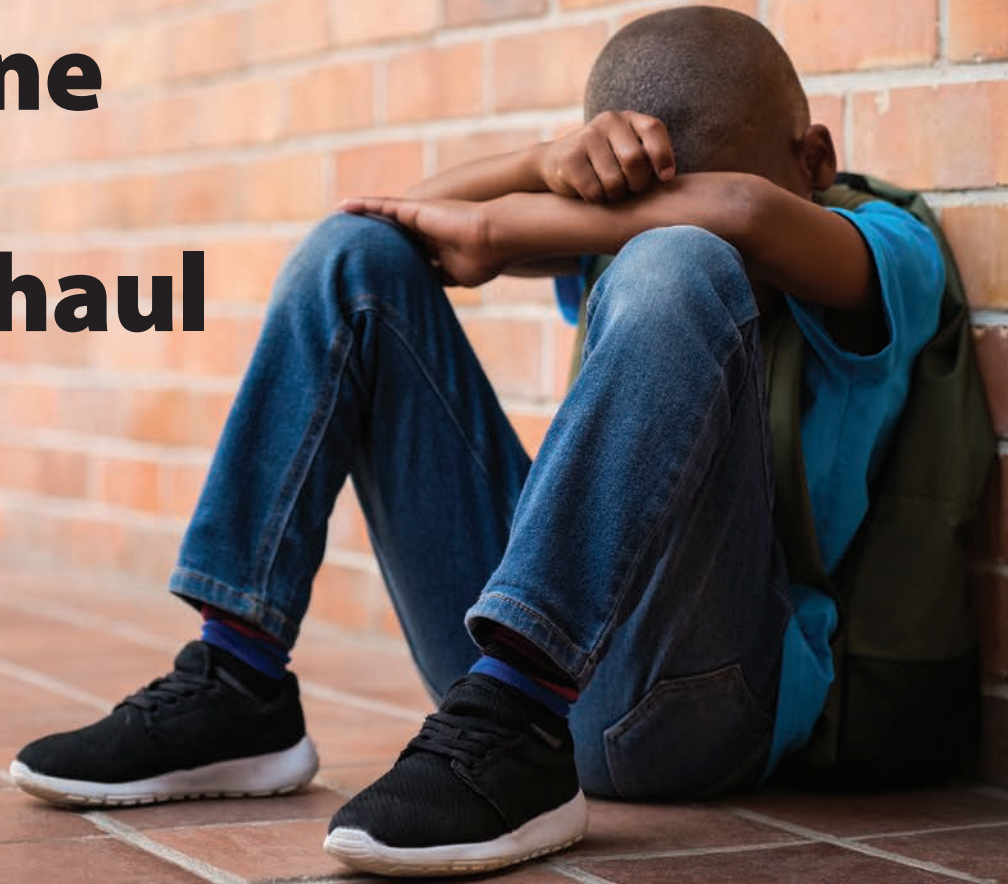


Discipline needs an overhaul

BETTER SUPPORT FOR EDUCATORS CAN CHANGE DEEPLY FLAWED PRACTICES



BY ABBIE LIEBERMAN

Picture a 6-year-old child sobbing and pleading to stay at school while a police officer escorts her through the building and puts her into the back of his police car. That's what a disturbing and heart-wrenching body camera video showed last February (it went viral): a young Black girl, Kaia Rolle, being handcuffed with zip ties by a school resource officer in Orlando, Florida (Toohey, 2020).

Kaia was arrested for reportedly throwing a tantrum earlier in the day that resulted in her kicking a staff member. In the video, Kaia does not appear to be posing an immediate threat to anyone when the officer enters the room to arrest her; she's sitting calmly in a school employee's office.

This isn't the first video or story of its kind to have surfaced in recent years. Because of the increasingly widespread availability of police body camera footage and smartphone videos, we have seen just how inappropriately children can be disciplined in schools. And it's no coincidence that most of these stories and videos are of Black children. While traumatic moments like Kaia's only occasionally make headlines, the data show that the way we discipline young children, and children of color in particular, is a nationwide problem.

INEQUITY IN DISCIPLINE PRACTICES

Across public and private settings, about 250 preschoolers are suspended or expelled each day, according to a

Center for American Progress analysis of the 2016 National Survey of Children's Health (Malik, 2017). A 2016 joint statement drafted by the National Association for the Education of Young Children and over 30 other national organizations estimated that more than 8,700 3- and 4-year-old children are expelled or pushed out of their state-funded pre-K programs each year. There are serious problems with the way we discipline students across grade levels, but a 2005 study estimated that pre-K students are three times more likely to be expelled than K-12 students (Gilliam, 2005).

The U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection has exposed serious inequities in exclusionary discipline

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practices. Certain subgroups, particularly Black children, boys, and children with disabilities, are disproportionately impacted. In 2012, Black children made up 18% of pre-K enrollment but 48% of the pre-K children who were suspended more than once (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). And while boys are more likely to be suspended than girls, racial disparities in punishment are more pronounced for Black girls than Black boys (Crenshaw et al., 2015). These racial disparities exist in every single state (Children’s Equity Project & Bipartisan Policy Center, 2020).

Exclusionary discipline isn’t always a dramatic scene of a school resource officer violently removing a student from the classroom. It’s more often an administrator sitting down with parents and explaining why their child cannot come back to school for a few days. Or sometimes it’s in the form of “soft suspensions,” which may look like a parent being asked to come pick up a child early because he or she is “having a tough day” or an administrator explaining that the program “isn’t a great fit” for the child. These less formal disciplinary actions are likely not even included in the data.

The research is clear that exclusionary discipline practices in the early grades are both ineffective and developmentally inappropriate. Sometimes young children are punished for behavior that is developmentally normal. Other times they are acting out because they are dealing with trauma outside of school.

Disparities may be partially explained by implicit bias. In 2016, the Yale Child Study Center looked at whether early educators’ implicit biases impacted their behavioral expectations for pre-K students. Using eye-tracking technology, they found that teachers tended to expect Black children, particularly boys, to misbehave more (Gilliam, Maupin, Reyes, Accavitti, & Shic 2016).

Our discipline system is broken, and the stakes are high. When children are removed from school, they not only miss out on valuable learning opportunities, but their emotional well-being may suffer and school might no longer feel like a safe place. These experiences, such as Kaia’s, can be traumatic.

In 2016, the Obama administration released a policy statement that said, “Young students who are expelled or suspended are as much as 10 times more likely to drop out of high school, experience academic failure and grade retention, hold negative school attitudes, and face incarceration than those who are not” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Exclusionary discipline in pre-K and the early grades is often viewed as the first step in the school-to-prison pipeline.

CHANGING POLICIES AND PRACTICES

The good news is that policies and practices that respond and intervene appropriately can help ameliorate or prevent both inappropriate discipline

practices and severe behavior problems.

Policy makers at the state and district level have taken action to limit exclusionary discipline in recent years. According to the Education Commission of the States, 16 states and Washington, D.C., now limit or ban the use of exclusionary discipline practices in pre-K and the early grades (Rafa, 2019). At the federal level, the 2016 update of the Head Start Performance Standards officially banned expulsion and severely limited suspension, which was already common practice in Head Start but had not been codified.

Prohibiting suspension and expulsion in early education classrooms is a good starting point, but policies must go further. Educators need knowledge, tools, and supports to handle difficult situations and best serve students. Real change has to happen within schools and will take time. So what supports are being put in place to assist educators and administrators in replacing exclusionary practices with more developmentally appropriate strategies?

Based on our research at New America so far, there are five primary strategies leaders are using to address inappropriate discipline practices: early childhood mental health consultations, professional learning to address biases, strengthening relationships with families, training on social-emotional learning and trauma-informed practice, and staffing policies.

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Early childhood mental health

consultants are trained to manage challenging behaviors and equip teachers to do the same. Research suggests that having access to an early childhood mental health specialist can reduce suspensions and expulsions by half (Gilliam, 2005). Unfortunately, most teachers do not have access to these specialists, and children of color are less likely than their white peers to have access to them or to school counselors (Gilliam, 2005). The Obama administration recommended that states take steps to ensure that all programs serving young children have access to mental health consultants (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Connecticut is often held up as an exemplar of how to curb suspension and expulsion due to its focus on early childhood mental health consultation. In 2015, the state passed a detailed law not just banning suspension and expulsion in pre-K through 2nd grade, but also providing supports to districts and relevant agencies (State of Connecticut, 2015).

Almost 20 years ago, the state began funding the Early Childhood Consultation Partnership pilot program. The program's "About Us" statement on its website explains that it "provides early childhood mental health promotion, prevention and intervention services to children who are at risk of suspension/expulsion from early care and education settings due to behavioral and mental health concerns" (Early Childhood Consultation Partnership, n.d.).

The Connecticut Department of Children and Families runs the program, and all early childhood programs serving children birth to age 5 can participate. The program serves any teacher or child care provider who is having trouble with a disruptive child. A randomized, controlled evaluation found that teachers reported significantly fewer problem behaviors for children who received intervention from the Early Childhood Consultation

Partnership (Gilliam, Maupin, & Reyes, 2016).

Additional research on early childhood mental health consultation suggests that more access to these specialists is associated with reduced teacher turnover and higher program quality (Brennan et al., 2008).

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

There are multiple ways that districts and schools are addressing inappropriate discipline practices through professional learning. Addressing implicit bias and building capacity for culturally responsive teaching may be good places to start. By working to understand and overcome biases, teachers and administrators could lessen racial and gender disparities in exclusionary discipline practices.

Efforts to strengthen relationships with families can also be effective. Improving communication can help educators understand what children are dealing with at home, giving context to their behaviors. When teachers and parents have positive relationships, they can work together to support the child's needs.

A study of Head Start programs found that more home-school collaboration and parental involvement was associated with less harsh child discipline by parents and better school behaviors (Ansari & Gershoff, 2016).

It is also important to ensure that educators understand social-emotional development and implement trauma-informed practices. Children displaying challenging behaviors in the classroom are often channeling trauma or stress they are experiencing in other aspects of their lives.

One national survey found that only 20% of early childhood educators engaged in professional learning about social-emotional development (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, 2016). It's likely that even fewer teachers have learned how to implement trauma-informed practices.

Equipping teachers to identify and address trauma is especially relevant now as the pandemic and current recession have added new challenges for many children, from social isolation to economic stress to loss of loved ones. This is especially true for children of color, whose families have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19.

Several years ago, with philanthropic support, Oakland Unified School District and the City of Oakland Head Start partnered to participate in a pilot program in trauma-informed classroom practices for pre-K teachers, as they were struggling with managing children's behaviors. Now termed the ROCK (Resilient Oakland Communities & Kids) initiative, this work could serve as an example for others interested in this approach.

Oakland pre-K teachers are learning how to respond to children's behavior that is related to traumatic experiences, which includes understanding their emotional development and how to create a healing environment, as well as the roles of race, implicit bias, and culturally responsive teaching (Jackson, 2019).

STAFF HIRING AND SUPPORT

Staffing decisions also matter. Pre-K programs with larger student-teacher ratios are associated with higher instances of expulsion (Gilliam, 2008). Adding a paraprofessional to the classroom so that there is another skilled adult who knows each child can help.

One longer-term strategy to address inequities in discipline practices may be increasing teacher diversity to better reflect the student body. A study of North Carolina elementary schools found that Black students, Black boys in particular, were less likely to be suspended or expelled when they had Black teachers (Lindsey & Hart, 2016).

Teacher stress and depression are also positively correlated with pre-K expulsion (Gilliam, 2008). Policies

that support teacher well-being, such as higher compensation and paid planning time, can set staff members up to manage stressful situations more skillfully.

SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE SCHOOLS

Early childhood educators want to do what is best for children; they just need the right tools to support them. True change requires equipping teachers and school leaders with better resources and building their capacity to support children in positive and proactive ways. Thoughtfully designed policies and careful implementation can make this a reality.

As districts move to reopen schools and educators think about how to best serve children after a difficult year, school discipline reform should be part of the conversation. It has arguably never been more important that teachers and school leaders understand what children are going through and how to support them so that school can be a safe place where they can thrive.

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