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Critical Issues in Child Care: Social and Emotional Support

Child care is essential for parents to engage in work, training, or education to support themselves and their families. High-quality child care is proven to close gaps in early learning by helping young children develop the skills they need to interact with others and learn basic literacy and numeracy later on. But what happens to families, to providers, and to our state when a child care arrangement is upset due to a child's behavioral issues that their provider isn't equipped to address, resulting in the child and family being asked to leave that care?

Our development is influenced by the kinds of experiences we have. From birth, children are learning to understand and manage emotions, build positive relationships, and learn from their environment, and in response to the growing pains of learning all this, young children tend to "act out". Sometimes, children experience toxic stress, which triggers the release of hormones that stall the growth of new connections in their brains, and without adult support and resources, these moments of stress can lead to more severe social, emotional, and behavioral issues later on. When children "act out", it takes training and capacity to be able to identify their needs and work out the situation. In early childhood education and care settings, when providers lack the support they need to accomplish this, they experience significant stress, and may expel children from their care in desperation. In 2017-18, over 1400 young Michigan children were reported as having been [expelled](#) from child care or preschool, and studies suggest there is disproportionate representation from children of color and boys.

A child care expulsion throws families into a very stressful situation by creating a sudden and critical need for care, which upends work or school schedules. When child care is disrupted often or for long periods of time, it can cost employers hours of lost productivity and causes major problems that could prevent parents from being able to fully provide for their families.

Disruptions in their care environment are difficult for all children, but for some, they are even more problematic. For children who have experienced the trauma that goes with removal from their own homes into the foster care system, these disruptions are extremely difficult, often making existing behavioral concerns worse. For foster families, when finding a child care provider who will accept their child becomes impossible due to behavioral issues, they may need to give up their fostering arrangement, further upsetting the child's stability and placing more strain on the foster care system. For families whose children are experiencing a developmental delay or other early mental health concerns, it is a missed opportunity to be connected with services that can support both the caregivers and the child that could prevent future need for costly special education or other behavioral services.

Child care expulsions also hurt child care providers. When a provider expels a child, it means not only a lost opportunity to care but also a lost revenue stream. Workforce studies show that the stress from difficult behavioral situations leads to high professional burn-out and turnover. When a provider decides to call it quits after too many highly stressful events without appropriate support, it shrinks the already small pool of child care providers that parents can access, undermining trust in our state's child care system. The child care profession itself also faces increased costs that come with turnover.

Social and Emotional Supports Improve Early Childhood Outcomes

Fortunately, Michigan has been a leader in recognizing both the challenges that child care providers face with difficult behavior and developing solutions to those challenges. The Michigan Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation program (IECMHC) offers a proven solution, pairing mental and behavioral health specialists with early childhood providers and families, offering training and support to everyone involved to better address social, emotional, and behavioral concerns and to support the healthy development of children in their care at home and in the child care setting.

IECMHC is based on Michigan's widely-regarded Child Care Expulsion Prevention (CCEP) model, which was found to improve young children's development, retain child care providers by improving their capacity and decreasing their own stress, decrease expulsion rates, and improve the overall quality of care for children. Parents benefited too, missing fewer work days and reporting feeling more empowered and able to deal with difficult situations at home in more effective ways. Because consultants are able to identify needed services for the child and their family, the model has been found to decrease need for future special education, and by promoting more stable families and supporting youth behavioral development, the model will contribute to fewer future situations with juvenile justice or child welfare down the road. Early investment in a child's social, emotional and mental health will decrease their need for future services and reduce provider turnover, presenting significant cost savings to the state and to taxpayers. According to evaluations, every dollar spent on IECMHC will reduce state spending on other related programs by \$7.14.

What Can Be Done?

We know that social, emotional, and behavioral supports for infants and toddlers provided through IECMHC work for the children themselves, for families, for providers, and for the public interest. Currently, however, access to this program is limited to just 18 counties across Michigan served by 13 consultants, not nearly enough to support all child care providers who need them, a significant inequity. IECMHC must be expanded statewide from its current status as a pilot project. Expanding access to consultants across the state is estimated to cost a total of \$6.9 million. Additional resources would then be needed to provide necessary services to children, families and providers that would be identified by these consultants, for example for referrals to *Early On Michigan*, a universally accessible program that provides families with in-home support to address developmental delays.

Expanding the program statewide is a worthy investment that will return significant value to taxpayers and to the state by improving family child care experiences; improving the skills and morale of both early childhood professionals and of parents; supporting the social, emotional, and behavioral health of young children; and helping grow our state's workforce.