

RESEARCH

Using High-Quality Behavior Guidance Policies to Support Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Learning Environments and Interrupt Implicit Bias

by Sarah Garrity and Sascha Longstreth

Recently, troubling data on preschool suspension and expulsion rates, as well as data indicating that young boys of color and young children with disabilities are suspended and expelled for behavioral challenges three to four times as often as other children (Office of Civil Rights, 2014), has received a great deal of national attention and has served as a wake-up call to the early childhood community. Caring for and educating young children in early childhood programs is rewarding yet difficult work, and we believe it is critical that systems are in place to support children,

families and staff to be their very best. Effective, high-quality behavior-guidance policies are one way to support both teaching and learning, and to prevent and address challenging behaviors in early childhood settings.

For almost 15 years, we have been reviewing the research on effective behavior guidance practices and have examined hundreds of behavior guidance policies collected from early childhood programs across the United States. During this time, it has become clear to us that programs need help developing policies that reflect evidence-based practices. We believe that a systematic and intentional approach to behavior guidance can ensure that:

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Sascha Longstreth is an associate professor in the department of child and family development at San Diego State University. She began her career as a preschool teacher and has extensive experience in a variety of educational settings. She has worked with the YMCA, Head Start, and Polinsky Children's Center to train early care and education teachers on topics related to infant and early childhood mental health. Longstreth's research is closely connected to her teaching practice, and she is deeply committed to the exploration of practices that support children's developing social emotional competence.

- evidence-based classroom practices for preventing and addressing challenging behaviors are consistently implemented across classrooms, resulting in a positive social-emotional climate and better child outcomes;
- relationships with families are meaningful, authentic and strengths based;
- professional development is in line with program goals and best-practice recommendations; and
- decision making is fair and equitable.

We developed the Teaching and Guidance Policy Essentials Checklist to help administrators of early childhood programs prevent and address challenging behaviors by providing clear, evidence-based information about how to develop and implement high-quality behavior guidance policies. The TAGPEC is an easy-to-use, 30-item checklist that

describes seven essential features of high-quality behavior guidance policies for programs serving children from birth to 8 years of age, which has been refined over the last several years through our ongoing research project. The seven essential features of the TAGPEC are presented in Table 1.

Our work using an earlier version of the TAGPEC found that early childhood policies seldom reflected evidence-based practices and often promoted a punitive rather than preventive approach to challenging behavior (Garrity et al. 2015, 2016; Longstreth et al. 2013). Programs scored particularly low on essential features measuring the family-centered nature of early childhood programs, staff training and professional development, and the use of data to inform continuous improvement efforts. These findings, as well as the identification of the role of implicit bias on decision making (Gilliam et al. 2016), led us to revise the TAGPEC to more explicitly focus on the importance of culture and language and on how policies can be used to inform decision

Table 1: Seven Essential Features of a High-Quality Behavior Guidance Policy

Essential Feature	Definition
EF 1: Intentional Focus on Teaching Social-Emotional Skills	Early childhood behavior guidance policies should reflect an instructional, proactive approach to behavior guidance that supports the learning and practice of appropriate prosocial behavior of all children, regardless of individual differences and/or cultural and linguistic background.
EF 2: Developmentally and Culturally Appropriate Learning Environment	Early childhood behavior guidance policies should describe the importance of a developmentally and culturally appropriate learning environment that is predictable, engaging, and relationship based.
EF 3: Setting Behavioral Expectations	Early childhood behavior guidance policies should describe clear and consistent expectations for behavior.
EF 4: Preventing and Addressing Challenging Behaviors Using a Tiered Model of Intervention	Early childhood behavior guidance policies should identify primary, secondary, and tertiary preventative and intervention practices for promoting prosocial behavior and reducing challenging behavior in young children.
EF 5: Working with Families	Early childhood behavior guidance policies should reflect the family-centered nature of early childhood education.
EF 6: Staff Training and Professional Development	Early childhood behavior guidance policies should indicate a commitment to providing ongoing staff training and professional development regarding how to implement the guidance policy.
EF7: Use of Data for Continuous Improvement	Early childhood behavior guidance policies should reference the use of a data-collection system, by which the relative success or failure of the behavior-guidance policy will be evaluated.

making and interrupt implicit bias (Longstreth & Garrity, 2018). The following items on the TAGPEC address these issues:

- **Essential Feature 1:** Item 4- Multiple evidence-based, developmentally and culturally appropriate strategies are described.
- **Essential Feature 2:** Item 10 - The policy clearly describes the value of an engaging curriculum that takes a strengths-based view of culture and language as a deterrent to challenging behavior.
- **Essential Feature 5:** Item 24 - The policy describes the need for obtaining contextually and culturally relevant information (e.g. at-home sleeping and eating habits, family events, favorite toys and activities) from families in order to understand children's inappropriate behavior.
- **Essential Feature 6:** Item 28 - The policy describes the intent of the program to ensure that staff have a strong understanding of culture and diversity and are provided

opportunities to engage in self-reflection and ongoing professional development that encourage awareness of implicit and explicit biases that may affect their work with children and families.

- **Essential Feature 7:** Item 30 - The policy describes how data will be used to engage in continuous improvement in order to ensure that practices are in line with the intent of the behavior guidance policy and to ensure fairness and equity for all children.

Following the addition of these items, we re-examined the 282 policies collected as part of our earlier study, in order to assess the degree to which they reflect the importance of linguistically and culturally appropriate environments and experiences, the need for ongoing professional development that ensures staff have a strong understanding of culture and diversity and engage in self-reflection to increase awareness of implicit and explicit biases, and use data to ensure that decision making is fair and equitable. Results from the study are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Frequency Counts of Score on TAGPEC Items 4, 10, 24, 28, 30

TAGPEC Item	Yes (f)/%	Emerging (f)/%	No (f)/%
Item 4: Multiple, evidence-based, developmentally and culturally appropriate strategies are described. (EF 1)	4 1.4%	140 49.6%	138 48.9%
Item 10: The policy clearly describes the value of an engaging curriculum that takes a strengths-based view of culture and language as a deterrent to challenging behavior. (EF 2)	2 0.7%	42 14.9%	238 84.4%
Item 24: The policy describes the need for obtaining contextually and culturally relevant information (e.g. at-home sleeping and eating habits, family events, favorite toys and activities) from families in order to understand children's inappropriate behavior. (EF 5)	0 0%	24 8.5%	258 91.4%
Item 28: The policy describes the intent of the program to ensure that staff have a strong understanding of culture and diversity and are provided opportunities to engage in self-reflection and ongoing professional development that encourage awareness of implicit and explicit biases that may affect their work with children and families. (EF 6)	1 0.4%	2 0.7%	279 98.9%
Item 30: The policy describes how data will be used to engage in continuous improvement in order to ensure that practices are in line with the intent of the behavior guidance policy and to ensure fairness and equity for all children. (EF 7)	0 0%	4 1.4%	278 98.6%

Overall, programs scored low on all five items. Only four policies described evidence-based strategies that were both developmentally and culturally appropriate (Item 4) and two programs had policies that described the importance of an engaging curriculum that takes a strengths-based view of culture and language as a deterrent to challenging behavior. One policy scored a two on Item 28, which measures the intent of the program to train staff on culture, diversity and implicit bias. None of the programs addressed the use of data to guide decision-making (Item 30).

Fortunately, the field has taken several important steps toward ensuring that program policies are used to help prevent suspension and expulsion in the early years. For example, the joint policy statement from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2014) titled *Statement on Expulsion and Suspension Policies in Early Childhood Settings*, recommends that “early childhood programs develop and clearly communicate preventive guidance and discipline practices” (p. 5) that are developmentally appropriate and promote social-emotional and behavioral health. It is also recommended that policies should describe discipline and intervention procedures, be implemented consistently and without bias, and be clearly communicated to parents, staff and community partners.

Similarly, the NAEYC policy statement *Standing Together Against Suspension and Expulsion in Early Childhood* (NAEYC, 2014) describes the need for early childhood educators to work together to “facilitate equitable access to high-quality, developmentally appropriate, and culturally responsive early childhood education that helps families and communities thrive” (NAEYC, 2014, p. 1). The statement also cites the need to use data to inform decision-making and to create systems, policies, and practices that reduce disparities across race and gender in order to prevent, and ultimately eliminate, expulsions and suspensions in settings serving young children. NAEYC’s (2019) recently released position statement, *Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education*, also provides comprehensive guidance on how the field can advance equity, ensure equitable learning opportunities, and eliminate structural inequalities. It is our hope that these recommendations, in conjunction with tools such as the TAGPEC, can help the field address the troubling racial disparities in suspension and expulsion rates and support all children to be successful.

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