

Michigan programs aim to prevent preschool expulsions, reducing lifelong harmful effects

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Some early childhood professionals use the term "preschool to prison pipeline" to describe the way preschool and daycare expulsions and suspensions rock children's lives.



Doug Coombe

Katherine Rosenblum, co-director of the University of Michigan's Zero to Thrive program.

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"Preschool to prison pipeline."

That's how some Michigan early childhood professionals refer to the way preschool and daycare expulsions and suspensions rock children's lives, not to mention the lives of their parents.

"This is way more common than most people realize. It's incredibly common for young children, three- and four-year-olds, to be expelled and suspended from child care," says Maddie Elliott, policy and programs associate for Michigan's Children, a Lansing-based advocacy organization. "Kids in daycare are 13 times more likely to be expelled than kids in K-12 schools."



Maddie Elliott.

The mental health trauma of experiencing expulsion at such a young age can impact children throughout school and beyond. These kids quickly conjure images of themselves as being "bad," as failures in the school setting, and as "less than" their peers.

"When a child is expelled at such a young age, it really gives them a bad first encounter with education in general," Elliott says. "It can also lead to kids stigmatizing themselves or thinking of themselves as bad students. That can really set them up for failure and not having a positive relationship with teachers in the future."

Even more troubling, preschools and daycare centers are most likely to expel little Black boys. A U.S. Department of Education study shows that Black children are 3.6 times more likely to be expelled in preschool than their white peers. And bad behavior may not be the reason. Teachers, caregivers, and peers often have subconscious biases that lead to more suspensions and expulsions for boys of color.

"We live in a society that holds white supremacist and anti-Black views. These are embedded for all of us from very early on. None of us are immune. We know from research that even really young children make different attributions between race and perceived threats of aggression," says Katherine Rosenblum, co-director of the University of Michigan's Zero to Thrive program. "We also know that adults are more likely to perceive Black children as less innocent and more culpable. And they tend to perceive Black children as older than they are."

Zero to Thrive's Infant and Early Childhood Clinic provides state-of-the-art assessment, support, and therapeutic intervention services to infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and their families, recognizing that the period from pregnancy through early childhood is an especially sensitive time for mitigating multi-generational effects of inequity, trauma, and adversity and promoting mental health. Washtenaw County children who have been expelled from daycare

centers and preschools have found help in the program.



Katherine Rosenblum.

"Sometimes these children are young Black boys who are tall. Their parents will say, 'You know, they have really unrealistic expectations for my child just because he is taller, bigger than average,'" Rosenblum says. "That implicit bias perceives Black boys as more of a threat, more aggressive, especially if they look older than they are, all of which contributes to perceiving behavior differently. If we see the behavior as aggressive, we are less likely to be thinking about what it is that this child needs."

When daycare centers or preschools expel children, whole families suffer the consequences. If parents don't have anyone to watch young children, they can't go to work. And if they don't work, they may be unable to pay bills.

"Being expelled from these settings can change the whole trajectory of that family," Elliott says. "They might not be able to find another child care option. It really impacts a lot of things."

The superficial causes of daycare center and preschool expulsions are physical behaviors like hitting, kicking, biting, yelling, or throwing tantrums. However, Elliott maintains that in children this young, these behaviors are how kids communicate their unmet needs. The

COVID-19 pandemic has put a huge strain on young families. Many young Michiganders have lost more than one grandparent, aunt, uncle, or even a parent or sibling to COVID. And for many Michigan families, substance use disorder has become the hidden pandemic within the pandemic. When young families fall into dysfunction, children suffer the consequences.

"If we're not able to help these kids when they're really young, then it could lead to more extreme behaviors and to them getting in trouble in the future, even getting in trouble with the law," Elliott says. "It's really important to intervene with these children when they're young and to get them the resources that they need early."

Michigan programs help kids manage behavior

Zero to Thrive is not alone in its mission to help the littlest Michiganders succeed socially and academically. With support from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS), Michigan's Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC) pairs mental health professionals with early care and education providers and families to develop children's social, emotional, and behavioral health from birth through age 5. This evidence-based model aims to increase children's mental health and decrease suspensions and expulsions from daycare and preschools. IECMHC currently works in 18 Michigan counties: Alger, Delta, Dickinson, Genesee, Huron, Kalamazoo, Lapeer, Macomb, Marquette, Menominee, Muskegon, Oakland, Saginaw, Sanilac, Schoolcraft, St. Clair, Tuscola, and Wayne.

"They do an awesome job with helping child care teachers deal with challenging behaviors in the classroom," Elliott says. "These mental health consultants are able to not only impact the one child who might be at risk of expulsion. They can also help all children by teaching the child care teachers how to better foster social-emotional learning."

IECMHC reports that the children it serves have not only had fewer instances of challenging behavior, but their parents missed fewer days of work and experienced less stress. Evaluations of programs like IECMHC found that daycare and preschool providers managed all children's behavior more effectively, and experienced reduced stress and turnover.

In Wayne, Oakland, Macomb, Monroe, Washtenaw, St. Clair, and Livingston counties, the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation-funded Positive Emotional Development and Learning Skills (PEDALS) Michigan program works specifically to reduce daycare and preschool expulsions. Based on a model developed in New York in 2012, PEDALS is in more than 160 early childhood classrooms across Southeast Michigan, with plans to add 100 new classrooms per year for the next three years.



Kamilah Henderson.

"We are all about reducing challenging behaviors that are the precursor to preschool expulsions," says PEDALS Director Kamilah Henderson. "Over the course of each school year, when we look at where the children are at the beginning of the school year and where they are at the close of the school year, we see a reduction in challenging behaviors in every classroom."

PEDALS coaches mentor early childhood teachers in how to develop social-emotional learning skills among their students so they can teach children how to listen, pay attention, manage their own behaviors, and get along with others.

"These are things we need across the lifespan, those executive functioning skills and inhibitory controls that make the preschool classroom a place of calm and learning," Henderson says. "The children can have a joyful time and the teacher can have a joyful time. When we see high levels of challenging behaviors, there's something that needs to happen at the classroom level. Or sometimes there are specific children that need more intervention and support. We move quickly to intervene, support the teacher, and build those SEL skills so there isn't an expulsion."

The ultimate goal of PEDALS, Zero to Thrive, and IECMHC is to prepare children to be happy, healthy learners who succeed academically, build healthy relationships with peers, and ultimately take their place in their communities as mentally healthy adults.

"The children who we see being expelled in preschool tend to be the children who have to repeat grades in elementary school, drop out of high school, and have other negative outcomes that are of great concern for our communities," Henderson says. "We want every child to be self-aware, to know how to notice and name an emotion, to manage their bodies and their

behavior — and to be aware of their friends around them. We want them to go into kindergarten with these skills, so they're ready to learn and have fun with friends."

Estelle Sloodmaker is a working writer focusing on journalism, book editing, communications, poetry, and children's books. You can contact her at Estelle.Sloodmaker@gmail.com or www.constellations.biz.

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