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*Logic will get you from  
A to B. Imagination will  
take you everywhere.*

—Albert Einstein

## NCOSEA Voice

### *Striking a Balance in Early Childhood Discipline*

Recently, a five-year-old kindergarten student was suspended for three days after he told his teacher that he had a bomb in his backpack, though there was no bomb. A four-year-old was suspended for seven days for bringing an empty shell casing to school and for having regularly turned toys into imaginary guns. A seven-year-old was suspended for two days for biting his Pop-Tart into a gun shape and pretending to shoot his classmates. Such applications of zero tolerance policies prompted Florida law makers to pass a “Pop-Tart law” to limit zero tolerance at schools, including discipline for “brandishing partially consumed pastry or other food to simulate a firearm or weapon” [Florida Code § 1006.07(2)(g)].

Under *Goss v. Lopez*, administrators may use exclusionary discipline, but parents of children in publicly funded early childhood programs, as well as those in K-12, are constitutionally entitled to notice and opportunity to be heard before schools expel or remove students for more than 10 days. Students with disabilities are also entitled to protections under federal law when they are removed from classrooms for disciplinary reasons.

Three key factors increase the likelihood of expulsions and suspensions for young children: lack of positive relationships among educators, families, and children; misguided or missing policies, such as zero tolerance policies applied to young children; and insufficient training and support for staff in promoting social-emotional development and managing challenging behavior.

Educators, medical professionals, and civil rights advocates have begun to track exclusionary discipline in early childhood settings, including “push-outs,” “soft” suspensions, and calls home to pick up a child who is “having a bad day.” Preschool

children are being excluded at a rate nearly three times that of K-12 children,<sup>1</sup> with serious detrimental effects:

- impedes the development of positive relationships;
- disrupts learning;
- has unintended undesirable effects that fail to reduce or eliminate targeted behaviors;
- interferes with addressing underlying issues such as disabilities or mental health needs; and
- increases stress on the family, who must find alternate services, often without assistance.<sup>2</sup>

Early childhood programs must balance protecting children with providing effective responses to problem behaviors. Expulsion and suspension should be a last resort—when there is a serious safety concern that cannot be reduced or eliminated with reasonable, age-appropriate modifications. State board members should consider statewide best practices to reduce exclusionary discipline in early childhood settings.<sup>3</sup> The Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports framework, for example, emphasizes a proactive, teaching approach rather than punitive responses. Such frameworks can help achieve a rich learning environment inclusive of all students. ■

<sup>1</sup>Walter S. Gilliam, “Prekindergarteners Left Behind: Expulsion Rates in State Prekindergarten Programs,” *FCD Policy Brief Series* no. 3 (New York: Foundation for Child Development, May 2005).

<sup>2</sup>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,” [www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ece/expulsion\\_suspension\\_final.pdf](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ece/expulsion_suspension_final.pdf) - 102k - 2014-12-10.

<sup>3</sup>Lori Connors-Tadros and Jessica Hammond, “Information and Resources to Assist States in Developing Policy on Early Childhood Suspension and Expulsion,” *CEELO Policy Report* (New Brunswick, NJ: Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes, May 2017).