Center of Excellence Equity Statement

Equity is central to the CoE's mission and values. As defined in the companion equity glossary in the [Promoting Equity and Reducing Disparities section](#) of the toolbox, *equity* is the quality of being fair, unbiased, and just. In this way, equity means that *all* young children and their families should have access to the resources and opportunities they need to reach their full, healthy potential. To achieve this goal, program administrators and policymakers need to be aware of and understand potential disparities in access to care and outcomes, and to then address these disparities through evidence-based strategies.

The CoE works to promote equity and reduce disparities based on race, ethnicity, language, gender, culture, and socioeconomic status. Recognizing the central role that race has played historically in contributing to persistent inequities, the CoE is committed to confronting and addressing all forms of racism, particularly institutional and structural, and integrating a racial equity lens into all aspects of the Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC) Toolbox.[1]

Why Focus on Equity in a Toolbox on IECMHC?

IECMHC can and should be a vehicle for attaining greater equity in access and outcomes for all young children. Mental health consultants work to address the impact of racism, sexism, and classism throughout their work with teachers, home visitors, and families. By partnering with adults who care for children and providing them with a safe place to gain more self-awareness, IECMH consultants can help bring about changes in those adults' beliefs and attitudes when biases are present, which in turn may lead to behavior change. Working in tribal communities, mental health consultants can help early childhood providers and families address the impacts of historical trauma that may impede the healthy social and emotional development of young children.

The process of IECMHC builds the capacity of early childhood professionals to reflect on their own experiences, biases, and fears—and to then move beyond them to see each young child as an individual within a unique family and community context.

The Power of Data to Raise Awareness About Inequity

Data often provide an opportunity to raise awareness about disparities that exist in access and outcomes for very young children, and can drive policymaking to reduce these inequities.

Recently, the public has been made aware of the "30 Million Word Gap"—a small but important study documenting differences in the average number of words that low-income children hear in their homes, compared to their wealthier peers, by the age of 3.[2] These data have served as a call to arms for the early childhood community—galvanizing new strategies to support parents in talking more with their infants and toddlers.[3] This study highlighted the inequities that exist between children in different socioeconomic groups.

Another landmark study from 2005, focusing on rates of expulsion from state-funded pre-kindergarten (pre-K) programs, raised the nation's awareness of gender and racial disparities.[4] This study found that preschoolers

were being expelled at a rate of 6.7 per 1,000—more than three times the rates for children enrolled in K–12 programs. Just as importantly, boys and African American children were being expelled at much higher rates than their peers. Specifically, boys were expelled at more than four times the rate of girls, and African American children were twice as likely to be expelled as white and Latino children.

The case for greater adoption and use of IECMHC came from a less-publicized but important finding from that same pre-K study: teachers who reported onsite access to mental health consultation expelled children at roughly half the rate of teachers without such access.[1] Along with the data on disproportionate expulsion of preschool children based on race and gender, this served as a catalyst for many states and communities to initiate and/or expand their IECMCHC programs.

Continued Disproportionality in Out-of-School Discipline

After the publication of state-level data on preschool expulsion in 2005, policymakers began to collect and report these data to the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR). A 2014 OCR report underscored that little had changed: more than 5,000 preschoolers were suspended at least once during the 2011–12 school year, with African American boys continuing to be at disproportionate risk for out-of-school discipline (i.e., suspension and expulsion). The report also documented ongoing gender disparities in the use of out-of-school discipline for children in public preschool programs.[5]

♦ Children of color are suspended and expelled more often than white children and are more harshly disciplined for the same behaviors exhibited by their white peers.[6,7,8]

♦ Black children represent 18% of preschool enrollment but 48% of preschool children receiving more than one out-of-school suspension; in comparison, white students represent 43% of preschool enrollment but 26% of preschool children receiving more than one out-of-school suspension.[9]

♦ Boys represent 79% of preschool children suspended once and 82% of preschool children suspended multiple times, although they represent only 54% of preschool enrollment.

♦ While boys receive more than two out of three suspensions, black girls are suspended at higher rates (12%) than girls of any other race or ethnicity and most boys.[4]

There is growing evidence that suspensions and expulsions are reduced when IECMHC is implemented. These data underscore the continued need for more states and tribal communities to expand their IECMHC programs, moving beyond school-based settings to include home visiting and other early childhood programs that support children and families. IECMHC can help advance movement in the field through collecting data on disparities and on expulsion and suspension, in order to promote progress toward use of more effective short- and long-term approaches to addressing children's behavior.

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Inequity in Access Is Linked to Disparities in Outcomes

The data on disparities in preschool programs underscore a longer-term problem faced by many young children at higher risk for expulsion: expulsion disrupts children's continuity within their educational programs and can further undermine their social, emotional, and relational development.[10] These young children's mental health needs might have been addressed if their teachers were able to get support from a mental health consultant. Educators and child health experts agree that early expulsion is one indicator of problems that can set children on a negative trajectory.

Children with early inequities are at higher risk for a cascade of other negative outcomes, including higher dropout rates, less economic productivity and security, and an increased risk for involvement with the juvenile and criminal justice systems and adult incarceration.[11,12,13,14] Data on the ongoing racial and gender disproportionality of preschool expulsions have led child and social justice advocates to start talking about the "preschool to prison pipeline."[15]

IECMHC: A Promising Strategy for Promoting Equity

Preschool expulsion data are important because they are a well-measured indicator of the inequality experienced by young children of color and boys, the root causes of which are complex. Often, unmet mental health needs, including trauma, exposure to lead, and other unaddressed environmental factors, are more evident in children affected by these exclusionary discipline measures.[16]

Another possible explanation for the disproportionality seen in preschool expulsions may be adults' *implicit bias*—the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. Unconscious biases, which are held by everyone, may lead teachers to "see" behaviors exhibited by particular children—behaviors that make sense in their world outside of a school setting—as more violent, disruptive, or otherwise challenging than similar behaviors exhibited by other children.[16]

Efforts to address the disproportionality in preschool expulsions will require action on many fronts. The federal government has recently initiated a number of efforts to address health disparities—including behavioral health disparities.

♦   The passage of the Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act of 2010 established a new National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities and supports widespread efforts through Healthy People 2020 to close the gap in the range of health outcomes.[17]

♦   In 2014, the Departments of Health and Human Services and Education issued a joint policy statement on expulsion and suspension in early childhood settings, aiming to prevent, severely limit, and work toward eventually eliminating the expulsion and suspension—and ensuring the safety and well-being—of *all* young children in early learning settings.[11]

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Since the publication of the first preschool expulsion study, the link between IECMHC and lower rates of expulsion has been replicated in many studies.[18,19] Therefore, one strategy to reduce the impact of implicit bias is to increase access to IECMHC. At its core, IECMHC is meant to create fundamental shifts in early childhood professionals' beliefs, attitudes, and practices to support more effective caregiving. Through the practice of IECMHC, mental health consultants cultivate a reflective perspective with early childhood educators, at the same time employing their therapeutic skills to develop trusting relationships. This partnership creates a safe space for teachers to do some self-discovery about their feelings and thoughts about a child at risk for expulsion.

In particular, IECMH consultants:

♦ Ask reflective questions and cultivate a deeper appreciation for the teacher's thoughts and feelings, past experiences, and current life circumstances

♦ Support teachers and administrators in being more curious about the meaning of individual children's behaviors—working to dispel myths and stereotypes as they emerge

♦ Increase early childhood professionals' capacity to reflect on their own biases and how their past experiences and preconceived ideas about race, class, and gender affect how they interact with children

♦ Build early childhood professionals' ability to reflect on developmentally appropriate expectations for young children, and then apply these expectations to individual children whose behavior they find challenging

♦ Bridge gaps in understanding of and communication between early childhood professionals and the parents of children with challenging behaviors

The CoE's primary goal is to increase the availability of high-quality IEMCHC to more early childhood programs. Ensuring that this work is focused on reducing disparities in access and outcomes for young children who are at disproportionate risk for failure is central to this mission.

Endnotes

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