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TITLE: Expelled From Preschool: A Case Study of the Sammy Center's Strengths-Based Catchment Program for Children with "Big Feelings and Emotions"

PRESENTATION TYPE: Organized Paper Symposia Abstract

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Introduction: Exclusionary practices are widespread across the United States but are less visible and understood in early childhood. Exclusionary practices, employed in a child's first introduction to educational institutions are critical for shaping parenting interactions with daycare and preschool expectations, but most importantly, set a negative course for child readiness that exacerbate rather than ameliorate socio-behavior needs of children. Exclusionary practices during this critical developmental period are more detrimental for children in home environments with limited resources to offset the impact of exclusion. To date, most of what we know about exclusion is focused on this practice in preschool and daycare environments such as HeadStart and private programs, sometimes employing national data. But where do excluded children go when these institutional arrangements fail families? Aside from kin and other private solutions, there is little knowledge of what we call "catchment programs" that work to actively address institutional failures and, most importantly, remove the disproportionately private costs of these failures.

Methods: We provide a case study of one such catchment program, the Sammy Center, est 2022 (SLC, Utah), that seeks out children that have been activity removed from mainstream services due to behavioral problems deemed too disruptive for conventional services. We outline the role of a "strengths-based" approach rooted in the Pyramid Model and trauma-informed care using parent interviews and child observations paired with preliminary quantitative results documenting behavior change over the course of two program years.

Results: Preliminary results for the Sammy Centers most disruptive students reveal that behavioral interventions have prevented or significantly reduced behavioral escalations. By tracking the occurrence of challenging behaviors and implementing targeted interventions, the Center also finds a rise in healthy social-emotional learning (SEL) behaviors over time. Preliminary qualitative evidence demonstrates why this approach is uniquely effective.

Conclusion: Catchment programs like the Sammy Center can also alleviate private care providers, where many mothers and caregivers are negotiating both elevated stress at home and home/work life balance in many households, especially homes with severe financial struggle. The Sammy Center demonstrates how critical a committed behavioral care program can be for the most vulnerable families denied access to other, more conventional options. Catchment programs reveal both the institutional failures of mainstream preschool and childcare solutions in early childhood, but also the promise of adopting more positive programming designed to build confidence, connection, and self-regulation for children not only at school, but at home.

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