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Behavior as a Part of Child Development: Changing the Response to Challenging Behavior in Young Children

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in Young Children

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Abstract

Challenging behavior among young children has gained more and more attention as early childhood programs look to address the issue of the high incidence rate of suspensions and expulsions among the youngest learners. In an effort to decrease the number of suspensions and expulsions in early childhood settings, there has been a shift from reacting to the challenging behaviors being exhibited to teaching children social-emotional skills in order to appropriately react to new or overwhelming experiences. This literature review focuses on research that examines how to best support young children as they develop social-emotional skills and how to best support teachers and caregivers of young children through the process. The research shows that effective social-emotional programs support all involved and create a foundation that will benefit children throughout their lives.

Keywords: challenging behavior, early childhood, social emotional learning, development

Table of Contents

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Early childhood is a time of rapid development, particularly during the first five years. Children are gaining skills in the areas of physical development, social-emotional development, cognitive development, and behavior (Moen et al., 2019). Many children are cared for outside of the home, often from a few weeks old, indicating that both parents and caregivers or teachers play a key role in the child's growth and development (Swit et al., 2018; Garner et al., 2019). With this rapid growth and development comes the emergence of behaviors that may stray from what is considered typical and require additional supports or services, so the availability of high-quality early learning experiences is a very important tool in helping children build a foundation for future learning and social-emotional growth (Blewitt et al., 2021).

Teachers play a critical role in the social and emotional development of the children in their care. A major issue facing early childhood educators is challenging behavior among young children. Children in preschool programs are significantly more likely to face expulsion than those in K-12 programs (Lang et al., 2016; Kelly et al., 2021). The persistence of challenging behavior and the effects of expulsion have lasting effects throughout childhood and often into adulthood, so the development of effective social-emotional programs and supports has become a major focus in early childhood education (Garrity et al., 2016).

This literature review will examine children's behavior as a part of development and how perceptions of challenging behavior have been impacted by research on social-emotional development in young children. A major push in recent years is the prevention of the expulsion of children in early childhood programs. This has lead to an examination of preventative

measures that can be taken to change what had become a common response to challenging behavior by young children.

The literature review will provide a historical perspective of the response to challenging behavior as compared to current trends and research. The literature review will discuss research on the impact of teacher perceptions of challenging behavior and social-emotional learning. Another focus of the literature review will be the current practices related to teaching social-emotional skills in early childhood, including the use of developmentally appropriate practices.

Review of the Literature

Social-Emotional Development and Challenging Behavior in Early Childhood

Social-emotional development involves the following: how individuals express emotions in certain contexts; what might cause individuals to express certain emotions in various contexts; the formation of social constructs from emotional experiences; and how emotion affects social behavior (Cui et al., 2018). Denham et al. (2014) provided the following domains of social-emotional learning in the discussion of their research on how social-emotional learning in preschool impacts early school success: self-regulation, social awareness, responsible decision making and social problem solving, and relationship skills. They also point out how each of these domains support each other (Denham et al., 2014). Children in the early childhood years are experiencing much growth and development in these areas, and teachers and caregivers are key in guiding and teaching necessary skills.

Early childhood is also a time when children are likely to express behaviors that are challenging for them and those around them. The Department of Early Childhood (DEC) defines challenging behavior as behavior that occurs repeatedly and interferes with the child's optimal learning and their engagement in pro-social interactions with other children and adults (2017). Challenging behavior can take many forms, including lack of engagement in tasks, yelling, relational aggression, and physical aggression (Blair et al., 2010; Swit et al., 2017). Early childhood educators indicate that much of their time is spent dealing with challenging behaviors and this is the area in which they have the biggest desire for training (Conners-Burrow, et al., 2016). This also aligns with research that suggests the need for teacher and caregiver emotional competence and the important role relationships between teachers/caregivers and children play in addressing challenging behavior and teaching social-emotional skills (Garner et al., 2019).

Current Research Trends

Impact of Challenging Behavior on Future Academic Success

While research on challenging behavior has existed for a long time, much of the research has been on primary and secondary grades. The focus on its affects in early childhood is much more recent (Swit et al., 2017). With research showing that challenging behaviors are exhibited by a significant number of children, and that if children are exhibiting these behaviors in their earliest years, they are most likely to continue and further impact their later school and social experiences, there has been a push to find effective ways to address challenging behaviors among young children and support the teachers and caregivers that are working with them (Denham et al., 2014; Hemmeter et al., 2016; Hoover et al., 2019).

There is a large body of research that points to the connection between the presence of challenging behavior in the early years and low levels of academic success, particularly in preschool and the primary grades (Brennan et al., 2012). In their research, Brennan et al. sought to further this research by examining how the presence of externalizing behaviors: aggression, oppositionality, inattention, and hyperactivity, in children who are toddler-age impacts later academic performance. Their research found that aggression seen in children ages two to three was consistently associated with academic performance at age 7.5 years. Additionally, the findings of their research pointed to the positive impact of intervention with children demonstrating these externalizing behaviors, particularly with children as young as two years old. This paves the way for future research into the positive impact on children's later academic success when interventions are implemented in the earliest stages of observed at-risk behavior (Brennan et al., 2012).

Prevalence of Expulsion in Early Childhood Programs

Preschool children are much more likely to be suspended or expelled than those in later grades. Data indicates this likelihood significantly increases for young boys of color and children with disabilities, pointing to the clear need for supports in early childhood education and care (Garrity et al., 2016; Hemmeter et al., 2016; Hooper & Schweiker, 2020). Another trend in the rate of expulsion is among children who attend home-based and for-profit childcare centers. Research has found that the expulsion rates in home-based and for-profit childcare centers for behavior reasons is higher than that found in not-for-profit centers, such as school-based or Head Start programs (Hooper & Schweiker, 2020). While there are a variety of reasons children have been removed from early childhood programs, including inability to pay and health concerns, challenging behavior or behavior concerns have been the most cited reasons for removal from a program (Garrity et al., 2019, Hooper & Schweiker, 2020). A major concern that comes with the removal of children from early childhood programs due to challenging behavior is that the children that are in greatest need for supports are being removed from the environments that can be providing those supports (Garrity et al., 2019).

Preventative Guidance and Discipline

It is important to note that the period of early childhood follows a progression and children's behavior should be viewed in relation the progression of developmental milestones, rather than isolating the behavior (McDermott et al., 2018). Additionally, the skill of self-regulation, which is a key skill needed in future social-emotional growth, requires a coordination of several processes. The development of self-regulation skills begins in infancy, however before the age of 3 it is difficult for children to coordinate and utilize multiple executive function skills in responses that also require motor or verbal responses (Montroy et al., 2016). As the

need to address challenging behavior in the youngest children has become clearer, over last 30

years there has been a shift to focusing on supporting young children, their families, and early

childhood professionals through early intervention and social-emotional learning (SEL)

programs that target social, emotional, and behavioral health (Gunter et al., 2012; Hoover et. al.

2012). In their study of the development of self-regulation in early childhood, Montroy et al.

(2016) found that while the development and acquisition of these skills tends to be rapid during

the preschool years, many children are continuing to develop these skills as they enter

kindergarten, indicating the need for teachers and caregivers to be mindful of the supports that

continue to be necessary.

The recognition of the need for additional supports has been promoted at the federal level

through a joint statement by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S.

Department of Education Office for Civil Right recommending that programs establish and

clearly communicate policies for preventative guidance and discipline. These policies should be

developmentally appropriate, promote social-emotional and behavioral health, consistently

implemented, and descriptive of the discipline and intervention procedures (Garrity et al., 2016).

In an effort to examine the extent to which programs accredited by the National Association for

the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) utilize evidence-based practices for preventing and

addressing challenging behaviors and promote social-emotional learning Garrity et al. conducted

a study of policies submitted by 282 NAEYC accredited programs, evaluating the quality of

practices for preventing and addressing challenging behavior and promoting prosocial skills

using the Teaching and Guidance Policy Essentials Checklist (TAGPEC).   While the policies

studied represent a small sample of accredited programs, scores from the TAGPEC did indicate a

need across all programs studied for improvements in developing policies and procedures that

are developmentally appropriate and promote social-emotional and behavioral health as part of their approach to dealing with challenging behavior (Garrity et al., 2016).

Caregiver Perceptions of Challenging Behavior and Social Emotional Learning

In a study conducted by Hoover et al. (2012), many childcare providers surveyed indicated that the presence of challenging behavior was having a negative impact on the well-being of their staff; in some cases, it was indicated that all staff was being negatively impacted by the presence of challenging behavior. In discussing the results of the study, Hoover et al. stress the importance of providing adequate supports for the teachers so that they can create environments for the children that are supportive, healthy, and safe. Without these supports for the staff, there is an increase in the likelihood that they will become stressed, which in turn negatively impacts the children (Hoover et al., 2012).

Garrity et al., (2019) also examined the perceptions of challenging behavior by center directors which is a change from previous studies that have focused on teacher perceptions. The reason behind studying center director perceptions was to see how they impacted professional development and available practices for implementation by teachers. The findings of the study did support the idea that center directors are positioned to give support to teachers dealing with challenging behaviors and ensure children receive appropriate supports, the study also showed that there are still limitations in accessing all necessary resources to actually make this happen (Garrity et al., 2019).

Preparing Teachers

The presence of challenging behavior in young children in a key source of burnout and stress for the adults that are working with and supporting the children (Kelly et al., 2021),

therefore it is important to examine the perceptions of challenging behavior by those who work closely with young children to ensure they are equipped with best practices for teaching social-emotional skills. The research on challenging behavior in young children has highlighted the need for systems that will provide children with necessary supports and equip them with appropriate social-emotional learning skills. Along with these systems and supports, comes the need for proper training and support for the caregivers of the children. Buettner et al. (2015) conducted a study of 175 university early childhood program directors in order to gain a better idea of what is being taught in education programs to pre-service teachers and how this aligns with the recommended quality standards for early childhood educators. For the study, the teacher preparation programs were reviewed on how much their curricula covered the following teacher competencies, taken from NAEYC quality standards and the CDA competencies: child development, social and emotional development, program and classroom management, families and community, academic instruction and curricula, observation and assessment, and professionalism. Other data related to the program was also collected, including the degrees offered, age groups covered in the program, number of students in the program, number of full-time equivalent faculty, and graduation requirements (Buettner et al., 2015).

The findings of the study by Buettner et al. (2015) indicated that most of the programs required courses on families and communities and there was a slight increase in the number of programs requiring courses on working with children and families than what had been noted from previous research. Additionally, the data indicated an improvement from previous studies in the number of programs requiring courses related to observation and assessment. Some areas of concern that were uncovered in this study are that teacher preparation programs tend to have fewer opportunities for pre-service teachers to learn and develop skills in the areas of

professionalism and social and emotional development. Each of these areas are important in

ensuring teachers are able to utilize necessary resources, build relationships with children and

their families, and create an environment that is effective in supporting children, particularly

those who do express challenging behaviors. Another aspect of the collected data was the focus

of the curricula for bachelor's degree programs versus associates degree programs. In the

bachelor's degree programs, it was found that the focus tended to be mainly on knowledge,

which includes instruction, curriculum, and observation and assessment, while the associates

degree programs tended to focus on practices, which include program and classroom

management (Buettner et al., 2015). By having a better idea of what is being covered in teacher

preparation programs and how that relates to quality recommendations for early childhood

programs, improvements can be made in the supports for the teachers, both in their pre-service

training and through ongoing professional development once they have entered the field of

education. This is an important step in ensuring developmentally appropriate practices and

supports are being used with the children, and also in providing the teachers needed supports that

will reduce their rate of burnout (Buettner et al., 2015; Kelly et al., 2021).

In a separate study by Lang et al. (2016), teachers' level of educational training was

examined to determine the impact on their responsiveness to children's social-emotional needs.

The study showed that teachers with an associate degree were more likely to have negative

responses to children's challenging behavior, negative emotions, or negative emotional displays.

The researchers indicate the reason for this kind of response is that the teachers have not been

trained in social-emotional development or how to provide a supportive response to difficulties a

child might experience. Instead, they see these emotions as disruptive to the classroom and are

more likely to punish the child for any outburst or dismiss the emotions all together. For

teachers with bachelor's degrees, there was a greater tendency toward child-centered beliefs, which then led to more positive social guidance. This is attributed to a higher level of training which is more likely to promote child-centered or constructivist beliefs. It was also noted that teachers who had coursework in child development and early childhood education tended to provide a greater amount of positive social guidance, and these teachers were inclined to see children in a more positive light: as capable and competent (Lang et al., 2016).

Lang et al. (2016) point to the importance of teachers supporting the emotional growth and competence of children since this sets the foundation for their social competence, which will have a lasting impact throughout their lives. If the teachers lack the knowledge or skills necessary to provide appropriate supports, there could be an impact on the social relationships of the children (Lang et al., 2016). It is important to ensure teachers are being provided a certain level of training in child development and social-emotional development, first in their training prior to entering the field of education and then on an ongoing basis through professional development. A starting point in providing these additional supports is measuring teacher and caregiver perceptions of challenging behavior, social-emotional supports, and their own level of social-emotional development. Research into these areas have helped streamline the behavior support process.

Social-Emotional Learning

The Foundation of SEL: Relationships

A main component of social-emotional learning is the relationship between the teacher or caregiver and the child, and the focus on supporting the child as they develop social-emotional competence. These competency skills include acknowledging and managing their own

emotions, recognizing the emotions of others, developing empathy, making good decisions, establishing positive friendships, and effectively handling challenging situations (Gunter et al., 2012; Hatfield & Williford, 2016). In their study of early childhood educators' perspective of children's social-emotional learning, Blewitt et al. (2021) reported the acknowledgement by teachers and other professionals who work with children that relationships with children were key to social-emotional development. Relationships that are responsive and nurturing allow those working with children to be in-tune with the children and understand their individual needs. Educators who participated in the study described the safety of these relationships for the children, allowing them to feel supported as they experience new, big emotions, practice new skills, and build confidence (Blewitt et al., 2021). In a study by Garner et al. (2016), it was found that there was a positive correlation between teacher responsiveness and close teacher-child relationships. The responsiveness and close relationships between teacher and child create a positive classroom environment in which children's needs are being effectively met (Garner et al., 2016). Moen et al. (2019) point out that in an early childhood setting, the relationship between teachers and students helps the children adjust to the social environment of the school (Moen et al., 2019). Hatfield and Williford (2016) also discuss previous research that shows that positive relationships between teachers and students often lead to fewer disruptive and challenging behaviors in early education, and an increase in strategies used for appropriate and positive emotion regulation. Previous research has also found that teacher-student relationships in which conflict exists have an increase in frustration and negative interactions, a decrease in student academic success, and an increase in the intensity of challenging behaviors (Hatfield & Williford, 2016).

Moen et al. (2019) have also conducted research on the effect of classroom climate on teacher-student relationships, but with a focus on the impact among children who are considered at-risk, either because of socioeconomic or developmental factors. Through the research conducted, it was shown that the main aspect of classroom climate to enhance the development of teacher-student relationships among at-risk students is high levels of emotional support. In classroom environments with these high-level supports, students are supported in their development of relationships with both teachers and their peers (Moen et al., 2019).

There has also been research into the effects of environment and relational experiences on the brain, particularly in the stress response system. Hatfield and Williford (2016) discussed the impact of time spent in childcare settings and how previous research has shown that children who have spent time in childcare or early learning settings may have an increased risk for activity in their stress response system that is not considered typical. Researchers attribute the increase in the atypical activity to environmental factors, such as large class size, which can lead to a hyper-arousal stress response (Hatfield & Williford).   Hatfield and Williford further examined the effects of time spend in childcare or early learning settings by examining the effects of teacher-student relationships on cortisol levels. Through their research it was determined that warm, responsive interactions lead to a decrease in the stress hormone cortisol in children (2016). These research studies make clear the importance of teachers and caregivers investing needed time into developing close relationships with the children in their care as a mean to promote positive social-emotional development and decrease the chances of disruptive and challenging behavior. These relationships are more than positive interactions between teachers and students, rather, the teachers are showing the students they have a secure base on

which they can rely as they are growing and developing these new skills while experiencing new, sometimes strong and overwhelming emotions.

Emotional Intelligence of Caregivers and Teachers

Poulou's (2016) study of the correlation between teachers' perceptions of their own emotional intelligence (EI) and teacher and student perspectives of the teacher-student relationship showed a positive correlation between the teachers' rating of EI and their comfort in implementing social-emotional learning practices in their classroom. Additionally, this was positively correlated with the teachers' perceptions of closeness of relationships with their students. The more comfortable teachers were with implementing SEL in their classroom, the more positive they rated their relationship with their students (Poulou, 2016). Garner et al. (2016) note that research regarding teachers' perceptions and responses to social-emotional learning is beginning to shift from the promotion of student emotional competence to the importance of teacher emotional competence and responsiveness in the classroom. Emotional competence requires one to understand, express, and manage their own emotions and successfully interpret and react to the emotions of others, while responsiveness refers to the prompt, appropriate and supportive caregiver reactions to the reactions and emotions of the children (Garner et al., 2016). When teachers have the skills of emotional competence and responsiveness, they are able to effectively engage with the children and have a positive impact on their social-emotional development. Teachers' interest in and respect for children's emotional development and expression helps children in their process of further developing their social-emotional skills and are therefore better able to regulate their emotions and respond appropriately to the emotions of others (Zinsser et al., 2014).

Garner et al. (2016) point to previous research that shows emotional competence is a key factor in problem-solving and decision-making skills. In the field of education, emotional competence leads to being better able to handle one's emotions and being more satisfied in the role of teacher. In their own research, Garner et al. found that understanding of emotions and emotional regulation was positively associated with teacher comfort in teaching social-emotional skills. Those with a greater commitment to social-emotional learning had a higher loyalty to their positions as teachers and were more likely to be providing appropriate social-emotional supports in the classroom (Garner et al, 2016).

Parents' beliefs about social-emotional learning and socialization also play an important role in the development of the child in these areas. Zinsser et al. (2014) point to previous research studies that have shown parents who value emotions and feel responsible for the emotional development of their children are more likely to be engaged in practices that promote positive socialization and put value in allowing their children to experience emotions while helping them through those experiences. When parents are supportive of their children's emotions, children develop early emotional competencies. However, if parents have a more negative perspective of emotional expression or want to protect their child from experiencing negative emotions, they are often less supportive of their child's emotional expression. This then leads to children who are less equipped with skills related to displaying or expressing emotions and have a poorer knowledge of emotions (Zinsser et al., 2014).

Supporting Teachers and Caregivers

The findings of Paulou's (2016) study point to the importance of training and support for teachers in the area of social-emotional development and learning. Additional research has also supported these findings, but the actual implementation can be a challenge (Connors-Burrow et.

al. 2016). Researchers have pointed to the use of coaching as a way to support teachers in the

implementation of social-emotional learning (Fox et al., 2011; Gadaire et al., 2020). In a study

by Gadaire et al. (2020), it was shown that students in classes where teachers received feedback

on their students' social-emotional competencies, as measured by the Devereux Early Childhood

Assessment (DECA) for Preschoolers and the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT-4th

Edition), and who also received coaching to implement interventions, showed significantly more

improvement than those who were in classes that did not receive the support (Gadaire et al.,

2020). Observational feedback has also been shown to have a positive impact on teachers' social

and emotional responsiveness. When teachers have access to this feedback, they are more likely

to provide appropriate emotional supports to children and less likely to engage with the use of

negative social guidance. This ongoing feedback is also more likely to be associated with

teacher motivation for professional development (Lang et al. 2016). In addition to receiving

coaching and observational feedback, teachers have indicated that having access to behavior or

mental health specialists have helped to change teacher perspectives of and responses to

challenging behavior and decrease the number of expulsions in early childhood programs

(Hoover et al., 2012; Hopper & Schweiker, 2020).

In another study by Conners-Burrow et al. (2016), the Reaching Educators and Children

(REACH) program was conducted to examine the impact of implementing a training and

coaching intervention with early childhood teachers. The purpose of this program is to provide

access to training for teachers who are using social-emotional frameworks, such as the Pyramid

Model, and give them a solid foundation for their work with young children. The program

includes training for the teachers and access to ongoing coaching with a trained REACH coach.

The data collected from the study showed improvement how teachers were implementing the

supports in each of the levels, particularly with targeted social and emotional supports. Additionally, teachers reported their satisfaction with receiving ongoing professional development and coaching as they implemented the practices (Conners-Burrow et al., 2016). These ongoing supports for teachers allow them to receive guidance and feedback as they implement social-emotional programs for their students and helps maintain consistency in how the practices are used, thereby increasing the effectiveness of the social-emotional programs.

It is also important to look at the parents' perspective in the SEL and behavior support process. In their study of family and educator perspectives on behavior supports in early childhood, Kelly et. al. (2021) collected data through a serious of focus groups from families and educators on their experience with behavior support plans. From the families' perspective, communication was essential to creating an effective team for developing and implementing behavior supports. Likewise, poor communication prevented the development of an effective team. Families noted that communication should be family centered, data-based, and practical and efficient. Teachers also noted the importance of communication, but also pointed out the need for support to effectively build partnerships with families through the needed time to share resources and intentionally build community (Kelly et al., 2021).

Current Practices in Teaching SEL

The years that are included in early childhood education present an important opportunity for teachers and caregivers to support children as they are developing social-emotional skills. As young children build upon their skills in this area, they develop a greater ability to regulate emotions, recognize emotions in others, show empathy, are more successful in making friends, have a more positive view of school, and achieve better grades and achievement in later schooling (Zinsser et al., 2014). As Zinsser et al. showed through their research, social-

emotional learning is a large component of early childhood programs. Many of the teachers studied indicated their views on the importance of social-emotional learning, stating that by focusing on social-emotional growth they are equipping children with essential skills they will use throughout their lives. Several of the teachers indicated this was something they engage in throughout the day (Zinsser et al., 2014).

Incorporating Social-Emotional Learning in Daily Practices

The teaching of social-emotional skills can take place through the use of planned lessons, either by the teacher or through the use of a social-emotional curriculum, it can happen organically through opportunities that come up through interactions with or among the children, or a combination of both structured and unstructured experiences. Ng et al. (2018) conducted a study to examine strategies teachers use to facilitate social-emotional learning in their classrooms. From the data collected on social-emotional teaching practices, it was found that there were certain routines in the day that were more conducive to facilitating social-emotional learning, such as during a small group activity or during outdoor activities in which peer interactions are happening more naturally and frequently. It was also found that social-emotional learning was taking place most frequently during intentional teaching experiences, indicating the importance of planning out and facilitating these types of experiences throughout the day. In their observations, Ng et al. noted that teachers used strategies that were both action-related: setting a positive tone and task allocation, and oral-related: suggestion of solutions and extension, with the action-related strategies being used most often (Ng et al., 2018). Since more and more attention is being given to the importance of social-emotional development and supporting teachers and caregivers in that process, there is an increase in what is being done to ensure the supports are put into practice in a manner that is appropriate for young children.

Social-Emotional Frameworks

Much work has been put into creating effective systems that provide methods for

teaching and supporting children's social-emotional development while also providing guidance

and support to teachers and caregivers. One example of a widely used social-emotional

framework is the Pyramid Model. The Pyramid Model is made up of four levels, increasing in

the amount of intervention used: nurturing and responsive relationships, high-quality supportive

environments, targeted social-emotional supports, and individualized, intensive intervention

(Blair et al., 2010; Fox et al., 2011). Starting with the base of the pyramid, teachers implement

universal strategies that promote the social development of all children, including building of

relationships between teachers and students, as well as among students, and creating a supportive

environment that enables children to maximize their level of engagement within classroom

activities and routines. At the next level, children who need additional support from that which

is provided for all children, are given additional guidance or intervention. At the top of the

pyramid are the intensive interventions for children who have not responded to previous

interventions and is developed by a team and with the child's family (Fox et al., 2011). These

most intensive interventions are intended to be used with a minimal number of children as the

goal is to teach appropriate social-emotional skills and prevent the high-level of challenging

behavior that would be addressed at the top of the pyramid.

Fox et al. (2011) note that in the past, research has indicated that the use of

comprehensive frameworks and all of the supporting practices that are included within those

frameworks, such as observation tools and coaching methods, are a challenge to implement in an

early childhood setting due to the level of training involved. This leads to teachers only

implementing select strategies, or only focusing on the most severe of behaviors needing

interventions, rather than creating a foundation through the use of universal practices with all

children (Fox et al., 2011). In their study, Fox et al. examined the effects of ongoing

professional development supports for teachers who were implementing Pyramid Model

practices. As part of the study, the participating teachers were provided training on the Pyramid

Model, received ongoing coaching for the implementation of the practices in the classroom

through goal setting and action planning, and teachers received observational feedback. The

impact of this level of support was measured through the Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool

(TPOT). The study showed that there was a significant decrease in the number of red flags

observed and a large increase in the percentage of pyramid teaching practices being implemented

from the time baseline data was collected until after implementing training and support practices

(2011).

Ensuring Effectiveness of Social-Emotional Supports

The benefit of these frameworks is that all aspects of the supports for children and

teachers are made to work together. It is a comprehensive system with many pieces that work

together with the intent to provide the necessary tools for developing and growing children's

social-emotional skills. The downside of the framework is that there are many people and pieces

involved on the implementation side and making sure everyone has what they need to effectively

implement all aspects of the framework can be a challenge. With research indicating the

prevalence of these challenges, more is being done to ensure all involved are appropriately

supported. Both Fox et al. (2011) and Gadiare et al. (2020) studied the impact of the availability

of ongoing support for the teachers through coaching. Both studies indicated the positive impact

on teachers of having access to regular coaching, professional development, and feedback. The

positive impact on teaching practices and availability of ongoing professional development and

coaching supports trickles down with positive impacts for the children and their social-emotional

growth and development (Fox et al., 2011; Gadiare et al., 2020).

      With the implementation of programs and frameworks to facilitate the implementation of

social-emotional supports in the classroom come the need for systems to evaluate their

effectiveness. Hemmeter et al. looked at the effectiveness of implementing the Pyramid Model

by using several assessment tools with the participating teachers and programs of the study.

While the purpose of the study was to determine the impact of professional development on the

implementation of Pyramid Model practices, it shows what assessment tools are available to

provide feedback on the effectiveness of the overall programs. Two of the measures used in the

study, the Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool (TPOT) and CLASS, measure classroom

systems, environment, and relationships between teachers and children. The other two

assessment systems used, the Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS) and the Focal Child

Observation System (FCOS), allow for the collection of data about the behavior and social skills

of the children (Hemmeter et al., 2016). While these assessment tools require training for those

administering them, and sometimes certification as is the case with the TPOT and CLASS, they

are a means to obtain meaningful data about classrooms and children that can be used as part of a

coaching relationship in an ongoing effort to best support all children.

      This increase in the use of systems and frameworks that provide ongoing professional

development and support for teachers as they are developing effective systems to best help

children develop and grow their own social-emotional skills is important in shifting the view of

challenging behavior and its place in early childhood. These systems focus on the growth and

development of the children and teacher, rather than the behavior itself. While the goal is to

prevent or decrease challenging behavior, the method used more and more focuses on growth

and support of the social-emotional skills of the child that is appropriate for where they are

developmentally. It also ensures parents or caregivers are an active part of the process so that the

supports are consistent in all aspects of the child's life.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Since the rate of suspension and expulsion among children in preschool is so much higher

than for later grades, it is important to examine the structures and policies that are in place and

note what adjustments could be made so that practices used with the youngest learners accurately

reflect developmentally appropriate expectations and practices. The evaluation of NAEYC

accredited programs on the nine essential features from the TAGPEC, which reflect the

implementation of evidence-based practices to prevent and address challenging behavior, a study

by Garrity et al. (2016), revealed that even programs accredited by the National Association for

the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) are not consistently implementing guidance and

discipline policies and practices that are evidence-based and developmentally appropriate.

Garrity et al. note that progress is being made in this area as more state licensing agencies are

requiring guidance and discipline policies that reflect developmentally appropriate practices.

This is seen as a positive step considering there is less universal guidance for early childhood

programs than what can be found for kindergarten to 12th grade school systems. They do note

the importance of including support and professional development to ensure staff are able to

effectively implement the policies (Garrity et al., 2016).

In addition to programs having guidance and discipline policies and procedures that

reflect developmentally appropriate practices, the implementation of daily practices in the

classroom should also be developmentally appropriate. The use of frameworks, such as the

Pyramid Model, which is research-based and developmentally appropriate for use with young

children, is an important step in ensuring this is being done on a consistent basis (Hemmeter et

al., 2016). Pokorski et al. (2016), examined the use of developmentally appropriate group

contingencies in preschool classrooms for implementing social-emotional frameworks that are

used program-wide. The study found that the use of these group contingencies can be effective

in reducing challenging behavior, particularly among children that are typically developing. In

examining future implications for the findings of the study, Pokorski et al., did indicate the need

for more extensive, high-quality research. However, their research did show that these

contingencies would be successful when used in other settings and with other populations of

children in order to support the targeting of increased positive behavior (Pokorski et al., 2016).

Supports for All Children

Social-emotional learning is an important means for schools to implement practices that

are culturally responsive and respond to the needs of all children and their families (Morgan et

al, 2012). As children learn and develop skills related to the five SEL competencies of self-

awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision

making, there is a positive impact on their own behavior, engagement, and social skills.

Additionally, it also has a positive impact on the children's awareness and knowledge of social-

emotional learning in others (Losinksi et al., 2019). However, research has shown that certain

groups of children experience a higher rate of suspension and expulsion due to challenging

behavior. Boys are more likely to be removed from programs than girls; African American

children are more likely to be removed than Latino or Caucasian children; and children with

disabilities are more likely to be removed from programs because of behavior concerns (Hopper

and Schweiker, 2020). Additionally, a study by Morgan et al. (2012) found that children of

ethnic-racial minorities are disproportionately underrepresented in early intervention and early

childhood special education programs, indicating they are less likely than white children to be

evaluated and diagnosed for communication, attention, or learning problems. The availability of

screening and assessment is crucial for early detection and prevention of social-emotional

difficulties (Gokiert et al., 2014). When children are not being provided appropriate supports in

these areas, they are more likely to exhibit behaviors that are seen as challenging. In discussing

the findings of their study, Morgan et al. point to the importance of community outreach

programs to increase the accessibility of services and supports for children and families from all

backgrounds, but particularly racial-ethnic minorities, to close the gap seen in enrollment in early

intervention and early childhood special education programs (Morgan et al., 2012).

Conclusion

As the amount of research on the effects of the presence challenging behavior in early childhood has increased, there has been a shift in the response to the behaviors among teachers and caregivers. While these behaviors had previously been dealt with by focusing on the behavior, research has shown the need for a wholistic approach that involves supporting the child, their family, their teachers, as well as creating a supportive environment that gives children access to supports that will enable them to develop social-emotional skills in a developmentally appropriate way (Denham et al., 2014; Hemmeter et al., 2016; Hoover et al., 2019; McDermott et al, 2018) . To assist children in building social-emotional skills, it is essential that teachers and caregivers are equipped with the necessary skills and supports. This begins with ensuring teacher preparation programs are providing preservice teachers with coursework that addresses social-emotional learning in young children and the developmentally appropriate response to challenging behavior. Ongoing professional development and access to coaching provides supports to those who work closest with the children are key so that teachers and caregivers can build their own skill set and have a support system in place 9Fox et al., 2011; Gadaire et al., 2020). An increase in social-emotional frameworks are being made available for early childhood programs and incorporate these supports for teachers, however there is still a need to ensure teachers and administrators have the time and resources to ensure all components can be fully implemented (Connors-Burrow et al., 2016, Poulou, 2016). Finally, it is key that all children have access to supports and programs to develop social-emotional skills. Research shows the disparity of certain racial-ethnic minorities being suspended or expelled at higher rates and also being underrepresented in early intervention and early childhood special education. This indicates more needs to be done to ensure this gap is closed by means of programs that are

more culturally responsive and diverse. Additional research is needed to determine more

effective means of outreach for all children and families (Hooper & Schweiker, 2020; Morgan et

al., 2012).

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