

Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood

**Exploring the Effects of Suspension and Expulsion on
Families in Early Child Care Programs:
Amplifying and Learning from the Voices of Parents**



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Issue Series Overview

The Delaware Early Care and Education Expulsion and Suspension (DECEES) project is funded by the Delaware Department of Education and is a collaborative effort between the Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood (DIEEC), the University of Delaware Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, the Delaware Department of Education (DDOE), and the Delaware Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS). The DECEES project is designed to examine past and current Delaware initiatives that support continued enrollment of young children under age 5 in state-licensed early care and education programs; understand the state landscape for tracking the expulsion and suspension of young children; and uplift the voices of families impacted by expulsion and/or suspension through a three-part brief series. In the brief series, we define expulsion and suspension in accordance with the definition outlined by *Caring for Our Children*² that is used in the Delaware DHSS policy, *Best Practice Statement for the Prevention of Expulsion and Suspension In Delaware Early Programs*³, as shown in Box 1.

This brief is the third in a three-part series and reports findings from interviews with five Delaware families whose child was expelled or suspended from a Delaware licensed child care program.

Box 1: Expulsion and Suspension Definitions¹

Expulsion—terminating enrollment of a child or family in the regular group setting because of a challenging behavior or a health condition.

Suspension—all other reductions in the amount of time a child may be in attendance of the regular group setting, either by requiring the child to cease attendance for a particular period of time or reducing the number of days or amount of time that a child may attend.

¹ American Academy of Pediatrics, American Public Health Association, & National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education. (2011). *Caring for our children: National health and safety performance standards; Guidelines for early care and education programs*. (3rd ed.). American Academy of Pediatrics.

² American Academy of Pediatrics, American Public Health Association, & National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education. (2011). *Caring for our children: National health and safety performance standards; Guidelines for early care and education programs*. (3rd ed.). American Academy of Pediatrics.

³ Delaware Department of Health and Social Services, Division of Social Services Program, Policy and Development Unit, Purchase of Care. (2019). *Best Practice Statement for the Prevention of Expulsion and Suspension In Delaware Early Childhood Programs*.

Introduction

The suspension and expulsion of young children from early education programs has been documented for decades.^{i,ii,iii} The perspective of educators and administrators is often the dominant voice addressed in early care suspension and expulsion research. Rarely are the voices of the families included in the literature, thus overlooking the perspectives of some of the most important stakeholders in a child's growth and development.^{iv} We expand the scope of knowledge by including the voices of Delaware families to understand their experience with the suspension or expulsion of their young child.

Children are most often suspended or expelled for behaviors that child care providers find challenging.^{v,vi} However, exclusionary practices are not implemented equitably.^{vii,viii,ix} Children with disabilities, children who are Black or African American, and children who are male are disproportionately suspended and expelled from child care programs.^{x,xi,xii} Children who "fit" into multiple marginalized categories (e.g., both Black or African American and disabled) tend to experience more episodes of suspension and expulsion.^{xiii,xiv,xv}

Two recent qualitative studies explored parents'^{xvi} and families'^{xvii} experience with suspension and expulsion of their young child. Zinsser and colleagues shed light on families' experiences by recounting the stories of 16 Illinois families who experienced expulsion of their child (ages 2–5 years) from an early childhood program prior to and after the Illinois policy change that eliminated expulsion. Wahman and colleagues share the experiences of 20 caregivers of preschoolers who were suspended or expelled.

A common theme across both studies related to communication. Parents and families reported experiences of vague informal communication at drop off or pickup that was perceived as a lack of communicating the severity of the teacher's/provider's concerns about their child's behaviors. Likewise, parents and families in both studies reported negative informal communication encounters. During these encounters, families believed that program personnel were conveying threats of the child's temporary exclusion or insinuating parental blame for the child's behavior.

Supporting children was another common theme centered on resources provided to the child and the family. Each study identified the lack of adequate resources available to meet the child's need and not fully employing available resources prior to expulsion. For example, a participant in Wahman et al.'s (2024) study mentioned that even though mental health specialists were available, program personnel did not use them. Another participant stated program personnel did not appear to have training to work with children with disabilities or neurodivergent children. Similarly, Zinsser and colleagues (2024) reported when parents asked about resources that were provided to support their child, many parents indicated that absolutely nothing was provided, and when they hired outside services such as an occupational therapist, the program prohibited the therapist from working with their child onsite.

Our work both confirms and extends findings from these and other studies, particularly around the challenges early care providers have in communicating with families. Findings contribute to shaping both policies and practices in Delaware, but offer insights into broader phenomena experienced in other contexts. In the next section we describe our methodological approach to gathering and analyzing the data.

Methods

Recruitment and Sample

Individuals met the eligibility criteria for this study if they were 18 years or older and were parents, guardians, or caretakers of children who were suspended and/or expelled from a Delaware licensed child care or preschool program. We recruited families using multiple methods. Members of our research team posted recruitment fliers at locations that deliver programming for school-aged children, to locate participants who could reflect on their child's experiences when they were younger. We also emailed the flier to child care program directors/owners, requesting they post and distribute the flier to families. In addition, we posted the recruitment flier on parent Facebook groups, and emailed key individuals identified by a state administrator to elicit their help in locating families.

In total, five parents, who met the eligibility requirements, participated in this study. Each chose their own pseudonym and the pseudonym of their child. Two parents identified their child as Black male, the other three parents identified their child as a Black female, a White male, and a biracial female. Three children were identified as having a developmental delay or disability and two children were suspected to have a disability or developmental delay. Demographic participant data is presented in Table 1.



Data and Analysis

We developed a semi-structured interview protocol to elicit participant insights into their family's experiences with suspension and expulsion. We collaboratively developed our protocol, drawing inspiration from research and our own understandings of practices and trends in early childhood education. The protocol's semi-structured nature was intentional for the purposes of this investigation. While each participant was asked the same set of questions, discussions with the interviewer were diverse due to each family's unique child and experiences.

The first author of this report conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with five parents to understand their experiences with having a child suspended or expelled from a licensed child care or preschool program. Participant consent was received via signed forms and individual interviews were conducted via Zoom virtual platform. Interviews were conducted between April and August 2024 with each lasting approximately 90 minutes. Participants were provided a \$50 e-gift card for their participation.

Zoom transcripts were cleaned for accuracy and verified by research assistants. The first author of this brief analyzed the transcription data using a process of both inductive coding and then deductive coding. After reading each of the interview transcripts, the first author developed a list of 26 codes to link with various excerpts of the interview data using Dedoose qualitative analysis software. Codes included "why families choose their center," "family perspectives on teachers," "what suspension/expulsion felt like to the child," and "impacts of suspension/expulsion on the family". The first author went through each interview and coded them with the existing codes, which showed evidence for five more codes. He then applied these remaining codes to the data during a second round of coding to achieve a deeper analysis. In total 31 codes were used to identify 273 coded excerpts or quotes from participants to make up the data set. The first author then looked for overlaps between coded excerpts for patterns and themes across responses that offered insights into the following research questions:

- What factors contributed to families being suspended and/or expelled from a licensed child care or preschool program?
- How did families and children experience suspension and expulsion?
- What were some of the impacts on being suspended or expelled from the vantage of the family and the child?

Findings

This section presents themes uncovered from interviews conducted with five parents (i.e., mother or father) of a child who had been suspended and/or expelled from a licensed child care program in Delaware. Featured in this section are their experiences narrated through their voices. We explore Rosie's account of her 3-year-old son Samuel's expulsion experience from a center he attended since infancy. Also, we highlight Lynn's experiences of choosing family child care (FCC) for her daughter Ella, and the surprise that came when she was asked to leave. Thomas, the only father interviewed in the sample, recounts experiences drawn from the multiple suspensions and expulsions experienced by his daughter Tyra. Olivia,

whose son Samir was eventually diagnosed with a chromosomal disorder, gave voice to their family's experiences with multiple school suspensions. Cherry drew on her son Sigma's experiences with expulsion and showed how his expulsion also contributed to his younger brother's educational displacement.

Reflecting various racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, age-levels, educational levels, household makeups, and drawing on experiences with both home-based and center-based care, this sample represents a wide breadth of Delaware families who encountered exclusionary practices in early child care. All participants interviewed had full-time employment at the time of their child's suspension and expulsion. They also all transported their child by car as opposed to relying on public transportation. Each family had at least one sibling, and none reported having consistent reliable options for alternative child care other than their programs due to work obligations or the work obligations of close relatives. Except for Lynn and her daughter Ella, all families were suspended or expelled from multiple facilities. During interviews, the first author asked families to focus their reflections on one of their child's placements to more deeply understand the contours of their experiences with one facility's practices.

We explore themes across three broader time frames: 1. Pre-Suspension and Expulsion 2. The Suspension and Expulsion Experience, and 3. The Aftermath of Suspension and Expulsion. Under each time frame are the key sub-themes that emerged from our analysis of interview data. We conclude with recommendations drawn from families' experiences for better policies and practices to mitigate suspension and expulsion and meet children's needs.

Pre-Suspension

In the following, we present the voiced perspectives of families according to the following themes: *choosing the "right fit" for their child; hidden mismatch between child care needs and program offerings; box-checking approach to family communication and engagement.*

Choosing the "Right Fit"

To more fully understand families' experiences with suspension expulsion, it is important to learn about some of their rationale for choosing their licensed child care program initially. Parents chose their centers for a variety of reasons; most were attracted by the facility's proximity to work or home and affordability. Parents also described looking for what Lynn describes as the "right fit." Determining the "right fit" meant weighing various logistical components (e.g., its location and affordability), while also determining its likelihood for serving the unique needs of their child. Parents made strategic decisions on child care facility type (e.g., home-based, center-based, religious-affiliation) based on their desires for the type of care they sought out for their child. Those like Lynn, chose a small home-based program, instead of center-based initially for her infant daughter Ella for the following:

"We were really looking for a home daycare because the centers kind of scared me. I just felt like it wasn't that same level of one-on-one attention. So I was really looking at that home daycare atmosphere where she could be in a smaller group of kids. And there was a little bit more supervision. And I also felt like it was just kind of that more personalized experience."

Ella attended a FCC run by one woman, who worked with her and four other children between the ages of 1-5. After touring 4 other home-based programs, Lynn chose this one, admiring it for its spaciousness, cleanliness, lack of clutter, large back yard, and how affable the childcare provider was. Lynn noted,

“She was just very sweet, very polite, very professional. She had been in the industry for a really long time, like over 20 years, or something like that that she had had a home daycare so it just really felt like the right fit.”

Parents like Olivia and Thomas chose their child’s program based on referrals from other families. Olivia said, “I heard about it actually, from my friend, the one that babysits Samir for me. All her kids went there, and she never had a problem with it.” Those who sent their children to center-based programs were also drawn in by other factors including their reputation and programmatic offerings. Rosie and her husband chose Samuel’s center for multiple reasons, including its religious affiliation and other factors including “its great reputation. 5 stars. Great facilities. So, it just seemed like it was like a win all the way around.” However, as their children started to show increasing behavioral challenges, evidence emerged that their child was not finding success in their early care facility, leaving families thinking that they made a poor choice.

A Hidden Mismatch Between Child Care Needs and Center Offerings

As families settled into their facilities, their children started to reveal behaviors that educators were unable to address adequately, indicating that they might not have found the right fit for their child. Wide chasms started to show a hidden mismatch between family needs and the staff capacity. This hidden mismatch revealed itself within weeks of 2-year-old Sigma’s enrollment in his center.

At the same time Sigma was enrolled in an early childhood center, Cherry noted patterns of what she indicated as “emotional distress” accompanied by “head banging,” “pulling away,” and “eloping”, which lead her to have him evaluated through Child Development Watch, a statewide early intervention program that helps families find support for their children with disabilities or developmental delays. As a result of Sigma’s diagnosis with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Cherry advocated for him to attain an IEP and 504 plan. Due to moving households from southern Delaware to New Castle County, Cherry began touring centers that not only were closer in distance but also better equipped to meet his unique needs.

Cherry was diligent in finding the “right fit” - the best center - for her son Sigma, who Cherry described as outgoing, bright, and intellectual. She thoroughly explored and assessed centers, eventually settling on one of the most popular and well-regarded centers in the state. “I saw the classroom. I met the teacher. I met the administration who was there, and again everyone assured me. He’ll be good. Everything should be fine. We’re going to work this out.” Cherry was forthright about Sigma’s developmental delays and behaviors, sharing with them his IEP and 504 plan. The center agreed to welcome Cherry’s son Sigma and his younger brother. However, things went downhill fast. Cherry said, “literally two or three weeks later, it was like, ‘you gotta come and get him because he is running around this classroom, and we can’t accommodate him.’” According to Cherry, the center simply “did not have enough staff and enough whatever they needed for him at the time.” So, after less than a month, her money was returned, and Cherry was forced to find a new child care center for both her sons.

Accounts from other participants showed a lack of congruence between program offerings and their child's needs. However, Cherry's experiences revealed a mismatch between care needs and center capabilities. Her account also reveals how a program can overestimate their abilities to successfully meet children's unique needs, sending them into a spiral of exclusionary practices.

Box-Checking Approach to Family Communication and Engagement

Parents were in constant communication with teachers and administrators regarding their child's daily behavior, utilizing various communication modes including emails, text messaging, and phone calls. The most frequent type of communication occurred with parent/teacher check-ins during drop-off and pick-up times. Parents like Olivia said that these check-ins about her son Samir, were effective for keeping her abreast on his progress. Olivia noted that during these times, "they updated me about like the everyday um, like situations and his like progress with everything."

But most of the other participants reported that this form of communication was less than ideal, given the needs of their children. For instance, Rosie thought those check-ins were ineffective, noting,

"I couldn't really have a good conversation with them during pick-up, because other parents are coming in, you know? Kids are still in the room. I'm trying to get Samuel ready to go. But yet it checked off a box."

An influx of families and the general excitement of pick-up made for less-than-ideal circumstances for families to share their concerns and hear those of the educator. But, as Rosie noted, "it checked off a box," a notion heard in other families.

The policies in place at these centers mandated documenting and reporting their child's challenges to families. After contacting the parents via phone or chatting with them at drop-off or pick-up, center administrators would convey punitive decisions in ways that participants believed lacked the personal touch or consideration they would have expected. This led families to believe that center leaders were merely "checking off a box" or "going through the motions." This form of engagement appeared insincere, favoring administrative processes of centers over meeting the unique needs of families and their children.

Thomas initially enrolled his daughter Tyra in a family child care program. But after she started to reveal some behavioral challenges, they recommended he consider enrolling her into a better-staffed larger center that could support her unique needs. She was suspended repeatedly from one center for behaviors including eloping and "not listening" as Thomas noted. While he valued their professionalism, he would have appreciated more personalism from the teacher particularly during calls regarding Tyra's behavior. Thomas noted, "The center called on a landline; I never really had no one's cell phone number. It wasn't personable. I would say it was more professional, you know?" He would have appreciated a more direct line to his child's teachers instead of a more formalized call to document the infraction.

As Tyra began to garner a reputation for presenting extreme externalizing behaviors, Thomas was regularly called to pick her up from her various early childhood educational facilities. In describing his engagement with these programs, his feelings reflected evidence of a family being mired in a bureaucratic system. Thomas noted,

“They start documenting things. It's just like a job. Once they find out, your child kind of has a problem with authority... They go like, ‘okay, can you just sign this write up for us?’ They just start making breadcrumbs and eventually want to push you out.”

Centers formulated “breadcrumbs” by documenting behavior infractions on forms, which Thomas had to sign. Although these forms were mandatory and served to keep track of behavioral issues and responses, they created a paper trail— similar to breadcrumbs left to demarcate a path – that led to eventually suspending and expelling their family.

Olivia also encountered formal routines and “box-checking” practices that made her question the center’s desire to really work with her in meeting her son’s needs. Olivia noted the following:

“I would go pick him up, they would say they would just let me know about his suspension. They would give me his little write up and just say, ‘well, he can't come back for 24 or 48 hours,’ and I'm like, ‘okay.’ Sign it and I leave. What else can I do when you guys are saying he can't come back?”

The center administrators informed Olivia about the suspension, requiring her to sign a standard form. Olivia had no opportunity to learn more about the occurrence that led to the suspension or any chance of exploring options other than suspension with their teacher or administrators. But again, they “checked the box” by having her sign off on the disciplinary sanction.

Sometimes, they would forgo this standardized process which fostered not only frustration, but also inconvenience. Olivia said, “There was multiple times where no one said anything to me. I would go pick up and I would go to drop off the next morning, and the director is like, ‘oh, he can't be here, like they didn't have you sign the slip yesterday? He’s suspended.” On the days when she was not informed of Samir’s suspension, she would have to call into work if alternative care options were unavailable.

Rosie, whose son Samuel was eventually expelled from his school, indicated how she felt this box-checking approach was a biased way for letting center staff off the hook for any responsibility for determining other solutions. This procedure justified forms of invisible power the center held over families. Rosie noted,

“It felt like for them, ‘well, I told the parent. I let the parent know what happened.’ Plus, it was also one-sided, right. Like maybe the teacher didn't see it happen, but they heard it from somebody else, or you know at that age Samuel can't express his side of what happened. So maybe they saw something but that they didn't see the antecedent. They just saw the result.”

Rosie felt powerless, and acknowledged the lack of agency afforded her son Samuel for explaining his behaviors or the encounters or contexts triggered his actions.

In sum, basing punitive decisions on these types of standardized approaches left parents like Thomas, Olivia, and Rosie suspicious of the willingness of their child’s center to collaborate for finding alternative

solutions. In the absence of expressing a concerted interest in coming to a more holistic consensus to address and mitigate the child's behavior, center leaders procedurally documented behaviors that checked the box, or were in essence, good enough for meeting center goals often at the expense of the child or family.

Suspension and Expulsion Experience

In the following section, we explore families' experiences during the suspension and expulsion experience by unpacking the following themes: *an invisible line in the sand*; *guilt, rejection, frustration: familial feelings*; and *scared and passed around: mining children's feelings*.

An Invisible Line in the Sand

Rosie, Lynn, and Cherry all noted feeling caught off-guard by the decision of their child care providers to expel their children. They all were acutely aware of their children's behaviors and realized the challenges the programs were having in meeting their children's needs. But none realized that an expulsion decision was imminent. For example, Rosie's extreme frustration and dismay at Samuel's expulsion emerged from misinterpreting the goals and or purposes of the communication between educators and family. Describing her feelings during the meeting where administrators expelled their family, Rosie noted,

“So, I thought we were collaborating. I thought they were interested in just continuing to collaborate with us and work with him. But apparently there was some sort of line in the sand. But we weren't warned that we were coming up to that line.”

Rosie thought that her family and center administrators were collaborating on determining new ways to possibly meet Samuel's unique needs. However, Rosie's family instead had arrived at the “line in the sand.” This line – or the metaphorical boundary beyond which no further advancement could be made – demarcated the borderline between the child's behavior and the center's willingness or ability to keep the family enrolled. It was not only consequential, but it was also *invisible*, meaning that Rosie and her husband did not realize that their family crossed it, leaving them stunned and more importantly, unprepared to handle the implications when they did. Rosie noted,

“They didn't give me a heads up. They didn't say, ‘listen, things aren't working out, you know? We really have to figure this out. Let's try some more things.’ It was kind of like ‘our committee met, and we decided Samuel isn't going to be a good fit here anymore.’ Which to me was like you know, you have community on the door, you know? So, I should be part of the community. Like, it just seemed like it was, we've made our decision, and you're gonna have to live with it.”

Atop the door, as a core governing tenant of their center, was “community.” But the actions of center directors made Rosie and her family feel like outsiders, denied a fair share in the decision-making that would impact their lives. Both the existence of this line and its arbitrary placement was established by the center administrators, who upheld the power to determine where families stood in relation to it.

Lynn reported similar experiences with the invisible line. Her six-month-old daughter Ella was colicky, prone to excessive crying, and required constant holding. Her FCC provider was patient and acquiescent to Ella's needs, holding her nearly the entire day while also attending to the learning needs of the other children under her care. Despite being in constant communication with Ella's day care provider, the expulsion came as a surprise. Lynn said,

"So it was really a shock to us, like we were not prepared at all. We had no indication that it was coming. Now we had had many conversations with her about like how colicky she was, and really the, she always wanted to be held was like a really big one, and I understood that because it was just her you know, is hard enough for me as a mom at home. I can't wash dishes without holding you. I used to baby-wear her all the time because she couldn't be put down ever. She co-slept with me until she was 6 months old because she literally would not go to sleep unless you were touching her. And it was exhausting. So, we had many conversations about like, 'Oh, she had a really rough day today. All she did was scream. You know, she wouldn't let me put her down.' We had lots of conversations about that, but I never in a million years did I see this coming."

Lynn was acutely aware of her child's challenges and was in steady communication with her teacher, but never did the teacher let on that an expulsion was imminent. In hindsight Lynn noted that perhaps Ella's teacher had reached her limit, noting "I think that she was kind of fed up with that a little bit ...towards the end, like the last month or so her reports were less supportive and more condescending." Lynn noticed a tone shift in her teacher, but no clear indication that she would be asked to leave.

Guilt, Rejection, Frustration: Familial Feelings of Suspension and Expulsion

Participants all noted having emotional responses to suspension and/or expulsion experiences. Feelings of guilt, rejection, frustration, and even hopelessness were common in participants' responses. For instance, Rosie noted, "it's devastating. You feel rejected. You feel like you're doing something wrong. You feel like something's broken. Is my child broken?" Also common were compounded feelings about their child's capabilities to find success elsewhere. For instance, Lynn said,

"I feel like I went through a lot of like 'mom guilt.' During that time like what did I do wrong, you know? Did I spoil her too much? Is this my fault?...I was feeling like, is she ever gonna fit in somewhere? Is she ever gonna find a space where she's gonna be content?"

Feelings of guilt coupled with worry over the future of their child. Thomas's reflection on his daughter Tyra's multiple suspensions and expulsion was similar. He noted,

"It was really upsetting. Like it almost felt like almost hopeless. Why, what can I do? What do I have to do with her? Everybody keeps going towards medication. Medication, you know! I'm like 'she's 4 years old!'"

Individuals recommended that Tyra try medication due to her behaviors, and Thomas was resistant to that form of treatment due to her age.

Scared and Passed Around: Mining Children's Feeling of Suspension and Expulsion

Participant accounts revealed clear evidence of the toll suspension and expulsion took on not only families but also the children themselves. Shifting from teacher to teacher or classroom to classroom reflects significant transitional moments for children, let alone from one learning center to another. Cherry's son Sigma was mostly non-verbal at the time of his expulsion, but she described him as having a sense that he was "always in trouble, possibly scared and or like just kind of worried." She also believed that he was keenly aware of what was happening. Cherry noted,

"You may not think they know, but they know. They can feel it, even though they're young. They're not vocal. They can feel it. They know if they being passed around... It was definitely an emotional turmoil for him...because he probably felt as though he wasn't wanted or cared about."

Olivia's son enjoyed going to his child care center, looking forward to it every morning despite his challenges. On the days he was suspended, Olivia described him as fraught with anguish. She said,

"He hated not being able to go to school. He wakes up every day, 'Alright, mom, let's go to school!' And then we're not. 'Oh, no, baby, you can't go to school today like you, you're home today.' He would cry. He would throw a fit. 'Why can't I go to school?' He loves school; he loves going to be around teachers and friends."

Not only did Samir feel and express his anguish over not being able to go to school, but he also started to apologize profusely and censor himself for fear of not being able to attend. Olivia continued, "But now he knows when he does something wrong, because he'll start saying I'm sorry. I'm sorry I won't do it again." This behavior was indicative of his fear of losing out on attending school, not necessarily his understanding of what he did to merit yet another suspension.

The Aftermath of Suspension and Expulsion

In this section we first explore *transitional advice and not transitional support; immediate impacts and echoes of suspension and expulsion* before concluding with some *family messages to stakeholders*.

Transitional Advice and Not Transitional Support

After being notified of their expulsion, the FCC or center allowed the families two weeks' notice in order to find an alternative placement for their child. Unfortunately, neither FCC nor centers provided families any transitional support. This was one of the most frustrating facets of Rosie's family's experience with expulsion; they felt abandoned and a lack of sincerity from a center their son attended from infancy. What they encountered harkened back to the "check-boxing" approach described earlier. Rosie said,

"They're washing their hands. The transition that's not part of what they need to worry about, because going back to 'community.' It's not really 'community,' right? It's a service they're providing. You pay them. You drop your kid off. We take care of your kid and that's it. It's a transaction."

The center's transactional attitude expressed even during expulsion disheartened Rosie and her husband, who were drawn into the center initially for its religious and community values. As they expected more from this center during his educational experience, Rosie and her family expected more as they transitioned elsewhere. This simply was not the case.

While no families received support, participants described garnering what Lynn described as "transitional advice" from their providers. For instance, Ella's teacher thought that Lynn and her family would be better served at a center. Lynn noted,

"She recommended that we search for a center and not a home day care so that was more transitional advice that she gave us because she felt like Ella would do better with children her own age in her group, as opposed to like the three- and four-year-olds with the infant. So, she said, if she was at a center she would be with other infants doing infant things. And she felt like she would do better. And she was absolutely right!"

Thomas garnered more informal advice from one of the center workers about a good option for Tyra after being expelled from her second center. Thomas described the advice he received from her,

"I'll say the last facility she went to, was like she showed me it. She's the only one who showed me the facility that deals with kids that have behaviors. She sent me a text message of another facility, and that was it. That was the only person that's said to go somewhere else."

As evidenced in these accounts, transitional advice was minimal and transitional supports were simply non-existent from the centers themselves. Participants did utilize services from Child Find and Child Development Watch, with varying successes.

Impacts and Echoes of Suspension and Expulsion

Some impacts of suspension and expulsion were immediate, while others continued to echo for the long term for both families and children. Short-term impacts mostly related to immediate financial stress and employment. Rosie, who was married and established in a white collar career, noted more emotional stress with no economic impacts of note. She was able to keep her job, and while staying at home with Samuel was on the table, she was determined to keep and even grow her career. She noted, "I don't wanna give up my career if I don't have to. I worked hard for this career."

Olivia, who was a single mother of two other children, initially described the impacts as related primarily to Samir's transportation. While her other children rode the bus to school, she had to shuttle him to school, and then often pick him up from school earlier than expected due to being called in to retrieve him. Olivia said that

"It was a lot of wasted gas. Having to drive him to daycare, go to work, drive back to the daycare. I mean sometimes, if my mom was off or my stepdad was off, they could watch him. I would have to drive like a half an hour to go drop him off there then back to work."

Although Olivia had some support from her parents with Samir, it varied due to their own work schedule and availability. Olivia was called to retrieve her son from school so much that she gradually had to reduce her hours, move from her home, even change her career altogether. Olivia noted,

“I was either, like leaving early, going in late, like it was, it was a lot. I actually left the job because my hours got cut and there was no way of me like get my hours back...They cut my hours at work at my pain management clinic. I went from working full time down to 15 hours a week, because I kept having to leave work to go pick him up.”

Olivia was trained as a medical assistant, and eventually left her position after having her hours cut from 40 hours a week to 15 hours per week, due to her inability to reasonably predict Samir's steady presence in his early care facility. She also had to move. Olivia noted, “I actually had to move back in with my sister because I couldn't

afford to stay in my apartment. If I'm only working a set amount of hours a week, I can't afford \$1,700, plus my other bills every month.” Samir's experiences with being constantly suspended was a driving force for her moving from her home and even switching careers. Olivia said, “I would have liked to stay in my like the medical assistant field but having to like miss so much work I couldn't stay in that field.”

Thomas also indicated how his daughter's constant experiences with suspension, and his need to avail himself to pick her up, tampered down his career ambitions. He noted that it impacted his “career advancement on jobs. If I wanted to start somewhere new like, how would this go about, if I have the call out twice a week or once a week, because they send her home?” Although Thomas worried about his own career advancement in light of his daughter's need for transportation during the day, he was more concerned about the long-term impacts on her socio-emotional development and overall well-being. Thomas said,

“She's been in six different facilities since she was one...She has not been at one place for one year straight, and it just sucks because she's building relationships with people and going away from them. So, I don't want her to feel a detachment from people, because now she always get attached...and I want her to be able to have something consistent, you know? I don't know how that's gonna affect her long-term, but we're still waiting to find out.”



The impacts of suspension and expulsion on Tyra may continue to echo in her attachment style and relationships with others.

Family's Messages to Stakeholders

At the end of each interview, we asked families to share final thoughts and messages to early childhood center administrators about them and their experiences. Olivia, Cherry, and Thomas all discussed the importance of centers understanding that they were not only welcoming a child, but also an entire family into their environments. Olivia noted, "I'm a single mom. So, it was harder for me to miss work and still have an income. So they definitely need to get to know, like the families that they bring into their child care facilities. Similarly, Thomas noted, that centers needed to know not only about the child, but the family. As he put it, centers needed to know

"Who you are and who you're dealing with, and what and what's coming into those doors, and the family behind them. It's not just the child. When you come in, you don't just need to learn about the child, you should learn about their family."

Olivia also emphasized the need for more supports so that early childhood teachers could better support children like Samir. She noted that she wanted leaders to as she put, "educate their workers on how to deal with kids with developmental delays. I believe, the teachers now they just go through the schooling, and they don't care too much about learning about kids with disabilities and that those kids tend to fall through the cracks." Similarly, Cherry stressed the importance of educators learning how to create and maintain an inclusive classroom.

"I want him to be to learn in an inclusive environment, not to feel as though he gotta sit here and color this while the other kids are there reading that. No, no, no...Don't be exclusive and inclusive; have equity for all, not just for some, but for all."

Rosie and Lynn offered messages geared toward their challenges with seeking transitional supports. Rosie said,

"I really hope that they, at least at a minimum, get trained in what resources are available to parents as they transition out and helping the parent know that their child isn't the only one who has struggled. There's other families out there. This isn't the first time."

For Rosie, centers should help families locate transitional supports and perhaps offer connections to other parents who have faced similar challenges. Lynn wanted program leaders to realize and mitigate the challenges her family faced. She recounted,

"The transition of finding alternate child care is extremely stressful, extremely traumatic, extremely emotionally evoking, and requires a level of support and specifically transitional support to, to navigate that process and just telling them just 'sorry you can't stay. You gotta go' is not enough. Families need to be supported through that process to make sure that they are able to find a reasonable alternative that is beneficial for their children."

Thomas also wanted stakeholders to foreground “love” in their policies and practices. Thomas noted that their children are “not around their loved ones. They’re around you. So, they just want to feel that love because their parents are not there.”

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Recommendations for policies and practices drawn from the expressed experiences of the families we interviewed are detailed by three topics: 1) address the needs of children with disabilities and their families; 2) develop supports for administrators, child care staff and teachers; and 3) provide concrete supports for program transition. Recommendations are detailed below by program-level and state-level.

Program-Level Recommendations

Address the needs of children with disabilities and their families

- Child care programs must develop better ways to attune their policies and practices to the needs of the families of children with disabilities. Families who arrive at the programs with children with diagnosed disabilities should be confident that if accepted, their child can find success. Families who have children who exhibit evidence of disabilities should be confident that the program will make every attempt to meet the needs of the learner.
- Communication with families must move beyond relaying information about perceived behavioral challenges at pick-up. Communication must include face to face discussions that incorporate a collaborative plan between parents and the child care provider.
- Consideration is needed for adapting child care program policies designed to meet the needs of a more traditional student body to a learning or inquiry posture. Such an approach should include working with families to become more inclusive in ways that meet their child’s needs.
- Child care programs must clarify their messaging about their capacity to enroll and support children with developmental delays.

Provide concrete supports for program transition

- Families should be provided transitional supports, not just informal transitional advice, for both parents and children as they seek alternative facilities.
- Families’ employers need to be made aware of their employee’s challenges with their children at their daycare or family child care provider. Centers or FCCs and employers can perhaps partner to support the parent by being more flexible with hours or finding alternative positions in their organization to mitigate the chance of dismissal. Child care programs should be cognizant of the impact suspension and expulsion has on parental employment and families economic well-being.

State-Level Recommendations

Develop supports for administrators, child care staff and teachers

- Center workers need ongoing supports for spotting and addressing developmental delays in children. It took a Child Development Watch specialist only 2 hours of observation to spot a possible chromosomal disorder in Samir. Child care providers were with him for two years, and did not alert her to anything. Workers should get the training to spot issues earlier or at least know when to reach out to those who might be able to identify disorders.
- State guidelines or requirements could be aligned to include fostering family partnerships as a component of a uniform process for managing behaviors perceived as challenging. Parents should be part of the team developing strategies for integrating their child into the child care program. Additionally, programs should maintain documentation of attempted strategies noting what worked and what did not.
- State-level professional development and coaching should include pertinent information on supporting children with an Individualized Family Services Plan (IFSP) or an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

Need for equitable compensation, including wages and benefits, for Delaware child care workforce

- The rotating door of teachers creates disruptions and trauma, especially for children with developmental delays, often leading to the types of behavioral outbursts that get them suspended or expelled. Interventions are needed to not only recruit but retain more educators in early care. Notably, this requires strategies to increase pay and access to benefits.

Conclusion

Parent voices show the care that went into choosing child care programs, programs that were unable to meet their children's needs. Though families communicated with their children's care providers and appreciated the professionalism of educators, many times felt like early child care teachers were merely "checking a box." This practice of documenting behavior infractions instead of providing the form of personalized care and attention they would expect when their child revealed challenging behaviors, spurred heightened stress in the family and made families doubt if care providers had their family's best interest at the core of their mission. Families reported that centers upheld considerable power, drawing an "invisible line in the sand" across which families stepped unknowingly, leaving them unaware that an expulsion was imminent. Feelings of guilt, rejection, and frustration were common among families, while children felt scared and "passed around" when expelled from placement after placement, widening chasms between children and the places they learn and grow.

Suspension and expulsion practices impacted not only families and children emotionally but pragmatically, as families reported loss of income, increase in transportation costs, and even stymied career growth. Instead of transitional support, families garnered advice, which was somewhat helpful for finding alternative placements but not comprehensive in meeting their family's needs. As a result of inadequate

supports, impacts and echoes of suspension and expulsion were both short-term and long-term and varied from family to family.

In conclusion, families of children with disabilities wanted stakeholders to realize that when a child walks through their doors, they bring their family with them. To meet the needs of their children, child care facility leaders and family child care providers need to understand the capacity of their families to respond to the policies and practices of the center, particularly if it is determined that they need to transition to a more suitable placement. Families need to feel that educators acknowledge the gravity of parental stress, suspension and expulsion brings about and intervene with the love that their children yearn for from their providers.



Table 1**Participant and Family Demographics and Characteristics**

Pseudonyms	Parent/ caregivers Description	Household members	Parents Race	Child's age	Child's Race and Gender	Behavioral descriptors (according to family)	Stated rationale for exclusion	Care setting	Suspended or expelled	Eventual Diagnosis
Rosie (Mother) Samuel (Child)	Married, data analytics, advanced degree	Mother, father, Samuel, stepson	White (Mother) White (Father)	3	White male	Twice exceptional, smart, intense, sensory anxiety, big reactions	Running out of the room (eloping), safety to child, peers, and teachers	Religious, private center-based	Expelled	ADHD
Cherry (Mother) Sigma (Child)	Single, various jobs, community advocate, college and post graduate	Mother, grandmother, Sigma, younger brother	Black (Mother) Black (Father)	4	Black male	Outgoing, bright, intellectual, sensitive, strategic, developmental delay, headbanging, not talking,	Could not accommodate his needs, safety, running out of the room (eloping)	Religious, private center-based	Expelled	ADHD, Autism Spectrum
Thomas (Father) Tyra (Child)	Single, shared custody with mother, inventory control, some college	Father, Tyra, older brother	Black (Father) Biracial (Mother)	3	Black female	Curious, smart, tactile, creative, artistic, emotionally volatile, separation anxiety	Hitting peer, safety, not listening, running out of the room (eloping), disrupting naptime	Non-religious center-based	Multiple suspensions, Expelled	Possible ADHD, Autism Spectrum
Olivia (Mother) Samir (Child)	Single, insurance, advanced training in medical assistant	Mother, Samir, two older siblings	White (Mother) Black (Father)	3	Black male	Outgoing, smart, loveable, talkative, developmental delays, separation anxiety	Could not accommodate his needs, throwing tantrums, hitting	Non-religious center-based	Multiple suspensions	Autism, 4-Q Chromosome Deletion
Lynn (Mother) Ella (Daughter)	Married, manufacturing industry, advanced degree	Mother, father, stepson	White (Mother) Black (Father)	6 months	Biracial female	Intelligent, creative, resilient, sensory processing disorder, colicky	Need to be constantly held, excessive crying, inability for teacher to attend to other children	Home-based	Expelled	Possible Autism Spectrum

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