REDUCING EARLY CHILDHOOD EXCLUSIONARY PRACTICES (RECEP)

An initiative to increase equity and inclusion in Alaska early education settings.

Thank you.

A note from the workgroup

The work of reducing exclusionary practices like suspension and expulsion in early childhood (EC) is to create a comprehensive system of supports for the EC workforce in Alaska. EC educators need access to specialized consultation, on-going professional development, evidence-based tools and reflective supervision or coaching, in a supportive and sustainable work environment.

Exclusionary practices disrupt access to high quality learning settings for children and families and to early childhood educators with whom children develop close relationships, putting children at increased risk of negative mental health and academic impact. Success will look like a well-funded, aligned, and sustainable early childhood system, wherein

- EC educators are culturally competent, well versed in children's social emotional development, feel supported and confident, and work in programs that actively promote teacher well-being
- programs and service provider agencies collaborate and coordinate with one another, and actively partner with families and caregivers
- there is shared state level early childhood exclusionary practices policy and regulation across agencies and programs; and
- private and government funding is invested upstream,

resulting in increased child retention and fewer transitions, preservation of nurturing relationships, and better child outcomes.

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The contents of this paper reflect the opinions of the authors and may not represent the official views of the contributors' respective organizations.

EXPULSION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Expulsion is the act of permanently removing a child from their school, child-care or other education program. From the perspective of the education program, this may be an effective way to resolve a potential safety risk, but the consequences to young children can be devastating. In a recently released report, the Children's Equity Project includes expulsion (and suspension) on the list of harsh discipline practices, which also includes corporal punishment, seclusion and inappropriate use of restraints (Children's Equity Project & Bipartisan Policy Center, 2020). In this report, The Children's Equity Project and Bipartisan Policy Center present a new policy agenda to close opportunity gaps in early education and address the structural inequities that hold some children back, especially Black, Latinx, AlaskaNative and Native American children, and deny them equal opportunity to education, health and economic wellbeing.

When viewed in this context, expulsion takes children away from learning opportunities and, especially in early childhood, disrupts nurturing relationships that are critical for healthy social-emotional development. Because expulsion can have lifelong effects, it is simply not an appropriate practice in early childhood.

Expulsion also places a burden on families, who rely on quality early childhood programming in order to work and earn an income, especially single-parent households.

> *With a sigh of relief Martha got back in her car and headed to work. After her son, Josh, was expelled from his last childcare center, Martha had found a nice, small in-homechildcare program.   The provider greeted her with a smile during the interview and assured her that she was willing to work with Josh to make sure he had the best early childhood experience.*
>
> *Just a few days later the dreaded phone calls started again. "Martha, your son is out of control! I just can't keep him here. You need to come and pick him up." Josh struggled with communication and when he became frustrated, he resorted to hitting other children or destroying classroom materials. In less than a month, after consistent phone calls and being asked to pick Josh up early several times, Josh was asked to leave the program.Strike two. Martha was crushed. Was she going to be able to keep her job? Would she everfind the right childcare program for Josh? Where could she go for help?*

A nationwide survey of parents found that in a single year, around 50,000 children under five were suspended and 17,000 were expelled (Children's Equity Project & Bipartisan Policy Center, 2020). Other national data show that children under five are expelled from private and community childcare programs at 13 times the rate of students in K-12 education, and from state-funded preschool at three times the rate (Schachner et al. 2016). In Alaska, 15% of surveyed early childhood educators have expelled a child in the last school year (Raviant LLC, 2018; Raviant LLC, 2019). When looking at suspension, the numbers are even higher – nearly 40% had suspended one or more children for some part of the day or more in the past year.

As a result of these concerning trends and long-term effects, in 2014 the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services issued a joint statement calling for an end to suspension and expulsion practices in early learning settings (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

We are calling for an end to suspension and expulsion practices in early childhood education settings

Education has the potential to be one of the great equalizing forces in our society. In their position statement on advancing equity, the National Association for the Education of Young Children states: "All children have the right to equitable learning opportunities that help them achieve their full potential as engaged learners and valued members of society. Thus, all early childhood educators have a professional obligation to advance equity" (NAEYC, 2019). EC educators cannot accomplish this alone. They need support and ultimately it is up to all of us to make sure that each generation has an equitable start to life. This work is about ensuring that all Alaska children have access to high-quality EC education opportunities.

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Exclusionary Practices Defined

In-school suspensions: Practices that involve removing or excluding the child from the classroom.

Out-of-school suspensions: Practices that involve temporarily removing the child from the program.

Expulsions: Permanent removal or dismissal from the program.

Soft-expulsions: Practices that make it so that the program is not a viable or welcoming care arrangement for the family and leaves the family with little choice but to withdraw their child.

From Preventing Suspensions and Expulsions in Early Childhood Settings: An Administrator's Guide to Supporting All Children's Success (2016)
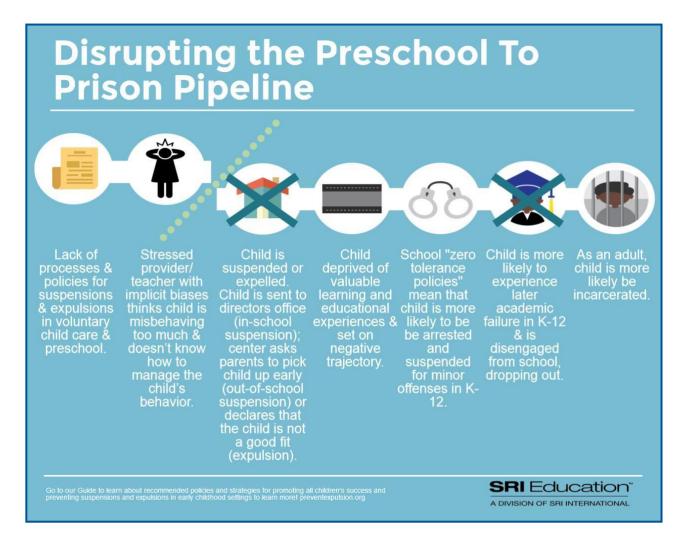
Note: Facilitated transfers from one program to the next, where a program assists a family in finding a new placement for their child with minimal or no interruption of continuity of care are not considered expulsion

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The Early Childhood Brain and the Impact of Exclusionary Practices

Between the ages of birth to three, the human brain creates one million new neural connections per second (Harvard Center on the Developing Child, 2009). Our early experiences significantly influence and establish the foundation for our long-term health and life-long development (National Resource Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000). The relationships that we form, as young children, with caregivers and peers in EC education programs, combined with regular exposure to enriched environments, are integral to our social, emotional, development. Nurturing relationships with responsive and sensitive teachers enable future academic success (Sandlos et al, 2018), along with predictable routines and enriched environments. When these early relationships are disrupted and early learning experiences are limited, children are more likely to drop out of school later in life or end up incarcerated.

Young students who are suspended or expelled are up to 10 times more likely to drop out of high school

The negative impact of suspension and expulsion can span the length of a child's academic career, leading to increased interaction with the juvenile justice system during a child's later years (Lamont, 2013; Mendez, 2003). Young students who are suspended or expelled are up to *10 times more likely* to experience future expulsion, drop out of high school, experience academic failure and grade retention, hold negative attitudes toward school, and face incarceration, compared to students who are not suspended or expelled. (Lamont, et al, 2013). This path is known as the "preschool to prison pipeline". (Schachter, et al. 2016)

Disrupting the Preschool To Prison Pipeline

Lack of processes & policies for suspensions & expulsions in voluntary child care & preschool.

Stressed provider/ teacher with implicit biases thinks child is misbehaving too much & doesn't know how to manage the child's behavior.

Child is suspended or expelled. Child is sent to directors office (in-school suspension); center asks parents to pick child up early (out-of-school suspension) or declares that the child is not a good fit (expulsion).

Child deprived of valuable learning and educational experiences & set on negative trajectory.

School "zero tolerance policies" mean that child is more likely to be be arrested and suspended for minor offenses in K-12.

Child is more likely to experience later academic failure in K-12 & is disengaged from school, dropping out.

As an adult, child is more likely be incarcerated.

Go to our Guide to learn about recommended policies and strategies for promoting all children's success and preventing suspensions and expulsions in early childhood settings to learn more! preventexpulsion.org

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Adverse Childhood Experiences and Expulsion

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are stressful or traumatic experiences, including abuse, neglect, witnessing domestic violence, or growing up with substance abuse, mental illness, or a parent in jail. The experience of early childhood trauma can impact the developing brain and lead to challenging behavior in the classroom, as certain situations or events may trigger these children to re-experience their trauma and behave in response to that experience rather than the current context. While this area continues to be understudied, exposure to ACEs in early childhood has been shown to be strongly associated with externalizing and internalizing behaviors in middle childhood (Hunt, Slack & Berger, 2017), both of which may be seen as challenging behaviors by teachers.

ACEs are typically measured as a whole number from 0-10. In a 2013 survey, two out of five Alaskan adults scored 2 or more ACEs (Advisory Board on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse, Alaska Mental Health Board, 2013) and one in ten had an ACE score of 5 or more. In this survey, participants were not asked about their experience of physical or emotional neglect, so the ACEs survey listed only 8 items instead of the 10 that are currently used. As many as one in ten Alaskans reported an ACE score of 5 more! In a study of Alaskan children by the Child and Adolescent Health Management Initiative in 2012, 15.5% of children aged 0-5 scored 2 or more ACEs. Nationwide, 14% of children aged 0-17 scored 2 or higher (HRSA, 2019). Children with two or more ACEs are almost ten times more likely to be suspended or expelled than children with no ACEs. (Child and Adolescent Health Management Initiative, 2016)

> **Challenging behavior is any behavior that interferes with a child's learning, engagement, and social interactions with her peers or adults (Chasin & Ledford, 2016).**

Challenging behavior includes both "acting out" and "acting in" or withdrawing, for example

- **Hitting, throwing things, pushing, biting**
- **Name calling, threatening others, angry words**
- **Sad behavior including crying, withdrawn, not wanting to participate**
- **Refusing to cooperate, including will not clean-up, will not follow directions**
- **Appearing worried and easily frightened**
- **Refusing to eat or feed**
- **Extremely active, impulsive, has trouble engaging appropriately in class activities**

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE USE OF EXCLUSIONARY PRACTICES

To make an impact on this complicated issue, we must begin by accepting that expulsions and suspensions are not child behaviors; they are adult decisions (Meek & Gilliam, 2016). There are multiple factors that influence these decisions and the use of exclusionary practices, including teacher beliefs about discipline, teacher stress and wellbeing, teacher knowledge of child development, implicit bias and recognition of cultural diversity, and a supportive organizational environment with access to specialized supports. Each of these different avenues must be evaluated and addressed.

Expulsions and suspensions are not child behaviors; they are adult decisions

We must also understand that challenging behavior is a normal part of child development. Brazelton's Touchpoints Model of Development shows us that challenging, or seemingly regressive, behavior are normal patterns that are associated with developmental milestones (Brazelton & Sparrow, 2003).

Factors that influence rates of suspension and expulsion

- **Implicit bias – the unconscious attitudes, stereotypes and beliefs that we hold that influence**
- **Teacher knowledge of child development and social-emotional development our speech and actions**
- **Available supports for teachers and children with additional needs, including mental health consultation**
- **Program characteristics, like work hours, classroom size and child-teacher ratios**
- **Teacher stress and wellbeing Cultural knowledge and inclusivity**
- **Use of data to monitor and improve performance & outcomes**

Implicit bias

Suspension and expulsion practices disproportionately impact children of color (Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam & Shahar, 2006). African-American children are more than twice as likely to be expelled as white or Latinx children and more than five times as likely to be expelled as Asian-American children (preventexpulsion.org).

More than half of the 74 million children in the United States are children of color, and they are served by learning systems that are gravely inequitable.

- Children's Equity Project & Bipartisan Policy Center, 2020

As we seek to understand why, studies have shown that African-American children are more likely to be monitored by teachers and expected to have challenging behavior (Gilliam 2005), and their behavior is more likely to be seen as warranting discipline or being part of a pattern of behaviors (Okonofua Eberhardt, 2015). This *implicit bias* refers to the attitudes and stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions and decisions in an unconscious manner.

> **Implicit Bias – the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions and decisions in an unconscious manner. Activated involuntarily, without awareness or intentional control. Can be either positive or negative. Everyone is susceptible.**

Key characteristics of implicit bias are

1. **Unconscious and automatic – they are activated without an individuals' intention or control**
2. **Pervasive – everyone possesses them, even those avowing commitments to impartiality**
3. **Do not always align with explicit beliefs – implicit and explicit biases are generally regarded asrelated but distinct mental constructs**
4. **Have real-world effects on behavior – significant research has documented real-world effectsacross domains such as employment, education, health care and criminal justice**
5. **Are malleable – the biases and associations we have formed can be "unlearned" and replaced with new mental associations**

Adapted from State of the Science: Implicit Bias Review. Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity (Staats et al, 2017)

Racial bias also exists at the structural level. Structural bias occurs when the application of systems, policies and procedures result in unequal treatment and can apply to race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation, to name but a few. On average, women earn less doing the same job as men. Across the country, civil rights groups are calling for reform to address how differently Black Americans and people of color are treated by police compared with white Americans. In the healthcare setting, studies have shown that Black Americans receive less pain relief medication (Sabin and Greenwald, 2012) and have higher maternal mortality rates during childbirth (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). The field of early childhood education needs to face its own structural bias and pursue equity in early education for all children.

Approaches to address implicit bias include
- Defining and exploring the underlying cognitive causes of bias
- Recognizing the disproportionality in discipline resulting from implicit bias by developing data systems that can disaggregate data and reveal disproportionally affected populations
- Seeing and reflecting on one's own bias by way of testing and reflective conversations
- Promoting the use of stress reduction techniques such as mindfulness meditation for the early education workforce
- Mitigating bias in disciplinary action by slowing down the decision-making process

(Capatosto, 2015; McIntosh, 2017)

Educator effectiveness – wellbeing, knowledge and access to supports

Three main areas are identified in the literature regarding the EC educator's decisions about suspension and expulsion, within the context of implicit bias.

EC educators' wellbeing and experience of stress, including personal stress as well as work-derived stress such as burnout and secondary traumatic stress. Burnout is related to the expectations and demand placed on workers and can be seen as a prolonged response to the on-going stress of the job role. In contrast, secondary traumatic stress can result from caring for children who have experienced trauma. Both can lead to chronic stress, which interferes with attachment and empathic connection and the ability to form and maintain nurturing relationships with young children. Higher stress levels may also increases workforce turnover rates, which poses several challenges for EC programs.

EC educators' knowledge of child development, particularly social-emotional development and the skills of attachment, self-regulation and initiative. Additional recommended training includes adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and the impact of early childhood trauma on development and behavior; diversity, cultural sensitivity and implicit bias; social intelligence, self-regulation and emotional literacy. On-going professional development should ideally be coupled with coaching or reflective supervision for skill development and use of evidence-based tools and practices.

Access to specialized supports, including mental health consultation and interdisciplinary response teams to support teachers when they find themselves faced with challenging situations.

Program characteristics

The structures and practices of programs include the physical environment, the policies and procedures that define the work set work expectations and the systems that EC educators use in their work. Policies on classroom sizes, work hours, child-teacher ratios can impact teacher stress and burnout. Policies on discipline that provide a step-by-step process provide a consistent and structured approach to challenging behavior rather than relying on individual beliefs about discipline and decision making in the heat of the moment. A structured classroom environment and the use of curricula and schedules support routines and classroom management, which helps children know what is expected of them.

THE ROAD TO EQUITY AND REDUCING EARLY CHILDHOOD EXPULSION IN ALASKA

The recently released Early Childhood Alaska: A Strategic Direction for 2020-2025 (EC AK 2025) outlines a strategic framework for a strong and equitable early childhood system where Alaska's families and children thrive. The three main goals in the plan are to ensure that Alaska children and families are healthy, safe and stable; Alaska children have quality early learning experiences and are prepared for success in school; and Alaska children and families are supported by a functional and comprehensive mixed-delivery early childhood system. The plan aims to provide children in all Alaskan communities with equitable access to resources and high-quality, affordable care and education and with a particular focus on low-income, rural and disadvantaged children. The work of reducing expulsion is a key component of achieving equity and supports this plan through key strategies shown in the excerpt below.

Goals and Strategies from Early Childhood Alaska: A Strategic Direction for 2020-2025

Goal 1: Alaska children and families are healthy, safe and stable

Objective 2: Integrated physical, mental and dental health: Children and their families have regular, ongoing access to health care services that are comprehensive, equitable and culturally and linguistically appropriate

> *Strategy 2.4: Increase access to infant and early childhood mental health supports including family supports, therapies, consultation and reflective supervision services.*

Goal 2: Alaska children have quality early learning experiences and are prepared for success in school

Objective 6: High quality: Alaska's children are in high quality early childhood education programs

> *Strategy 6.1: Increase the number of early childhood education programs participating and advancing in Learn & Grow, Alaska's Quality Recognition and Improvement System.*

> *6.4: Provide supports to decrease suspensions and expulsions in early childhood education programs.*

Goal 3: Alaska children and families are supported by a functional, comprehensive, mixed-delivery early childhood system

Objective 11: Workforce: the early childhood workforce is stable, qualified, fairly compensated, diverse and supported

> *Strategy 11.1 – Increase cross sector recruitment and retention of early childhood professionals (Increase the number of trained Relationship-Based Professional Development (RBPD) Coaches & Infant/EC Mental Health Consultants)*

> *Strategy 11.2 – Increase professional development opportunities for early childhood professionals.*

Adapted from Connections to Early Childhood Alaska: A Strategic Direction for 2020-2025. Alaska Early Childhood Coordinating Council, (2020)

At the national level, the Children's Equity Project and the Bipartisan Policy Center have studied the learning experience of young children birth to five and school age children K-5th grade and published their findings in the report Start with Equity: From the Early Years to the Early Grades (2020). This report covers three policy areas, one of which includes exclusionary discipline, and provides recommendations to address these areas to make early learning more equitable for young children.

Main recommendations related to exclusionary practices from Start with Equity: From the Early Years to the Early Grades

Federal agencies should:

- *Raise awareness about the negative impacts of harsh discipline and family rights*
- *Tie federal funds to state progress reducing harsh discipline and disparities in its use*
- *Reinstate guidance that discourages the use of exclusionary discipline and address racial disparities*
- *Require states to report their use of harsh discipline and its disproportionate application in childcare*

States should:

- *Prohibit corporal punishment, seclusion, and exclusionary discipline in learning settings serving young children and limit restraint*
- *Invest in data systems and professional development*
- *Develop infrastructure to receive, investigate, and act on parent complaints*

Districts should:

- *Ban harsh discipline even in states where it remains legal*
- *Ensure that young children never have negative interactions with school resource officers via intimidation, inappropriate restraint, handcuffing, or arrest*
- *Invest in systems for training, coaching, and evaluating the use of positive discipline and anti-bias approaches*

Adapted from Start with Equity: From the Early Years to the Early Grades, the Children's Equity Project and Bipartisan Policy Center (2020)
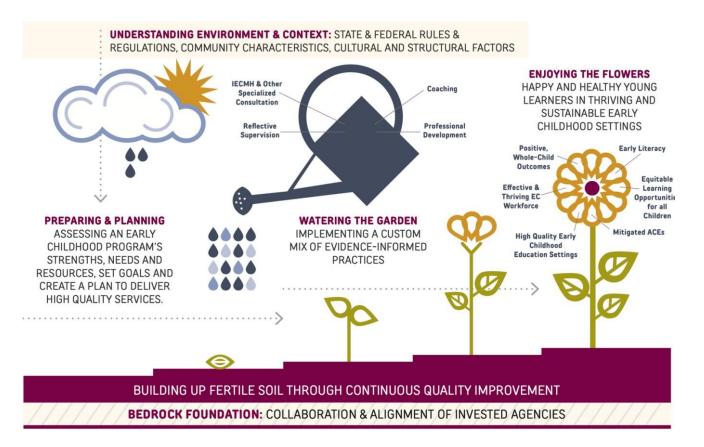
The work to increase equity and reduce the use of exclusionary practices thus requires alignment across agencies and several levels of government. Supporting infrastructure is needed, such as shared definitions of exclusionary practices, program-level policy guidance, aligned state policy across departments, and data monitoring systems for on-going management and continuous improvement. To that end, representatives from multiple programs and agencies from the early childhood context have come togetherin 2019 to assess the current state of a broad range of policies and practices in affecting exclusionary practices across the state of Alaska. Using the Expulsion Policy Strategy Tool by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Administration for Children & Families (2018), the interdisciplinary team identified four priority areas that will need to be addressed:

- Mitigate the effect of implicit bias in early childhood education
- Promote and support the wellbeing of the early childhood education workforce
- Increase utilization of specialized supports by teachers working with children with challenging behaviors
- Establish systems for capturing, monitoring and reporting the use of exclusionary practices and the drivers thereof, in support of continuous improvement efforts

To realize the goals of happy and healthy young children with equitable access to high quality early childhood education settings with a thriving workforce will require an integrated, coordinated and aligned approach. Local communities, early childhood education providers, supporting service organizations, technical assistance centers and public agencies need to collaborate and coordinate efforts across sectors to promote happy and healthy young learners and educations settings where children can blossom and grow.

Cross-sector alignment can promote efficiencies and open opportunities for blended funding and will rely on the policies, priorities, and funding of local and state governments. Together, these form the foundation, or the bedrock and soil of what we suggest to think of as our early childhood education garden. Our garden requires good soil and a place with good conditions for flowers to grow. And, of course, every garden needs nutrients, sunlight and water to thrive.

This improvement work is cyclical and developmental and will require programs to identify goals for each discrete change initiative, to make plans, develop strategies, and acquire needed resources. Programs should reach out for support as needed, such as professional development, coaching or reflective supervision or consultation for program development as well as in support of individual children. Changes should be based on current best knowledge, or evidence-informed practices with sufficient support from funders, policy makers and technical experts.

UNDERSTANDING ENVIRONMENT & CONTEXT: STATE & FEDERAL RULES & REGULATIONS, COMMUNITY CHARACTERISTICS, CULTURAL AND STRUCTURAL FACTORS

IECMH & Other Specialized Consultation

Reflective Supervision

Coaching

Professional Development

ENJOYING THE FLOWERS
HAPPY AND HEALTHY YOUNG LEARNERS IN THRIVING AND SUSTAINABLE EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

Positive, Whole-Child Outcomes

Early Literacy

Effective & Thriving EC Workforce

Equitable Learning Opportunities for all Children

High Quality Early Childhood Education Settings

Mitigated ACEs

PREPARING & PLANNING
ASSESSING AN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM'S STRENGTHS, NEEDS AND RESOURCES, SET GOALS AND CREATE A PLAN TO DELIVER HIGH QUALITY SERVICES.

WATERING THE GARDEN
IMPLEMENTING A CUSTOM MIX OF EVIDENCE-INFORMED PRACTICES

BUILDING UP FERTILE SOIL THROUGH CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

BEDROCK FOUNDATION: COLLABORATION & ALIGNMENT OF INVESTED AGENCIES

Priority Intervention Areas to Promote Equity and Reduce Exclusionary Practices

This work focuses on programs and agencies across Alaska that offer out-of-home early childhood education serving children ages 0–8. This includes child-care, Early Head Start, Head Start, Pre-Elementary, 619 and infant learning programs, as well as private programs that offer before or after school care for school age children up through age 12. As used here, early childhood educator refers to the teacher or provider workforce who support young children in early childhood education programs and settings.

Mitigate the effect of implicit bias in early childhood education

- Promote and deliver training on diversity and inclusion to address implicit bias in the early childhood workforce (*thread has developed implicit bias training which will be offered in 2021*)
- Promote and support implementation of specific evidence-informed policies outlining a decision-making process and criteria for suspension and expulsion
- Invest in systems for training, coaching, and evaluating the use of anti-bias approaches (Children's Equity Project)

Promote and support the wellbeing of the early childhood education workforce

- Study the state of wellbeing, burnout and secondary traumatic stress in the early childhood workforce in order to improve their well-being and effectiveness (*thread is currently in its second year of surveying the EC workforce on levels of stress and burnout*)
- Promote selfcare and provide training on stress reduction tools and techniques
- Implement evidence-informed wellbeing interventions and study the impact
- Increase cross sector recruitment and retention of early childhood professionals, particularly the number of trained Relationship-Based Professional Development (RBPD) Coaches & Infant/EC Mental Health Consultants, and by making the role of EC educator more attractive and sustainable (EC AK 2025, strategy 2.4 and 11.1)

Increase utilization of specialized supports by early childhood educators working with children with challenging behaviors

- Develop relationships and communication with EC programs
- Expand the workforce with ability to deliver mental health consultation through recruitment and professional development, by increasing the number of trained Relationship-Based Professional Development (RBPD) Coaches & Infant/EC Mental Health Consultants (EC AK 2025 Strategy 2.4 and 11.1)
- Promote available specialized supports and make it as easy as possible for programs and teachers to access these supports (*interagency plans are underway to assess and fill gaps of needed specialized supports*)
- Increase professional development opportunities for early childhood professionals (EC AK 2025 Strategy 11.2)
- Increase access to infant and early childhood mental health supports including family supports, therapies, consultation and reflective supervision services (EC AK 2025 Strategy 2.4)

Four Priority Areas to Promote Equity and Reduce Exclusionary Practices

Mitigate the effect of implicit bias in early childhood education

Promote and support the wellbeing of the early childhood education workforce

Increase utilization of specialized supports by early childhood educators working with children with challenging behaviors

Establish systems for capturing, monitoring and reporting the use of exclusionary practices and the drivers thereof, in support of continuous improvement efforts

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Establish systems for capturing, monitoring and reporting the use of exclusionary practices and thedrivers thereof, in support of continuous improvement efforts

- Establish and adopt shared definitions of suspension and expulsion (EC AK 2025, Strategy 6.4) (*standard national definitions for expulsion and suspension are currently being promoted for adoption across AK programs and agencies*)
- Develop and implement systems for on-going data collection of exclusionary practice data (*the prevalence of exclusionary practices has been measured by survey for the last two years and cross-sector data collection is in development*)
- Provide supports to decrease suspensions and expulsions in early childhood education programs. (EC AK 2025, Strategy 6.4)
- Invest in systems for training, coaching, and evaluating the use of positive discipline and anti-bias approaches (Children's Equity Project). (EC AK 2025, Strategy 6.1)
- Invest in data systems and professional development; prohibit seclusion and exclusionary discipline in early childhood learning settings (Children's Equity Project)

Supporting foundation of interagency collaboration and alignment

- Identify and develop family engagement partnerships, in order to involve families in policy work and in responding to challenging behavior (EC AK 2025, Strategy 6.4)
- Promote and support the implementation and adoption of evidence-based tools and practices, such as the Pyramid Model and Trauma-Informed Care, and participation in quality improvement programs such as Learn & Grow. (EC AK 2025, Strategy 6.1) (*plans are in development for integrating Pyramid Model evidence-based practices into Learn & Grow in a feasible and achievable way*)
- Monitor across sectors the implementation of policies that promote inclusion and prevent expulsions. (EC AK 2025, Strategy 6.1)
- Increase the number of early childhood education programs participating and advancing in Learn & Grow, Alaska's Quality Recognition and Improvement System (EC AK 2025, Strategy 6.4)
- Increase cross sector recruitment and retention of early childhood professionals (Increase the number of trained Relationship-Based Professional Development (RBPD) Coaches & Infant/EC Mental Health Consultants) – by making the role of EC educator more attractive and sustainable as a career path (EC AK 2025, Strategy 11.1)
- Develop infrastructure to receive, investigate and act on parent complaints (Children's Equity Project)

A New Behavioral Support Process

In the beginning of this paper, we met Martha and her son Josh who faced repeated expulsion. Josh's teacher did not call for outside help, and did not appear to try any evidence-informed strategies that could help Josh reduce his hitting behaviors, or attempt to try and find out why he was hitting. They, and many real EC programs, followed a series of steps that might be illustrated like this:

Repeated problem behavior	Multiple reports to family	Program attempts interventions	Program makes decision to remove child

Facing repeated problem behavior, the EC program attempts to prevent, mitigate or manage the behavior without outside help. Reports are made to the parents, who might be informed, or told, of the incidents rather than invited into a problem-solving conversation. After a few attempts, the program determines it doesn't have the resources to support the child and informs the parents that they will have to find another EC program.

The following response process to challenging behavior uses the principles from the Pyramid Model framework, an evidenced-informed model to increase children's social emotional development and create high quality early childhood programs. The illustration below shows how a program might respond to a child's challenging behavior, get support for the child, the educator, and the family and go through a process of assessment, problem-solving, planning and monitoring, with external supports, before making a decision about whether to remove the child from the program, and if so, identify and facilitate a transfer to the new program.
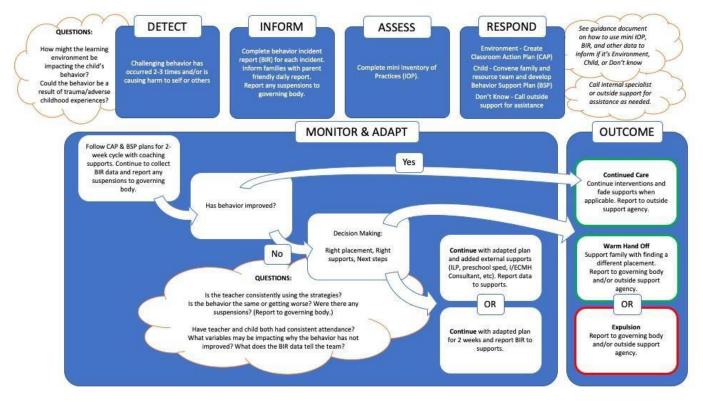
Figure: What a process for responding to challenging behavior could look like

If we work to achieve the goals, employ the strategies, and follow the recommendations outlined in this paper, a streamlined support system will help reduce exclusionary practices, allow more children to stay in their programs, improve equitable access to high quality care and education, and promote children's overall wellbeing.

In closing, we refer back to the Millers and their experience with the behavioral support process.

> *The Millers were hopeful as they approached the center for a parent-teacher conference. Their daughter, Anna, had been struggling with some pretty challenging behaviors at school. In addition to constantly running out of the classroom, she would also bite or hit peers who got too close to her during play. After talking to the teachers, they had agreed to let thread, the local resource and referral agency, get involved to observe and provide some suggested supports to help the teacher with Anna. Two weeks ago, they had met with the teachers, the principal and an early childhood coach from thread to create an individual support plan for Anna. As a team they had discussed Anna's strengths, (specific data regarding her behavior,) possible triggers and agreed on an action plan. The plan included environmental supports, skill building with Anna and outlined how the family could support this progress at home. Today they were meeting to follow-up and assess how the plan was working. With regular updates from the teachers, the Millers knew Anna had been improving. Additionally, they had been reassured at the first meeting that if things didn't work out at this program the team would support the family to find a more appropriate program suited for Anna's specific needs.*

Reducing Early Childhood Exclusionary Practices – 2022 Goals

In order to increase equity and continuity of access to inclusive, high-quality EC education where children and educators all can thrive, goals are established under the following headers:

Implicit Bias
Increase access to implicit bias training available to EC educators (in-person, live virtual and on-demand virtual).

Mental Health Consultation and Other Supports
Increase EC educator knowledge of available supports (including coaching, MH consultation, and other consultation and supports).

Increase EC educator use of supports (including coaching, MH consultation, and other consultation and supports).

Early Childhood Educator Well-Being
Improve EC educator well-being and prevent and mitigate burnout.

State Systems Alignment
Develop shared state level early childhood policy and data collection across agencies and programs to reduce exclusionary practices in all early childhood programs (Child Care, Head Start, Early Head Start, Pre- Elementary, and Preschool Special Education) and align with P-3 systems.

Develop and adopt shared definitions of expulsion and suspension across the Department of Education and Early Development and Department of Health and Social Services and other participating agencies.

Data System and Measurement
Establish metric(s) (indicators) for expulsion rates and design

Develop and implement a cross-sector system to capture expulsion rate data

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