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CENTERING BLACK FAMILIES:

EQUITABLE DISCIPLINE THROUGH IMPROVED DATA POLICIES IN CHILD CARE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In their earliest years, all children deserve a safe and caring environment, positive interactions with peers and adults, and educational practices and providers that encourage their healthy development. Families who access child care and early learning programs come from diverse backgrounds and communities and bring to bear a wide range of lived experiences. Child care providers may encounter behavioral challenges as young children grow into their personalities; develop fine motor, emotional, and cognitive skills; explore their worlds; and navigate relationships with peers and providers.

Yet managing the behavior and interactions of young children does not happen in a vacuum. Specific groups face unique burdens of racism, discrimination, and unequal treatment, including children from Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color; children in immigrant families; children in families with low incomes; and children with disabilities.

The disproportionate impact of discipline is well documented in the K-12 space and in pre-K, although both are likely underreported. However, it is difficult to get a full picture of discipline for the youngest children (birth to age three) due to a lack of reliable quantitative and qualitative data. Because child care is a privatized system—services are delivered through individual providers—policies, regulations, and data collection vary significantly by state. This fractured landscape has led to a lack of policies aimed at eradicating harsh discipline practices in early care settings and addressing the inequitable impact these practices have on Black families and their very young children.

In this analysis, we focus specifically on disparities in discipline experienced by Black children and families within child care and early learning settings in the earliest years of life. Our society has disproportionately used punishment and harsh discipline—including suspension, expulsion, or pushing families out—to address behavior among Black children when compared to their peers. This phenomenon, which has at its historical precedent the violence Black children and their parents experienced during slavery and the Jim Crow era, reflects the current practice of policing of Black families and communities.

The good news is that state and federal child care agencies are well-equipped to collect data on punishment and discipline and drive policy change. Federally funded programs such as the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) and Head Start can be catalysts for leveraging data to reduce and eliminate inequitable and exclusionary discipline. In doing so, administrators can improve health and safety and bolster child care program quality and access—all of which improve overall child and family wellbeing.

To be clear, using data on discipline to inform policy is not just a matter of collecting more data. Data collection efforts must center those most harmed by such practices and acknowledge historical inequities and racial bias in survey practices and data collection systems. Without changing the status quo on how we collect data and evidence, policies will perpetuate cycles of inequity and harm in the early childhood field. Federal and state policymakers must commit to funding equitable community engagement strategies at every step of the data collection and policy development processes to ensure that solutions address the disparities and systemic inequities in discipline in early education settings.

In summary, we find that:

- **The lack of data on harsh punishment in child care and early learning settings limits our understanding of the effectiveness of disciplinary policies and standards—including outright bans on expulsion or suspension—meant to mitigate harm.** Without data, policymakers lack a clear understanding of the scope and nature of harsh disciplinary practices occurring in child care programs.

- **Policymakers must invest in sources of quantitative and qualitative data on discipline and behavioral management of children ages birth to three.** These data must be disaggregated by race to understand the disproportionate impacts on Black children and families.

- **Federal and state programs such as Head Start and CCDBG are well positioned to begin collecting these data through existing systems.** Collecting data on discipline and punishment in early care settings is the first step to understanding the impact of current practices on young Black children and their families, a prerequisite to establishing policies to mitigate harm and eliminate inequities.

- **Simply collecting more data is an insufficient solution.** State agencies must be intentional and systematic in their efforts to dismantle systemic racism within the data collection process, which often excludes or devalues the unique experiences of Black children and families. And the solutions go far beyond the data collection itself to utilizing the data for meaningful changes in policies and practices.

- **Equitable data practices including community engagement with families and intentional power shifts are key steps to mitigating and eradicating harsh and inequitable discipline in child care.** These efforts will not only promote the health and wellbeing of Black children and families and quality experiences in child care but also contribute to positive social interactions and the improvement of child care and early education programs as a whole.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

We conclude our analysis by offering specific recommendations for federal and state agencies and policymakers. None of these recommendations can be adopted without significant and sustained investment in child care systems and specific investments to address harsh and inequitable discipline. This funding can empower federal and state agencies to link harsh and inequitable discipline to access and quality for infants and toddlers. We urge federal and state policymakers to:

- **Provide increased direct funding to states** with the explicit purpose of supporting the identification and elimination of harsh and disproportionate disciplinary practices and the use of behavioral management in response to perceived challenging behaviors.

- **Pass state legislation** to severely limit or prohibit suspension, expulsion, and removal for all children in state-funded and/or state-licensed programs; support an implementation plan; develop systems of accountability; and provide necessary family, provider, and community supports such as training, professional development, mediation, and child and family related services.

- **Directly connect** continuous quality improvement and health and safety to reducing and prohibiting suspension, expulsion, and/or other disciplinary practices.

- **Transform data collection and analysis** to incorporate equitable data practices that center community engagement, trust building, and intentional power shifts, progressing beyond disaggregating data by race and ethnicity and adding important qualitative context on how to address disparities.

- **Use administrative processes** like statewide needs assessments to conduct outreach and surveys of Black families and communities about their experiences of early childhood programs and systems.

- **Ramp up data collection and analysis**, including the collection of qualitative data, to learn more about expulsion, suspension, and other forms of discipline at the state and federal levels. Use those findings to inform training, professional development, health and safety standards, and strengthen systems of accountability at the federal and state levels.

- **Create an office similar to the Office of Civil Rights** in the U.S. Department of Education that is devoted to protecting the civil rights of very young children, ages zero to three.

- **Create state-wide task forces** to identify and mitigate harsh discipline practices in partnership with lead agencies in the state and/or engage in individual advocacy to uplift the issues.

Simply put, the lack of available data and inclusionary data practices regarding disciplinary practices in child care and early education settings for the youngest children needs significant improvements to ensure we are making necessary policy and practice changes to reverse the harsh and disproportionate discipline of Black children. **Policymakers should commit to a bold vision and plan of action to ensure Black children and families are liberated from policies that harshly punish and strip them of the child care experience** so they can continue to have access to quality child care and supports for their healthy growth and development.