



Research Snapshot No.17

July, 2025

Examining Early Childhood Expulsion Through a Trauma-Informed Lens

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What you need to know

The authors point to research showing that children are more than three times as likely to be expelled from ECE settings than from kindergarten through grade 12. Furthermore, they note that exclusion disproportionately impacts boys, children of colour, children with disabilities, and children who have experienced trauma. At a critical time of development, young children who are most in need of support and having a sense of belonging may be excluded.

The experience of trauma is central to this study and is defined as an event or series of events that impacts a person's ability to cope and that affects them emotionally, cognitively, behaviourally, and/or physically. It is of concern that rates of trauma are high in early childhood, with estimates suggesting that up to one in two preschool-age children experience trauma.

Early childhood settings which implement trauma-informed practice can have a positive effect on the developmental outcomes of children who have experienced trauma. However, Chudzik et al. argue that, without sufficient training, educators may feel overwhelmed and unprepared to support children with challenging behaviour with the result that expulsion is seen as the only option.

What is this research about?

This study was part of a larger project which examined caregiver experiences with expulsion in ECE programs.

By examining early childhood expulsion through a trauma-informed lens, the paper not only explores the influence that previous trauma may have on a child's being expelled but also considers the possibility of expulsion itself leading to (re)traumatisation of the children and their caregivers.

“Caregiver” was defined as an adult who saw themselves in a primary caretaker role for a young child (e.g., mother, father, foster parent, grandparent).

The study utilised the framework developed by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s (SAMHSA, 2014) to determine if the children and caregivers who participated experienced trauma-informed care (TIC).

This TIC framework has four assumptions:

1. realise the widespread impact of trauma,
2. recognise the signs and symptoms of trauma,
3. respond by integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices, and
4. resist re-traumatisation.

In addition, they also applied the intersectional lens of Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory which theorises how race, (dis)ability and ableism are built into the procedures, discourses and institutions of education to interpret the data.

What did the researchers do?

This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews to explore 26 caregivers’ experiences of suspension and expulsion in early childhood.

Participants were from across the USA with the majority identifying as white (n=23), middle-class (n=25), and female (n=24). They were aged between 26 and 48 years and all said English was their primary language.

Nineteen of the children were male and 22 had a disability.

Interviews were conducted over the phone or by Zoom and lasted 26 – 70 minutes.

The transcripts of the interviews were analysed thematically using both deductive and inductive coding by three researchers and coding compared. Participants were sent summaries of the transcripts for checking and were able to make changes.

What did the researchers find?

Firstly, it should be noted that most participants stated that they and/or their children had either experienced trauma before the expulsion or that the experience of expulsion itself caused trauma.

Three main themes and associated sub-themes were identified that aligned with SAMHSA’s framework around TIC. These are listed below together with a quote from a caregiver that illustrates the sub-theme.

1. *ECE Programs are Unprepared to Support Children Who Have Experienced Trauma.* This theme aligns with the recognise, respond, and resist

retraumatizing components of SAMHSA's TIC framework. (The letter and number in brackets indicate the participant who made the comment.)

- a. (Mis)Understanding of Children's Behaviour e.g. "I think that there have been so many transitions that she is misunderstood. She's had bad behaviours over the years because she's with people who didn't understand her or [didn't] know that they were coping responses" (p.22).
 - b. Classroom Practices and Policies. e.g. "They started this burying thing where they would grab those cushions, and they would bury him into the middle until he was done with his meltdowns" (p.19).
2. *Expulsion as a Source of Trauma for Children and Caregivers*. This theme aligns with the resist retraumatizing component of SAMHSA's framework.
- a. Impact of Expulsion on Children. e.g. "A couple of times I drove by it (the EC setting) with her, even a year later, she cries and says she was a bad girl. I just stopped driving that way" (p.3).
 - b. Impact of Expulsion on Caregivers e.g. from a foster caregiver: "I remember feeling like maybe I can't do this. I thought I could be a mom for special needs kids. But I can't have childcare or have a break, I can't do this. Do I need to call and say I need to give one of them back? I can't do this without childcare. It was so stressful." (p.25)
3. *Systemic Issues Causing Trauma*. This theme aligns with the recognise, respond, and resist retraumatization components of SAMHSA's framework.
- a. Navigating Multiple Systems e.g. "Everything was on me to figure out how to do it, what to do next, where I would take her . . . When you're trying to work and you're getting called to go and get your kid, it's hard" (p.5)
 - b. Ableism and Racism e.g., "I just couldn't believe all the stuff that I have to suggest. . . You've had kids with Down syndrome in this school before. All the things I'm suggesting are not revolutionary" (p.10). And: "To me, I felt like I had watched other children who were not Brown misbehaving or screaming at their teachers, "No, shut up!" And they would just be like, "Okay, little Johnny, I'm going to call your mom" (p.9).

How can you use this research?

This study has a number of implications both for early childhood educators and early childhood intervention professionals.

- Use the framework to consider your setting's policies with respect to suspending and/or expelling children and the impact this may have on children and families.
- Explore opportunities for professional learning around trauma-informed practice and the signs and symptoms of trauma.

- Work to implement trauma-informed care as an essential part of family-centred and person-centred practice.
- Act to ensure an inclusive and positive experience for all children and their families, knowing that this prepares them for success in future school settings.

Where to from here

Mia Chudzik and her colleagues have a number of other papers that might be of interest:

Chudzik, M., Corr, C., & Santos, R. M. (2025). Trauma-informed care in early childhood education settings: A scoping literature review. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 53(2), 477-488.

Chudzik, M., Corr, C., & Santos, R. M. (2025). "... We're Not Doing Enough:" Trauma-Informed Care in an Early Childhood Special Education Center. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 45(1), 43-55.

Chudzik, M., Corr, C., & Fisher, K. W. (2024). Trauma-informed care: The professional development needs of Early Childhood Special Education teachers. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 46(1), 113-129.

In addition, the article discussed is part of a special issue on Research to Practice in Trauma and Trauma-Informed Care in Early Childhood Special Education published in *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 2025, Vol 45(1).

About the researchers

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Citation

Chudzik, M., O'Grady, C., Burdick, L., & Corr, C. (2025). Examining early childhood expulsion through a trauma-informed lens. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 45(1), 32-42.

This Research Snapshot was prepared by Christine Johnston PhD, B.A. (Hons), PRECI Director, Associate Professor in the School of Education, Western Sydney University

In the spirit of reconciliation PRECI acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respect to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.