

## The Roots of Discipline-Induced Trauma for Black Children in Early Childhood Settings

### Introduction

For too long, Black children have been subjected to harsh school disciplinary policies rooted in systemic racism. The pernicious phenomenon of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers being inequitably punished for behavior that is developmentally appropriate causes severe harm to our children, families, communities, and larger society.

Over the coming months, we will explore the issue of discipline in early childhood settings—focusing on the very youngest children. In this first look, we present an overview that traces the historical and systemic roots of harsh discipline practices and outlines policy recommendations for rooting out the problem and instituting positive change.

### Deep-seated History of Institutional Discipline for Black Children

Though COVID-19 led to the closing of countless schools and child care centers, historically children have not been immune from experiencing elements of this moment in the racial justice movement. Children **participated in and organized marches and protests** over the summer of 2020 alongside adults to take a stand against injustice. This builds on our country's deep history of children, particularly Black children, not only participating in activism (including some as young as 4 years old in Birmingham's **Children's March** in 1963), but also being on the receiving end of one of the ways racism shows up—discipline policies.

In care and learning environments, these policies have caused physical, mental, and economic harm and violence for the families of disciplined children. **Discipline policies for young children include** suspension, expulsion, and the less overt concept of pushout or "soft expulsion" in which families are asked that a child not return to a program because of their behavior. These practices have seeped into care and education spaces as young as infancy and toddlerhood. And this is not a new phenomenon for Black children.

Discipline practices in early childhood originate in American slavery. Children were not exempt from the realities of punishment used in this economic structure, **which historians assert** included harsh discipline that caused enduring trauma. Early childhood trauma can lead to adverse childhood experiences or ACEs, which can **manifest as toxic stress or other health issues** later in life. The effects on Black children are particularly insidious when compounded with other social and institutional effects of racism. School integration in the 20th century and the **creation of Head Start** in 1964 as part of President Johnson's War on Poverty also opened the door for integrated **child care that expanded** in the mid 1960s and 1970s. This new reality created a transfer of punishment that existed in society writ large. This, in turn, has spawned the cycle known as the "school-to-prison pipeline" to which Black children are disproportionately subjected. This cycle of discipline, which results in school pushout and leaves children susceptible to interactions with the criminal justice system, is well documented and researched in K-12 schooling and

increasingly in preschool settings.

While Black students comprise approximately 19 percent of the preschool population, they represent 47 percent of preschool suspensions (**U.S. Department of Education 2016**). However, the use of pushout and discipline begins even before preschool, with some infants and toddlers (ages 1-3) facing this cruel treatment. According to an **expert panel convened by SRI Education in 2016**, “one study found that 42 percent of infant/toddler care centers in a state reported at least one expulsion in the past year. Based on these estimated rates and the current enrollment of young children in early care and education settings, more than 300,000 children may be expelled each year.”

In today’s context **this shows up in policies or practices** that ultimately harm both children and their families who must then secure alternate care or frequently miss work. **Some of these policies and practices** result in exclusion from peers, suspension from a program, requests that a child and their family not to return to a program, and repeated conversations with the parent/caretaker about behavior that is common for the child’s developmental phase.

## Policy Solutions

State policymakers, the Biden-Harris Administration, and the 117th Congress should consider several policy approaches to root out this trauma:

- **At the state level:**
  - Work across agencies and with advocates to codify language that bans discipline practices in the early years.
  - Allocate federal Child Care Development Fund dollars for anti-bias training of providers and for the recruitment of diverse providers and educators.
  - Ensure pay parity between providers and educators.
  - **Support infant and toddler mental health** and developmental screenings and services.
  - Collect additional data on disciplinary practices in child care programs to assess demographic information by race/ethnicity on children who have been suspended or expelled.
  - Communicate with parents and caregivers to ensure they know state and program policies. When this communication is bidirectional, it can also help inform policymakers in letting community and parent needs drive policy.
- **At the federal level:**
  - Collect additional data to inform the development of new federal guidance and work with states to address this issue.
  - Update the U.S. Department of Education and Department of Health and Human Services **joint policy statement** on suspension/expulsion policies to 1) include recent data and trends from the pandemic and 2) seek to eliminate these policies in early childhood settings.
  - Adopt language in future legislation on discipline. A good model is included in the **BREATHE Act**, which calls for shifting funds from policing into community-based approaches to public safety and urges our nation to: “Ban zero-tolerance policies, corporal punishment, exclusionary discipline at all levels, punishment for truancy, and subjective infractions as they apply to child care.”

Dismantling racism in child care and early education requires both rooting out policies of exclusion and planting trees of support so children and their families can learn, grow, and thrive.