%	0%
The program told you that your child was not a good fit	14%	15%	13%	0%
The program told you that they couldn't meet the needs of your child	15%	15%	25%	0%
The program suggested or identified an alternative program for your child	9%	5%	40%	0%
The program referred your child to Early Intervention services	7%	2%	40%	0%

Regarding specific responses (Table 1), *child was sent to the director's office* was the most common experience (58% of the subgroup who received disciplinary action) followed by *child sat out or missed an activity* (50%) and *pick up your child early* (49%). For specific behavior complaints (Table 2), the most common concerns were related to *classroom routine* (49%) and *refused to nap or sit still* (44%).

Table 2. Specific child behavior complaints among respondents who received disciplinary action (%)

	Discipline Subgroup (n=74)	Black (n=59)	Latino (n=7)	White (n=5)
They acted out towards others (yelling, calling names, or verbally threatening)	39%	37%	57%	40%
They were destructive (damaging classroom materials or furniture)	22%	20%	43%	20%
They were injuring themselves or acting in an unsafe way with their own body	8%	8%	0%	20%
They had injured other students	13%	12%	14%	20%
They had injured staff	13%	10%	43%	0%
They refused to eat or be fed	11%	8%	38%	0%
They refused to nap or sit still	44%	44%	64%	0%
They refused to follow classroom routines	49%	53%	44%	0%
They could not be consoled when upset and cried frequently	26%	25%	44%	0%

Preschool Program Policy and Experiences. The next questions sought to understand parental perceptions related to understanding of the preschool program's discipline policy and how they felt their family was treated by the program. Regarding the preschool's discipline policy, four items asked parents whether they received a written policy and/or an explanation verbally. There was a significant association between receipt of a formal discipline policy and race/ethnicity (X_2 = 16.1, p = .04). Black families were more likely to only receive a written discipline policy (48%) or not explained at all (14%), while a higher proportion of Latino and White families in the sample reported receiving both a written and verbal policy.

Figure 4. Receipt of Disciplinary Policy by Race/Ethnicity

■ Received a written discipline policy ■ Discipline policy only verbally explained

■ Received written discipline; explained to me ■ Discipline policy not explained to me in any form

The last set of items sought to explore parents' perceptions of discrimination and shared identity in the preschool setting. Parents were asked whether they or their child were *treated unfairly because of their race or ethnic group*. This item was derived from the National Survey of Children's Health adverse childhood experiences items intended to measure race or ethnic discrimination. [36] Among parents of Black children, 29% reported experiencing racial discrimination in their preschool program, compared to 6% of Latino and 13% of White parents (X^2 = 19.6, p < .001). The next two items asked whether there were *teachers or other children or families who shared their race or ethnic identity*. Regarding teachers, parents of Black (82%) and White (81%) children reported higher shared identity compared to Latino (52%) families (X^2 = 24.9, p < .001). The shared identity with other children and families were also associated with child race/ethnicity (X^2 = 6.25, p = .04), but the differences were not as large as teacher concordance.

Figure 5. Parent Perceptions of Discrimination and Shared Identity

■ Black ■ Latino ■ White
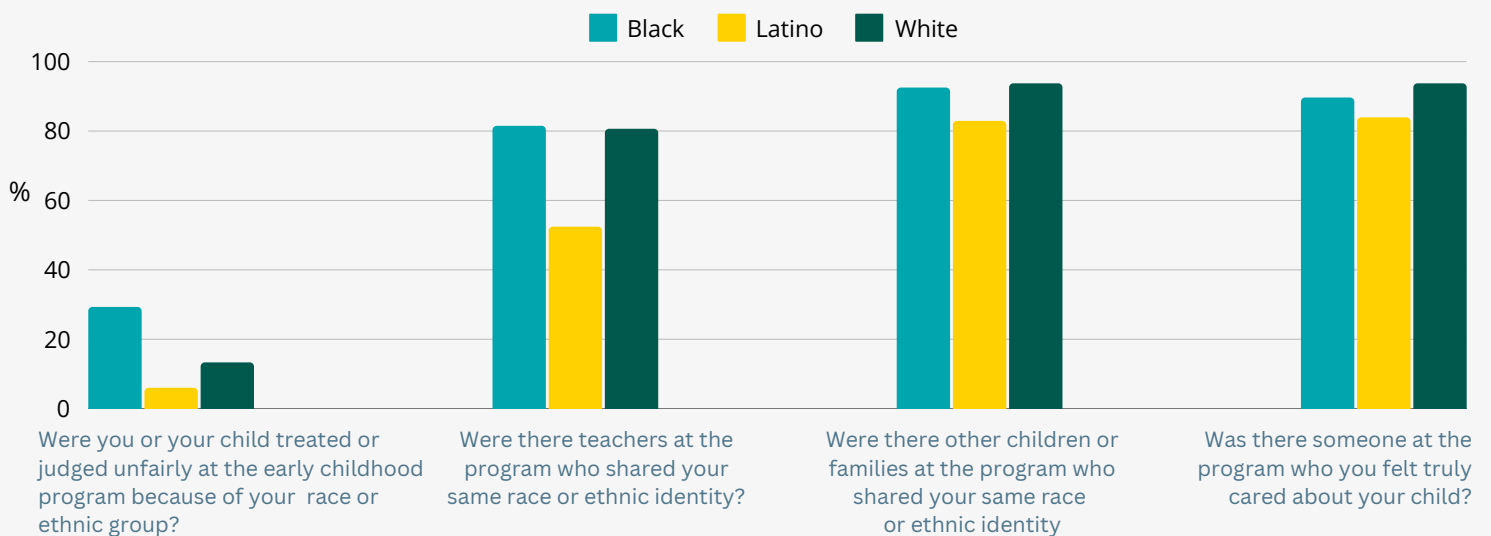
The last question asked simply whether the parent thought there was *someone who truly cared about their child* at the program. This item was important to gather as a key measure of inclusion to complement the study's more specific focus on exclusion through discipline. There were no significant differences by race/ethnicity (X = 2.76, p = .25), with almost 90% of the sample reporting there was someone at the program who truly cared about their child.

Findings from Parent and Provider Interviews

Parent Interview Cross-Cutting Themes

This section describes themes and findings from the semi-structured interviews conducted with parents or other caregivers. Interviews were held with 14 caregivers, including grandparents, who voluntarily enrolled in the study. This report draws extensively on qualitatively analyzed data from caregivers to paint a detailed portrait of their experiences with preschool discipline and the various factors that facilitate and/or undermine their ability to support the school readiness of young learners. Key themes and findings that emerged from caregivers' narratives include:

1 *Caregivers' Nuanced Experiences with Preschools*

"They were understanding to a certain extent, but then they got to the point where they were just tired of him. They wanted him gone!" During their interviews, caregivers described their experiences with their children's preschools, highlighting both positive and negative aspects. Many chose the preschools based on convenience factors like location near home or work, availability of spots, and familiarity with other family members attending. Positive aspects included the preschools providing a structured, learning-focused environment with activities, curriculum, and staff that participants felt were beneficial for their children's development and preparation for kindergarten. However, several participants expressed concerns that the preschool staff did not fully understand or meet the needs of their children, particularly those with behavioral or developmental challenges. Some felt the staff lacked patience, were quick to dismiss or expel their children, and did not provide adequate support or resources. A few participants also noted a lack of racial/ethnic diversity among staff, which they felt limited the staff's ability to relate to and support their families. Overall, the participants' experiences highlight the importance of preschools having the knowledge, skills, and resources to effectively support the diverse needs of all children and families.

2 *Children's Personality Traits and Strengths*

"He has a very big personality. Very talkative, very bright. You are gonna notice him in a room. He's the life of the party." Children's personality traits and strengths play a pivotal role in their development and interactions with the world around them. Insights from caregivers shed light on their children's characteristics, highlighting various positive attributes as well as areas for growth. When discussing the personality traits and strengths of their children, caregivers described them as having good memories, being outgoing, communicative, passionate, creative, and quick learners. Some children were described as caring and protective of their siblings. The children were also described as having high vocabulary and reasoning skills. Some caregivers mentioned that their children were shy or self-centered, but confident and assertive. The children were also described as being energetic, curious, and playful. Overall, the insights shared by caregivers provide a comprehensive overview of children's personality traits and strengths, showcasing a blend of positive characteristics and areas that may require nurturing. Understanding these attributes is crucial for fostering their growth and development, enabling children to navigate their environments with confidence and resilience.

"I just took him out, because it was just too much. I wanted to find a center that would better fit him and help him with his needs." Caregivers described experiences with exclusionary discipline practices in preschools, where children were suspended, expelled, or asked to leave due to behavioral issues. Many caregivers felt the preschools were quick to resort to these measures without first trying to understand or address the child's needs. Some caregivers perceived racial bias in how their children, particularly Black children, were disciplined compared to their peers. Caregivers expressed frustration that preschools lacked the resources, training, or patience to work with young children exhibiting challenging behaviors. Instead of supportive interventions, caregivers encountered punitive responses that disrupted the child's education and left the family scrambling to find alternative care. Overall, the caregivers highlight systemic issues in early childhood settings that fail to meet the developmental needs of all children and disproportionately impact marginalized families.

- **Preference for Proactive, Supportive Discipline Approaches**

"**They are inexperienced, and they don't know how to deal with kids with certain underlying behavior issues. They should be trained to deal with kids..."** Caregivers expressed a desire for more beneficial, supportive discipline methods in early childhood settings. Additionally, caregivers suggested that exclusionary discipline should not be the default approach, and that alternative strategies should be explored. Overall, the interviews highlighted the need for preschools to have a more positive and supportive approach towards discipline and behavior management. This includes better training and understanding of children with behavioral issues, sensitivity towards different cultures and races, and involving families in the education process. Preschools should also focus on helping children learn how to behave and prepare for kindergarten and beyond, rather than using suspension as a behavior modification tool. According to caregivers, a range of disciplinary methods can be used, but they should be effective and appropriate for each child's needs.

- **Combating Exclusionary Discipline Through Parental Resilience**

"I had to be my own resource. I had to be my kid's voice and back them up..." To overcome the hurdles associated with exclusionary discipline, many caregivers developed parental resilience, meaning they cultivated their own inner resources and coping skills that help them to handle stress and crisis. Resilient coping skills allowed caregivers to solve problems, keep calm and collected when upset, and make it through challenging times. Parental resilience is a powerful tool for navigating the challenges of exclusionary discipline within early childhood settings. By developing inner resources and fostering coping strategies, many caregivers managed to effectively advocate for their children's educational needs. This resilience not only empowered caregivers but also significantly benefited their children, promoting a healthier and more supportive educational experience. Overall, caregivers had to be resilient and resourceful in navigating the educational system and advocating for their children's needs.

- **Lasting Psychological Impact of Exclusionary Discipline**

"This school traumatized us so bad that we both had to go to therapy." Caregivers also discussed the emotional toll that exclusionary discipline can have on both children and their caregivers. Caregivers expressed feelings of helplessness, frustration, and sadness when their children were repeatedly suspended or expelled from school. They also expressed concern about the negative impact that exclusionary discipline can have on their children's emotional well-being and education. Caregivers also expressed frustration with the fairness of teachers' discipline towards their children, as it often resulted in the need to leave work early to pick up their child. Interviewees often highlighted the emotional toll that exclusionary discipline can have on caregivers, causing stress and anxiety about work disruptions and the need for backup plans.

"You should be able to be trained or have the knowledge to deal with kids with certain issues." Caregivers provided recommendations for improving the behavior modification process and support for children with behavioral issues in preschool. They emphasized the importance of communication and collaboration between caregivers/parents and teachers, as well as the need for training and resources for dealing with behavioral issues. They also highlighted the negative impact of implicit biases on interactions with families and the need for more diverse and qualified teachers. Interviewees recommended in-house counseling services for children with behavioral issues and a slower approach to suspensions, only using them in cases of physical harm to others. Caregivers also emphasized the need for more support and resources for children with behavior issues in preschool. They also highlighted the importance of culturally responsive and trauma-informed approaches to discipline in early childhood education. Overall, caregivers emphasized the importance of a supportive and inclusive environment for young children in preschool.

Provider Interview Cross-Cutting Themes

Interviews were held with 12 early childhood providers, including center directors and classroom teachers, who voluntarily enrolled in the study. This report draws extensively on qualitatively analyzed data from early childhood providers to paint a detailed portrait of their experiences managing classroom behaviors in preschool settings and the various factors that facilitate and/or undermine their ability to support the school readiness of young learners. Key themes and findings that emerged from early childhood providers' narratives include:

1   *Description of a Complex and Diverse Early Childhood Program Landscape*

"We have three different programs within our schools, our traditional program, our Early Head Start, and we have an advanced pre-k program." The provider interviews focused on gathering information about various programs and centers that serve children in North Carolina. Participants shared details about the age range of children they serve, the number of children enrolled, and the racial and ethnic breakdown of their programs. Many participants mentioned low enrollment due to lack of funding for childcare in their area. The interviews also touched on the challenges of disciplining children in corporate versus individually owned centers. Overall, the interviews provided insight into the diverse programs and centers that serve children in North Carolina.

- **Professional and Personal Fulfillment is the Driving Force Among Childcare Providers**

"It is very rewarding. One of the things that I enjoy the most is when children leave with a smile on their faces. I know that they had a great experience." The provider interviews focused a great deal on professional fulfillment. The directors and teachers expressed both joys and challenges in their work. They found fulfillment in providing a safe and comfortable environment for children and helping families access resources. The preschool teachers found their work exciting and rewarding but also frustrating when social and economic factors hindered their students' learning. The participants' motivation varied day-to-day, but they were driven by their passion for working with children and seeing them learn and grow. The participants' favorite part of the job was working with the children and witnessing their progress. The work was described as constantly changing and interactive, with challenges and rewards. Overall, providers found their work to be rewarding and fulfilling, driven by their love for children and their desire to provide a positive experience for them and their families.

"We've had experiences with behavior that have gone well. It tends to involve developmentally appropriate expectations and communication that is developmentally appropriate to the child." Preschool disciplinary practices were explored through provider interviews, revealing several effective strategies for addressing negative behavior in young children. All participants were able to describe what this effort should look like in theory but acknowledged that it is not always followed in practice. One approach described is to use calm and direct language and teach appropriate behavior at the beginning of the school year to prevent negative behaviors before they occur. Redirection is another technique used to engage children in activities that challenge them and make them feel helpful. Positive reinforcement was also mentioned as being effective in encouraging children to behave appropriately.

Communication is key in addressing negative behavior, and teachers often talk to children about their actions and feelings to help them understand why their behavior is inappropriate. Establishing routines and having a plan in place are also important tools for teachers to use when addressing negative behavior. Parent involvement is crucial, and teachers often hold parent-teacher conferences to discuss behavior concerns and offer resources for support. In some cases, behavior specialists may be brought in to observe and offer advice on how to change the classroom environment or routine to better support the child. Suspension and expulsion are rarely practiced in these programs, and instead, efforts are made to build relationships with families and work together to address behavior concerns.

Providers emphasized the importance of forming a relationship with families to create a comfortable environment for open communication. Providers also stressed the need for outside resources and strategies before resorting to suspension or expulsion. However, some providers noted that certain behaviors, such as extreme aggression, may require termination of enrollment. Providers also discussed the challenges of implementing discipline policies, such as time-out, and the need for age-appropriate strategies. The interviews also highlighted the impact of home life on disciplinary action and the importance of considering the child's well-being and teachable moments. Overall, providers emphasized the need for a team approach and resources to effectively address challenging behaviors in preschool settings.

Positive reinforcement, praise, and modeling appropriate behavior are effective behavior management techniques for children. Physical punishment or abuse, shaming, yelling, threatening, and leaving children unattended are not allowed. Time-out is used based on the child's age, but it can become ineffective once the child becomes familiar with it. Restraint is the least preferred option and should only be used in situations where there is no other way to calm down the child.

The importance of considering the environment and the child's needs when making placement decisions was also highlighted. Daily walk-throughs and support from administration can help teachers manage their classrooms and take breaks when needed. Discipline that involves lecturing children for an extended period can disengage the whole class and is not effective. Observations and outside resources should be used before suspending or expelling a student.

In summary, preschool disciplinary practices prioritized by providers include positive redirection, emotional literacy, and open communication with families. Providers use age-appropriate strategies, avoid physical punishment, or abuse, and consider the child's well-being and teachable moments. Suspension and expulsion should be a last resort, and outside resources and support should be used before resorting to these measures. A team approach, including behavior specialists and parent involvement, can effectively address challenging behaviors in preschool settings.

- **Challenging Home Environments, Developmental Delays, and Cultural Barriers led to Classroom Disruptions**

"**I have experienced a lot of different behaviors and for a lot of different reasons.**" Provider interviews were conducted to explore the decision factors that lead to exclusionary discipline in early childhood education settings. Providers discussed various factors that contribute to classroom disruptions and challenging behaviors among children. According to providers, challenging behaviors observed in preschool settings often stem from children's home environments and lack of access to resources and support. Participants noted seeing more aggression, anger, and violence in young children, which they attributed to factors such as lack of parental involvement, exposure to domestic violence, and developmental delays. Language barriers and cultural differences also contribute to behavioral issues as children struggle to communicate their needs and frustrations. Effective discipline requires understanding the child's background and home life, collaborating with parents, and accessing specialized services like speech therapy and behavior specialists. Ultimately, addressing challenging behaviors in early childhood settings requires a holistic, community-based approach that supports both children and their families.

- **Perceptions of Parental Denial and Resistance**

"Parents tend to ignore the signs. They don't feel that there's anything wrong." Providers commonly cited parents' unwillingness to acknowledge their children's behavioral and/or developmental issues undermines their ability to establish a safe and nurturing learning environment for their children. Interviewed providers noted that while positive redirection remains a common disciplinary approach, there have been changes in how parents participate in their child's education. According to providers, some parents believe that it is the responsibility of the school to ensure their child learns everything they need to know, and they do not need help at home. Providers also noted that some parents work long hours, which means their child spends a lot of time in care. Providers believe that parent training could be helpful, but strategies will be needed to overcome barriers to reaching parents and supporting their participation.

- **Perceptions of Generational Differences in Parenting**

"You can blame it on how they were raised. When I was raised, children were seen and not heard." Several providers highlighted how challenging behaviors displayed by children is due to generational differences in parenting behavior. Specifically, they attributed some of these changes to generational differences in parenting styles with younger parents being less involved as parents, resulting in them spending more time in school and childcare settings. To compensate for the lack of parental involvement of younger parents, grandparents are raising their grandchildren with an "old-school" approach to discipline, such as using physical punishment, which many providers feel is the appropriate way to instill the proper respect for authority in young children. Interviewees also believe younger parents, particularly those within vulnerable and marginalized communities, lack parenting skills and knowledge, which contributes to their children's challenging preschool behaviors.

- **Implicit Bias and Exclusionary Discipline**

"Black males seem a little more aggressive in their behavior ... they're more physical and physical is scary." The provider interviews focused on decision factors that lead to exclusionary discipline in early childhood education, particularly for Black boys. Implicit bias by teachers, administrators, and other staff was identified as a potential contributor to early childhood suspension and expulsion. Participants shared their experiences of bias against different races, including discrimination by licensed teachers and ignoring Black boys in classrooms. The root cause of exclusionary discipline was attributed to perceptions about racial and gender differences, with Black boys being perceived as more aggressive in their behavior. However, participants also shared strategies for addressing behavior issues, such as taking children outside to play and talking to them to find the root cause of their behavior. Implicit bias was seen to affect early childhood disciplinary practices by leading to labeling and preconceived judgments about children and families. Program staff were working to address these issues by giving children grace and seeing the child first, rather than relying solely on first impressions.

"I hope that there is work that'll be done to provide resources for early childhood professionals so that we can get better at what we're doing for the children of today." Providers offered recommendations for addressing behavior problems in children and reducing disciplinary responses by race and gender. Interviewees emphasized the importance of building relationships with families and working collaboratively with them to address behavior concerns. They suggested involving outside resources, such as speech therapists and behavior specialists, to provide support and guidance. Providers also highlighted the need for staff training and professional development, particularly in trauma-informed practices and early childhood development. They acknowledged that staff pay can impact the quality of service but emphasized the importance of a passion for the job and a willingness to seek out additional education and training.

To prevent challenging behaviors and reduce disciplinary responses by race and gender, the providers also recommended providing more training on different cultures to help teachers effectively communicate and understand cultural differences. It was also suggested to have someone on site who can communicate with families in their native language to prevent misunderstandings. Teachers should try to learn about the cultures of their students and incorporate them into the classroom. It was emphasized that teachers should remain calm and spend time talking with the child to understand the root of their behavior. Additional resources, such as sensory items and adaptive equipment, were recommended to help alleviate behavior problems.

Interviewees also discussed the challenges of working with children with special needs and the importance of providing intervention services and support to both the child and family. They suggested that centers need more funding to hire mental health professionals to develop strategies for children and provide assessments. It was noted that additional staff members may be necessary to ensure the safety of children with behavioral issues, especially those with autism. The interviews highlighted the need for more resources and support to address behavior problems and reduce disciplinary responses by race and gender.

The participants emphasized the importance of involving families in the process and providing them with resources and support. They suggested troubleshooting the root issues of behavior, such as hunger or unstructured home environments, and working with families to create structure and expectations at home. Providers also recommended offering social-emotional support and resources to children and families, as well as engaging families through family nights, communication apps, and home visits. They emphasized the need for education and advocacy for parents who may not have had positive parenting experiences or may not know about available resources.

To prevent expulsion and suspension of children with behavior issues, the participants suggested having additional staff in the classroom to help monitor and manage children with aggressive behaviors. The use of behavioral specialists was also recommended, as they can provide support to teachers and help identify triggers for behavioral issues. Providers emphasized the importance of early intervention services and screenings for children with behavior issues, and expressed frustration with parents who refuse to seek help for their children. They suggested that childcare providers should be knowledgeable about available resources and be willing to use them to help children reach their potential. Interviewees also discussed the need for a change in behavior policies to include early intervention services and screenings. Overall, providers stressed the importance of providing children with the tools they need to succeed and expressed frustration with the stigma surrounding special needs services.

Limitations of the Current Pilot Study

The primary purpose of this pilot study was to assess the feasibility of collecting survey and interview data from parents and providers in North Carolina regarding their experiences with exclusionary discipline in preschool settings. While the key findings of this study are consistent with prior research and support clear policy recommendations, there are many limitations to this study that would need to be improved in subsequent research to enhance the scientific validity, reliability, and generalizability of the findings.

First, this study was conducted from 2020-2023, during the COVID-19 pandemic and an ongoing childcare crisis. While our sample included families with children in preschool in the past five years, we did not attempt to account for the effects of COVID or the childcare crisis in our results. Second, we used a small, convenience, non-probability sample from five counties in North Carolina. The results may or may not generalize statewide or to the present day. Third, the survey responses were complete for 77% of individuals who initiated the survey, leading to concerns about nonresponse bias. Further, for in-depth interviews, due to scheduling and communication barriers among the parents and providers who were contacted and agreed to participate in interviews, only 40% completed the interview process. We also did not collect data from individuals who were approached but did not consent to participate in the study. We also acknowledge the potential limitation of our decision to focus qualitative interviews exclusively on a sample of Black parents. While this focus was justified given the disparate experiences and lack of focused research on this population, future research must also explore the experiences of other marginalized family groups of minoritized race and ethnic groups as well as other vulnerable family identities.

Perhaps not an inherent limitation of the study design, we also want to acknowledge a major system limitation we confronted throughout this study. Typically, when researchers are studying groups of topics that have clear potential for identifying the need for additional support or services, the research team will provide a list of resources or perhaps a referral to such services. For example, if a research team conducts a depression screening on participants, its common practice to provide a list of mental health resources to participants.

Early in our process of conducting surveys and interviews, our research team talked with parents experiencing ongoing challenges related to exclusionary discipline. In many cases, the parents asked members of the research team for support finding referrals for legal advice, peer support, alternative preschool arrangements, etc.

To our knowledge, there is not currently a specific statewide organization or source of support for families who have experienced or are threatened with placement disruptions. Some counties have established parent advocacy groups we could refer participants to. But, in general, parents were unaware of their rights and options and did not have a trusted source of information to turn to. For this study, leadership and staff at the Local Partnerships quickly developed a protocol and response specific to participants in their local community that we could share with study participants. Future research should anticipate the need for a clear parent advocacy referral process and the potential gap in communities to address this need.

Conclusions

Feasibility. Overall, the approach we adopted for assessing prevalence of exclusionary discipline using a survey tool fielded through local partnerships showed medium to high feasibility.

Prevalence of Exclusionary Discipline. The results of this pilot study provide initial empirical evidence for a racial disparity in preschool exclusionary discipline in early care and education settings. Consistent with prior studies, Black children in the sample were twice as likely to have experienced exclusionary discipline. Findings from qualitative interviews with Black parents who have experienced exclusionary discipline suggest that this experience is confusing and inconvenient at best and potentially traumatic at worst.

Black racial *disparity* was confirmed using survey data, and current estimates of prevalence of exclusionary discipline likely underestimated for all groups. Specifically, 11 families in our study (about 4% of the total sample) reported their child was formally expelled ("I was told my child could not come back"). This finding suggests that prior estimates of zero preschool expulsions in North Carolina by the OCR is likely an underestimate.

Experiences of Exclusionary Discipline. For Black families, exclusionary discipline is a potentially traumatic event that could be prevented with adequate investment in supporting providers.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this pilot study and the existing best available evidence regarding exclusionary discipline, we offer the following recommendations for change. The recommendations are organized from the family to the collective level. Reducing and eventually eliminating the use of exclusionary discipline in North Carolina will only occur through multiple sustained strategies. Simply banning preschool suspension and expulsion will be ineffective without substantial changes to other areas of policy and practice.

Summarizing their review of the existing literature, Zinsser and colleagues (2022) suggest "changing discipline processes will require attention to and support improved mesosystem interactions, including supporting teacher well-being and parent-teacher relationships and teachers' preparation to address children's diverse needs." Many of the practice and policy recommendation areas we considered have been recently outlined in detail in a series of recent reports by the **North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation and the Trauma Responsive Educational Practices (TREP) Project.** [37] Further, numerous innovative practice strategies are currently being implemented through five models supported through the **North Carolina Coalition for Inclusion, Not Expulsion**. Our intent is to align our recommendations with these ongoing efforts and encourage readers to seek out additional information and engage with these groups directly to stay updated on the next steps in this movement.

1. Recommendations for Families

All families need to ensure they are adequately informed of their preschool's disciplinary policies and practices. Only 22% of families in our study reported receiving a written and verbal explanation of the discipline policy. Although many families may not anticipate disciplinary concerns when they first initiate a preschool arrangement, taking a proactive role in understanding the policies in advance may help to clarify responses when issues do arise and to hold teachers and directors accountable for their own policies. We also recommend parents and caregivers who are experiencing exclusionary discipline to identify and organize opportunities for mutual aid and support. As noted previously, during the study we encountered many participants who were looking for support to understand and respond to exclusionary discipline situations they were facing. Identifying opportunities to learn from other parents to understand their own options and provide parenting support would likely help parents engage with school staff effectively and may help buffer the psychological distress many parents reported experiencing.

Recommendations for Preschool Practice and Policy Change

Both parents and providers agreed that exclusionary discipline could be drastically reduced with better access to training, supports, services, and technical assistance for teachers and preschools. Improving access to supports in the classroom will likely require policy changes to support implementation and scale-up and could be facilitated by targeting incentives and aligning resource allocation. Many strategies for supporting developmentally appropriate child behavior involves training in social emotional learning (SEL), better family engagement, and culturally responsive environments. To create effective SEL practices and policies, educators need both the knowledge and tools to integrate SEL into their teaching and address any challenges that arise. This effort involves focusing on both the content and delivery of SEL programs. Recommended practice changes include:

- **Creation of Comprehensive Training Modules or Professional Development Sessions:** Develop modules that cover key competency areas, including knowledge of what are developmentally appropriate behaviors delivered through interactive elements, such as role-playing, case studies, and various resource materials (e.g., guides, videos, worksheets). Ensure these resources align with training objectives to reinforce learning.
- **Integrate SEL with Existing Curriculum**
  o **Embed SEL in Daily Lessons**: Integrate SEL objectives into regular academic lessons rather than treating SEL as a standalone subject.
  o **Cross-Disciplinary Approach:** Foster collaboration between SEL instructors and academic teachers to create cohesive lesson plans that support both social-emotional and academic growth.
- **Personalized Training and Support**
  o **Needs Assessment:** Conduct thorough assessments to understand the specific social-emotional needs of students and educators, tailoring training accordingly.
  o **Differentiated Support:** Provide various levels of training and resources to meet the diverse needs of educators and students, ranging from basic to advanced.
- **Engage Families and Communities**
  o **Family Involvement:** Include families in SEL training initiatives to ensure a consistent approach between school and home environments.
  o **Community Partnerships:** Collaborate with community organizations to support SEL initiatives and provide additional resources.
- **Focus on Mental Health Integration**
  o **Mental Health Awareness:** Integrate mental health education into SEL training, highlighting the connection between social-emotional skills and mental health.
  o **Support Systems**: Establish clear pathways for students and educators to access mental health resources and support when needed.
- **Promote a Positive School Climate**
  o **Inclusive Environment:** Cultivate a school culture that values diversity and inclusion, ensuring SEL practices are sensitive to and reflective of students' diverse backgrounds.
  o **Recognition and Reinforcement:** Implement systems to recognize and reward positive social-emotional behaviors and progress.
- **Resource Allocation**
  o **Funding and Support:** Ensure adequate resources are allocated for SEL training and implementation, including funding for materials, expert facilitators, and time for educators to participate in training.

- **Parent Support and Skill Training Opportunities**
  - o Offer culturally sensitive trainings to teach parenting skills and time management.
  - o Ensure trainings are embedded within families' communities and trusted networks and accessible (time, location, languages).
  - o Supports should affirm families' strengths and their racial and cultural identities.
  - o Families are part of the design, improvement process, and implementation, including being trained to facilitate or co-facilitate.
  - o Examples of existing parent support and skill trainings opportunities:
    - * Village of Wisdom - Black Genius Framework and Dreamship
    - * Circle of Security Parenting
    - * Black SEL
    - * Circle of Parents
- **Building Strong Home-School Partnerships**
  - o Create a culture of care in the classroom beyond just supporting children but also supporting the educators.
  - o Engage young parents to improve experiences in the home and support families to help themselves.
  - o Build strong home-school partnerships through a family-centered approach. The Standards for Quality and Family Strengthening and Support provide a clear framework for developing strong partnerships with families while affirming families' strengths and their identities.
  - o Create a family-centered approach to the workplace.
  - o Additional strategies in creating a culture of care for educators include:
    - * Higher wages and benefits (including health insurance)
    - * Breaks and planning time
    - * Wellness or relaxation space or rooms
    - * Access to additional resources for the classroom when needed (e.g., healthy behavior specialists, therapists)
    - * Supportive on boarding and/or mentoring program for new teachers

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3. Develop a System of Reflective Supervision and Consultation

One specific practice improvement that would likely require policy change to coordinate and implement is the development of systems for reflective supervision and consultation to promote equitable disciplinary practice. To promote fairness, inclusivity, and transparency in disciplinary practices, it is essential to enhance reflective supervision and consultation. While several efforts are underway to enhance reflective supervision and consultation in North Carolina across other sectors of early childhood, we recommend policy changes consider the following recommended practices:

- **Develop a Framework for Reflective Supervision:**
  - o **Clear Guidelines:** Establish explicit guidelines for reflective supervision that emphasize equity and fairness in disciplinary decisions.
  - o **Standardized Procedures:** Create consistent procedures for reflecting on disciplinary practices to ensure transparency and uniformity.
- **Promote Culturally Responsive Practices:**
  - o **Cultural Competency Training:** Provide training for supervisors and educators on cultural competency to help them recognize and address biases that may influence disciplinary practices.
  - o **Cultural Awareness:** Encourage supervisors to reflect on and address their own cultural biases and assumptions.

- **Implement Regular Equity Audits:**
  - **Data Analysis:** Regularly analyze disciplinary data to identify disparities across different student demographics (e.g., race, gender, socioeconomic status).
  - **Review Practices:** Use equity audits to review and adjust disciplinary practices to address identified disparities.
- **Facilitate Collaborative Reflection:**
  - **Peer Discussions**: Promote group discussions and peer consultations where educators and supervisors can share experiences and reflect on equitable practices collectively.
  - **Diverse Perspectives:** Include a diverse group of stakeholders in discussions to ensure multiple perspectives are considered.
- **Strengthen Supervision Skills:**
  - **Training for Supervisors:** Offer specialized training for supervisors in reflective practices, focusing on guiding discussions about equity and fairness.
  - **Feedback Mechanisms:** Implement regular feedback systems where staff can provide input on the effectiveness and fairness of disciplinary practices.
- **Develop Equity-Focused Metrics:**
  - **Equity Indicators:** Establish specific metrics to measure the equity of disciplinary practices, such as referral, suspension, and expulsion rates among different student groups.
  - **Outcome Tracking:** Track disciplinary outcomes to ensure they are equitable and effectively support student behavior and growth.
- **Helpful Resources:**
  - **Early Intervention Technical Assistance Portal:** Offers online interactions to help individuals learn and apply basic behavioral principles. Visit the portal.
  - **NCASE:** Provides training and technical assistance to support SEL, address adverse childhood experiences, and more. Explore NCASE resources.
  - **Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety:** Offers peer-to-peer collaborative opportunities to address shared problems of practice. Access their resources.
  - **Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC):** Provides resources and guidance on early childhood education and SEL. Visit ECLKC.
  - **Center on Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL)**: Provides research-based resources on SEL. Explore CSEFEL

4. Recommendations for Data, Research, and Evaluation

The primary purpose of this study was to pilot a survey-based data collection approach to understanding the prevalence of exclusionary discipline in North Carolina. Extending this survey statewide is likely feasible, but a more sustainable approach would involve integrating the data on exclusionary discipline with other ongoing data collection and outcome monitoring efforts. Although data system development and reporting are underway with public preschool settings, ensuring private providers are participating will require broader policy change. The system investments required to build such a data system in early care and education (ECCE) systems is summarized by Zinsser et al. (2022), "Without a similar coordinated data system spanning all birth-to-5 care settings (e.g., private center-based care), a robust estimation of disproportionality cannot be computed. Furthermore, to ensure adequate data quality, efforts to promote data literacy and accessibility of reporting for ECCE administrators are paramount. Unlike K–12 superintendents, ECCE settings do not have access to a full cadre of district personnel to collect, organize, and upload requisite data."

An investment in data systems would also support ongoing program evaluation and research in this area. Because such research is relatively limited, ongoing efforts are needed to understand what works, for whom, and under what conditions. Data and evaluation systems can also help teachers and schools across the state learn from each other. When schools are using the same measures to track progress, learning collaboratives can be an effective approach to share knowledge about what is working and share strategies to improve outcomes.

5. Recommendations for Collective Action

We recommend ongoing support and broader participation in the N.C. Coalition for Inclusion, Not Expulsions. The Coalition, started in 2021 by a team from N.C. A&T State University, uses a comprehensive approach across the following work groups: Communications and Public Interest, Public Policy, Research and Data, Resources and Support, and Program and Practice Evaluation. The Coalition helped select and is working with five "Promising Models" across the state to test a range of approaches to eliminate classroom expulsion, including staff training and workshops, curriculum development, and culturally affirming practices.

The Coalition has articulated the following five specific areas of leadership:

1. Learning from the first five Promising Models and creating a Promising Model matrix and a set of alternative tools for positive responses to behaviors of children for EC professionals, educators and families.
2. Increasing public awareness of harsh disciplinary measures and solutions to address them.
3. Ensuring the state has implemented policy changes per the recommendation our Policy and Systems Infrastructure Task Force.
4. Directly naming and addressing the root causes of bias and racism within the early childhood system.
5. Ensuring early childhood professionals and communities have the resources and tools they need to build positive relationships between teachers and parents.

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Appendix

Opening Prompt: Thank you for taking this brief survey. The following questions ask about you and your child's experience in an early childhood program in the past five years. By early childhood program, we mean any preschool, daycare, or childcare center. Please select one child to focus on for the responses to these questions. If you have more than one child who has been in an early childhood program in the past five years, please focus on the child who was most recently enrolled in a program.

A. DEMOGRAPHIC

1. Are you the parent, guardian, or caregiver of a child who attended an early childhood program in the past five years?
- a. Yes
- b. No

2. What is your relationship to the child?
- a. Mother
- b. Father
- c. Grandparent
- d. Aunt/Uncle/Cousin
- e. Foster parent
- f. Other

3. What words do you use to describe your ethnic or racial identity? Check all that apply.
- a. Asian American or Asian
- b. African American or Black
- c. Latino/a/x or Hispanic
- d. Middle Eastern, North African, African
- e. Native American, Alaskan Native, Indigenous
- f. White or Caucasian or European American
- g. Prefer not to answer
- h. Other / Prefer to identify as: (text field)

4. What words do you use to describe your child's ethnic or racial identity? Check all that apply.
- a. Asian American or Asian
- b. African American or Black
- c. Latino/a/x or Hispanic
- d. Middle Eastern, North African, African
- e. Native American, Alaskan Native, Indigenous
- f. White or Caucasian or European American
- g. Prefer not to answer
- h. Other / Prefer to identify as: (text field)

5. How would you describe your child's gender identity?
- a. Boy
- b. Girl
- c. Non-binary
- d. Other
- e. Prefer not to answer

B. **CHILD BEHAVIOR**

6. On a scale of 0 to 10, how would you describe your child's behavior challenges when they were attending the early childhood program?

Less challenges than other kids					About the same as other kids			More challenges than other kids		
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1 0

- a. Overall child behavior:
- b. Handling their emotions:
- c. Getting along with other kids:
- d. Following directions:

C. **DISCIPLINE**

7. When your child started the program, was the discipline policy clearly explained to you?
- a. I only received a written discipline policy.
- b. The discipline policy was explained to me verbally.
- c. I received a written discipline AND it was explained to me.
- d. The discipline was not explained to me verbally or in written form.
- e. I can't remember.

8. Did your child receive disciplinary action while attending an early childhood program because of their behavior? Disciplinary action can include the following: receiving documented warning or incident reports, being sent home early or temporarily suspended, being formally expelled, pushed out or encouraged to leave because of their behavior.

- a. Yes, my child received disciplinary action.
- b. No, my child never received any disciplinary actions or warnings.

9. IF YES to #8: Select the option that is most true for your child:

- a. I received warnings but my child was never expelled
- b. I was told my child could not come back
- c. I was advised to find another program
- d. The program made it impossible for us to stay

10. IF YES to #8: What complaints did the program have about your child's behavior (check all that apply):

- a. They were angry towards others (yelling, calling names, or verbally threatening)
- b. They were destructive (damaging classroom materials or furniture)
- c. They were injuring themselves or acting in an unsafe way with their own body
- d. They had injured other students
- e. They had injured staff
- f. They refused to eat or be fed
- g. They refused to nap or sit still
- h. They refused to follow classroom routines
- i. They could not be consoled with upset and cried frequently
- j. Other (please describe):

11. IF YES to #8: Did any of the following happen after the early childhood program raised concerns about your child's behavior? (check all that apply)"

- a. Your child was sent to the directors' office
- b. The program called you to pick up your child early
- c. Your child sat out or missed an activity or field trip
- d. The program temporarily suspended your child
- e. You felt pressured by the program to take your child out
- f. The program told you that your child was not a good fit
- g. The program told you that they couldn't meet the needs of your child
- h. The program suggested or identified an alternative program for your child
- i. The program referred your child to Early Intervention services

12. Why did your child ultimately stop attending the early childhood program? (check all that apply):

- a. They aged out or graduated
- b. Your family moved
- c. You felt that your child's needs were not being met
- d. You felt unwelcome
- e. You felt the program was making it impossible for you to keep your child there
- f. The cost of the program was too high

D. ▶ **DISCRIMINATION**

13. Were you or your child treated or judged unfairly at the early childhood program because of your race or ethnic group?
- a. Yes
- b. No

14. How much do you think your or your child's race or ethnicity affected your experiences in the early childhood program?
- a. None at all
- b. A little
- c. A moderate amount
- d. A lot
- e. A great deal

15. Were there teachers at the program that shared your same race or ethnic identity?
- a. Yes
- b. No

16. Were there other children and families at the program that shared your same race or ethnic identity?
- a. Yes
- b. No

17. Was there someone at the program who you felt truly cared about your child?
- a. Yes
- b. No

E. FOLLOW-UP

18. Would you like more information about how to be involved with initiatives related to early childhood suspensions and expulsions in your community?
- a. Yes
- b. No

19. If YES to #18: Please provide your best contact information to get more information about how to be involved:
- a. Name:
- b. Phone number:
- c. Email address:

20. We would like to speak to parents who experienced suspensions or expulsions to hear more details about their experience. Would you be willing to talk with a member of the research team about participating in an individual interview?
- a. Yes
- b. No

21. If YES to #20: Please provide your contact information if you would like to be contacted about an individual interview:
- a. Name:
- b. Phone number:
- c. Email address:

Introduction: We really appreciate you taking the time to talk with us. We are conducting this interview to learn more about your experiences related to child behavior and discipline in preschool settings. The interview should only take 45 to 60 minutes.

We would like to record this interview to ensure that we accurately capture your responses. We will not collect any personal information, so your identity will be protected and your responses will remain completely confidential. Once we have completed reviewing the interviews, we will delete the audio recordings. Your participation is voluntary; if you feel uncomfortable answering any of the interview questions, you can choose not to respond. Do we have your permission to record the interview?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Introduction

- Tell me more about the program or center you work in? How many children are there?
- What is it like being a preschool teacher/director?
- What is your favorite part of the job?
- What keeps you motivated to do this work?

Perceptions About Preschool Behavior and Discipline

- Take a moment to think about the types of behavior concerns you have observed in preschool settings. Please describe what comes to mind? What types of challenging child behaviors have you observed in your experience?

- Can you think of a time that discipline went well and did not go well, what were the differences?

- Next, what is the typical disciplinary response to these behavior concerns?

    o [Possible Probe] What tools do teachers have? Are they effective?

    o [Possible Probe] What other resources would you need to address behavior problems more effectively?

    o [Possible Probe] Does your program have a specific behavior policy? How is it implemented?

    o [Possible Probe] What are some of the factors you must consider when taking disciplinary action on a child, such as suspension or expulsion?

- Have you noticed any changes over time in your experience in the types of behavior and discipline policies used in early care and education settings?

    o [Possible Probe] If changes noted, what prompted these changes?

Perceptions About Racial and Gender Differences

- Some research suggests that Black children, especially Black boys, are more likely to receive exclusionary discipline, such as suspensions and expulsions in preschool. Is this something you have observed in your career?

    o [Possible Probe] If yes, what do you think are the root causes of these racial and gender differences? Have there been any changes over time?

- Do you consider implicit bias by teachers, administrators, and other staff to be a potential contributor of early childhood expulsion and suspension? If yes, how does implicit bias affect early childhood disciplinary practices.
  - o [Possible Probe] If no, what is this research missing?

- In what ways are you already working with families on these issues?

- ·If we wanted to reduce differences in disciplinary responses by race and gender, what changes would we need to make in policy and practice?

  - o [Possible Probe] How can childcare providers work with families to help prevent expulsion and suspension?
  - o [Possible Probe] What can childcare providers do to prevent expulsion and suspension?

Closing Comments

- Is there anything else you would like to say that we haven't talked about?

Thank you again for participating in this interview!

Introduction: We really appreciate you taking the time to talk with us. We are conducting this interview to learn more about your experiences related to child's preschool experience. The interview should only take 45 to 60 minutes.

We would like to record this interview to ensure that we accurately capture your responses. We will not collect any personal information, so your identity will be protected and your responses will remain completely confidential. Once we have completed reviewing the interviews, we will delete the audio recordings. Your participation is voluntary; if you feel uncomfortable answering any of the interview questions, you can choose not to respond. Do we have your permission to record the interview?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Perceptions About Child's Preschool

- To begin, I would like to start by asking you a few questions about your child's preschool.

    o How did you first hear about your child's preschool?

    o Why did you in enroll your child in this specific preschool?

    o What do you like most about your child's preschool?

    o What do you like the least about your child's preschool?

    o How would you describe your child's preschool to friends or family with preschool-age children?

    o [Possible Probe] What were you initially told about the discipline process at your child's preschool?

Perceptions About Your Child's Personality and Preschool Discipline

- Now, I'd like to hear about your child's disciplinary experiences in preschool. Before doing so, however, I'm interested in learning a little about your child.

    o How would you describe your child's personality?
    - [Probe] Please describe your child's strengths.

    o How does your child's preschool identify and develop your child's strengths?

    o Please describe the discipline policy at your child's preschool. How do you feel about it?

    o From start to finish, please tell me the story about a time when your child was disciplined in preschool. What happened?

    - [Probe] How did that experience make you feel?
    - [Probe] How did it affect your child?
    - [Probe] What did your child say about how he/she/they felt?
    - [Probe] Did you feel like you "had a voice" or had input during the discipline process? Why or why not?

Perceptions About Prevention Measures

- Take a moment to think about your child's experiences in preschool. What actions were taken to change behavior before the expulsion/suspension?

- o [Possible Probe] What do you see as your "role" in the process?
- o [Possible Probe] Do you feel like you "have a voice," or have input, in the behavior modification process? Why or why not?

- Are you aware of any resources available in your community to support children with behavioral concerns in preschool?
- Do you feel like staff understand the needs of your family? Why or why not?

- o [Possible Probe] Does your child understand the discipline practices at his/her/their preschool?

Closing Comments

- Is there anything else you would like to say that we haven't asked about?

Thank you again for participating in this interview!