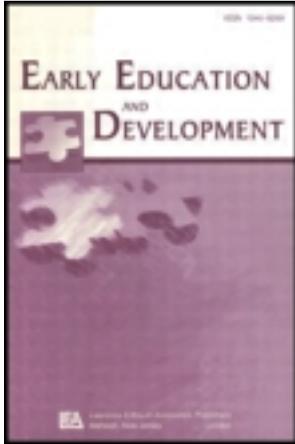


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### Discipline Policies in Early Childhood Care and Education Programs: Building an Infrastructure for Social and Academic Success

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# Discipline Policies in Early Childhood Care and Education Programs: Building an Infrastructure for Social and Academic Success

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*Research Findings:* Preventing challenging behavior in young children is a national priority. The number of young children with behavioral problems is on the rise. Discipline policies can help early childhood programs build an infrastructure that promotes social and academic success. This study sought to document the extent to which existing early childhood program discipline policies implement the essential features for developing high-quality, system-wide (viz., program- and school-wide) discipline policies. Using the Early Childhood Discipline Policy Essentials Checklist, investigators assessed the quality of 65 discipline policies from state-licensed early childhood care and education programs. *Practice or Policy:* Results revealed that early childhood program discipline policies, for the most part, fail to sufficiently address those essential features known to contribute to reducing challenging behavior and promoting prosocial behavior in young children.

In the past, system-level (viz., program- and school-wide) discipline policies have not been perceived to play a significant role in reducing challenging behavior, largely because of limited input from stakeholders and lack of clarity in policy development. Today, the potential importance of addressing challenging behaviors via system-level discipline policies is recognized (Brown & Beckett, 2006; Gottfredson, 1997). Research in K–12 settings over the past 35 years has consistently shown that discipline policies that are understood, accepted, and consistently enforced by administrators, teachers, students, and families correlate with lower levels of challenging behaviors (e.g., Brown & Beckett, 2006). Conversely, copious numbers of early childhood care and education professionals still practice a less consistent class-by-class approach to discipline. In a class-by-class approach to discipline teachers see themselves as independent from one another. Even within the same program, it is not uncommon to find teachers who have different expectations for students' behavior and who use different discipline strategies because they do not perceive themselves as

connected to the whole program (Munn, 1999). Furthermore, there is little documentation regarding the interrelated role that program administrators, teachers, and parents play in improving children's discipline by developing and implementing high-quality, system-level discipline policies.

Early childhood discipline policies that promote developmentally appropriate practices and enhance the optimal development of *all* children can be considered high quality. High-quality discipline policies enable early childhood programs to build an infrastructure that promotes a social climate conducive to learning and academic success, as well as assist early childhood professionals in identifying valued outcomes and priorities for supporting children's social competence. One major advantage of a system-level approach versus a class-by-class approach to discipline is that the system-level approach promotes the involvement of all program personnel and parents in arriving at a consensus view on the student discipline policy. Program personnel and parents are therefore more committed and prepared to support the implementation of a system-level discipline policy because of the collaborative approach to its conception. Most important, implementing system-level discipline policies can be instrumental in guiding administrators, teachers, and families to decipher the difference between high-quality and low-quality discipline programs or practices (Doolittle, Horner, Bradley, Sugai, & Vincent, 2007; Nelson, Martella, & Marchand-Martella, 2002; Netzel & Eber, 2003).

Only 41 states legally require licensed early childhood programs to specify the types of discipline or behavior guidance that programs are allowed to use with children, and 49 states specify forms of discipline that programs are *not* allowed to use with children (National Association for Regulatory Administration and the National Child Care Information and Technical Assistance Center, 2005). For example, the Arizona Department of Health Services Office of Child Care Licensing explicitly states in its child care licensing regulations that facilities should provide and make public "discipline guidelines and methods." Similarly, the Arizona Department of Education requires public schools to

[develop] classroom discipline policies that encompass penalties for excessive absenteeism, procedures for the use of corporal punishment, procedures for dealing with students who have committed or are believed to have committed a crime, as well as procedures and conditions for the readmission of students who have been expelled or suspended for more than 10 days. (<http://www.azleg.state.az.us/ars/15/00843.htm>)

Despite these requirements, limited information is available regarding exemplary discipline policies in early childhood programs.

The two major professional organizations that work on behalf of children between birth and 8 years of age are the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC/CEC). These two organizations have issued position or policy statements advocating for developmentally appropriate early childhood environments for all children, as well as individualized supports and strategies to meet the unique needs of children with challenging behaviors (DEC, 1998; NAEYC, 1999). In order to reduce challenging behaviors in early childhood environments, the NAEYC and the DEC/CEC recommend discipline policies that emphasize the significance of teaching young children prosocial behaviors. In direct contrast to the NAEYC and the DEC/CEC recommendations for developmentally appropriate discipline practices, an alarming number of early childhood environments (a) predominantly rely on the use of exclusionary measures for addressing challenging

behavior; (b) contain poorly written, age-inappropriate behavioral expectations; and (c) only reference working with families in reaction to addressing challenging behavior (Colvin, Kame'enui, & Sugai, 1993; Doolittle et al., 2007; Martella, Nelson, & Marchand-Martella, 2003; National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, 2007; Netzel & Eber, 2003).

The purpose of this article is to expand the knowledge base regarding exemplary discipline policies in early childhood care and education programs. Two studies are presented. Study 1 is a thorough review of the research literature conducted to identify essential features for developing, implementing, and evaluating high-quality, system-level discipline policies. Once identified, the essential features were compiled to develop an early childhood discipline policies checklist, termed the Early Childhood Discipline Policy Essentials Checklist (EC-DPEC; see the Appendix). The purpose of Study 2 was to pilot the EC-DPEC to determine the extent to which the discipline policies of 65 state-licensed early childhood care and education programs addressed each of the essential features in the EC-DPEC and, more specifically, the 28 items in the EC-DPEC. Data for Study 2 were gathered as part of a larger research investigation examining preschool expulsion in Arizona (Perry & Brady, 2007).

## STUDY 1

The purpose of the first study was to identify essential features that are indicated to maximize the likelihood that a discipline policy will contribute to (a) promoting prosocial behavior, (b) reducing challenging behavior, and (c) creating social climates conducive to the academic success of young children. These essential features guided the investigators' conceptualization and development of the EC-DPEC, which can be used by administrators to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of a program's discipline policy.

### Methods

Investigators conducted Internet literature searches and the published literature was surveyed with the assistance of databases from the fields of general education, special education, early childhood education, early care and education, early childhood special education, educational administration, and school psychology. Databases searched included the Education Resources Information Center, PsycINFO, Academic Search Premier, and Google Scholar; databases were searched using the following search terms: *school discipline policies*, *school discipline systems*, *school-wide discipline policies*, *school-wide discipline practices*, *early childhood discipline policies*, *early care and education discipline policies*, *supporting young children with challenging behavior*, and *positive behavior(al) supports*. Citations were reviewed for relevance to the development or implementation of checklists to evaluate the quality of system-wide early childhood care and education discipline policies. In addition, citations were selected for inclusion based on the overall credibility of the source; peer-reviewed, university-published, or government-published documentation was selected when possible. In all, 48 sources were selected for detailed review and were coded for themes; the corresponding themes were grouped into nine key coding categories termed *essential features*.

### Results

We found no examples of checklists that were specifically designed to measure the quality of discipline policies. Results from a comprehensive review of the literature consistently indicated

that high-quality, system-wide early childhood care and education discipline policies should (a) reflect an instructional, proactive approach to discipline that supports the learning and practice of appropriate prosocial behavior (Games & Menlove, 2003; Schweinhart et al., 2005; Sugai & Horner, 2002; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004); (b) identify primary, secondary, and tertiary preventative and intervention practices for promoting prosocial behavior and reducing challenging behavior in young children (Dunlap, Fox, & Hemmeter, 2004; Forness et al., 2000; Mayer, 1995; Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992; Raver & Knitzer, 2002; Schweinhart et al., 2005; Sugai & Horner, 2002; Washburn, Burrello, & Buckman, 2001); (c) describe clear and consistent expectations for behavior (Council for Children with Behavior Disorders, 2002; Lewis & Sugai, 1999; Moldenhauer-Salazar, 2000; Strain & Joseph, 2004); (d) describe behavioral expectations that are developmentally appropriate and essential to social and academic success (Grisham-Brown, Hemmeter, & Pretti-Frontczak, 2005; Gronlund, 2006; Sugai & Horner, 2002); (e) recommend evidence-based and developmentally appropriate guidance strategies for promoting prosocial behavior and reducing challenging behavior (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997; Conroy, Davis, Fox, & Brown, 2002; Conroy, Hendrickson, & Hester, 2004; Dunlap et al., 2003; Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, & Strain, 2003; Hester et al., 2004); (f) emphasize the importance of sufficient and active adult supervision of all children (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997; Reinke & Herman, 2002; Welsh, Stokes, & Greene, 2000); (g) reflect the family-centered nature of early childhood education (Forgatch & Patterson, 1998; Grisham-Brown et al., 2005; McEvoy & Welker, 2000; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Hammond, 2001); (h) ensure that all staff have access to training and technical assistance in implementing policy guidelines and promoting the social competence of young children (Council for Children with Behavior Disorders, 2002; McEvoy & Welker, 2000; Strain & Joseph, 2004); and (i) reference the use of a uniform data collection system by which the relative success or failure of the discipline policy will be evaluated (Sugai & Horner, 2002; Washburn et al., 2001).

### *The EC-DPEC*

The EC-DPEC is a 28-item checklist created by the investigators to assess the quality of discipline policies in early childhood care and education programs. The 28 items in the checklist guided the investigators' ratings of the nine essential features of high-quality program discipline policies along three dimensions: (a) a rating of "no" if the feature was not addressed, (b) a rating of "emerging" if there was at least minimal evidence that the feature was addressed, and (c) a rating of "yes" if the feature was clearly addressed. Because of the heuristic nature of the instrument, the researchers decided to code items rated as yes or emerging with the same point value of 1 for providing at least minimal evidence that the essential feature was addressed within the policy. Each item rated as no was coded with a point value of 0. The highest total score possible on any individual EC-DPEC used in Study 1 and Study 2 was 28 points.

*Instrument validity.* To validate the EC-DPEC, we invited a seven-member panel of content experts to evaluate the validity of the checklist. The panel consisted of two university professors who specialized in addressing challenging behavior, two university professors who specialized in early care and education, one 26-year veteran and National Board Certified first-grade public school teacher, one Chase Early Education Emergent Leader preschool administrator, and one university professor who specialized in psychometrics. Prior to reviewing the checklist, panel

members were provided with background information to help them prepare for their evaluation. This included a summary of the study objectives, a list of the research questions, and a brief description of the study's educational implications. Panel members were then asked to individually respond to the following questions: (a) Are the essential features and the 28 items we selected aligned with the published literature and evidence-based practices? (b) Are any essential features or items missing? (c) Are any essential features or items inappropriate for the checklist? (d) Do the 28 items we selected align with the nine essential features of the checklist?

Following a review of the checklist, the panelists met individually with one of the three researchers to thoroughly discuss their findings. The expert panel's main conclusions and recommendations were then aggregated into a single report. The foremost conclusion was that all seven of the experts agreed that the EC-DPEC addressed the essential features of high-quality discipline policies in early childhood care and education, thereby further substantiating critical points identified in the literature. In addition, the panelists concluded that the 28 items were aligned with the nine essential features of the checklist. Panelists further expressed their satisfaction with the way in which the checklist referred to systematic delivery and data collection (e.g., training and preparation of staff, data collection) and with the simple, straightforward format of the checklist. Recommendations for improving the EC-DPEC included (a) the need for a more nuanced point structure (e.g., a rating of 0 for no, a rating of 0.5 for emerging, and a rating of 1 for yes), (b) the need for an observation form to accompany the checklist to assess whether each item is actually practiced, and (c) the need to incorporate the phrase "observable and measurable" into Essential Feature 4 on behavioral expectations. Of these recommendations, the latter (recommendation c) was incorporated into the existing version of the checklist. The other two recommendations (a and b) will be incorporated into future versions of the checklist.

*Interrater reliability.* Of all of the administrators of licensed early childhood care and education programs who were asked to submit their program discipline policies for review, 41% ( $n = 65$ ) responded (see the Methods section in Study 2 for a more detailed description of the study participants). In order to assess the interrater reliability of the EC-DPEC instrument, the first two authors independently reviewed and rated 15 of the 65 early childhood care and education discipline policies using the EC-DPEC. Thus, a total of 420 ratings ( $15 \text{ policies} \times 28 \text{ items}$ ) were compared between the two raters.

A Pearson correlation test was used to establish interrater reliability through computing the correlation between Rater 1 and Rater 2. The computed Pearson correlation coefficient for overall agreement between the two raters was  $r = .788$  ( $n = 420 \text{ items}$ ),  $p = .01$ , indicating that there was a significant positive and moderately strong relationship between ratings identified by Rater 1 and Rater 2. After the 15 policies were independently rated and the ratings from Rater 1 were compared with those of Rater 2, the investigators met to reach consensus on discrepant ratings. The results of the initial independent analysis were also used to revise and refine the checklist items.

Once consensus on rating was reached, Rater 2 reviewed and rated all 65 policies while Rater 1 independently reviewed and rated a random sample of 728 items (40%) within the 65 policies. The computed Pearson correlation coefficient for overall agreement between the two raters was  $r = .931$  ( $n = 728 \text{ items}$ ),  $p = .01$ , indicating that there was a significant positive and strong relationship between ratings identified by Rater 1 and Rater 2. There were discrepancies in the essential features, with Rater 1 coding positively more often on the item related to whether behavioral expectations were written with clarity and Rater 2 coding positively more often on the

item related to the use of secondary strategies. In addition, the two raters disagreed on how to rate items related to adult supervision (“Addresses adult supervision”) on a small number of the policies. This disagreement was related to the use of the term *adult supervision*; one rater was coding positively only those policies that specifically used the term *adult supervision*, whereas the second rater was coding positively policies that used language that was *related* to the term *adult supervision* (e.g., “staff constantly oversee young children,” “sufficient staff are always available to provide care and education”). Upon discussion, both raters agreed to code for language that either used the term *adult supervision* or used terms directly associated with adult supervision.

## Discussion

In summary, the results of Study 1 identified *nine essential features* of high-quality discipline policies in early childhood education based on the research literature and expert opinion. The nine essential features guided the conceptualization of the only checklist currently known to exist to assess the quality of discipline policies in early childhood programs, the EC-DPEC. Interrater reliability for the EC-DPEC was moderately strong, ranging from  $r = .723$  to  $r = .921$ .

## STUDY 2

The purpose of the second study was to document the degree to which existing early childhood program discipline policies address the nine essential features of high-quality, system-wide early childhood program discipline policies. The research question was as follows: To what extent do existing discipline policies address each of the nine essential features and, more specifically, each of the 28 items in the EC-DPEC?

## Methods

Licensed early child care facilities were identified through the Arizona Department of Health Services Division of Licensing Services Provider Database (<http://www.azdhs.gov/als/databases/index.htm>). The Provider Database lists the names of all of licensed early child care facilities ( $n = 159$ ) and their corresponding mailing addresses. All administrators of licensed early child care facilities in the state of Arizona were sent a survey on preschool expulsion and were asked to submit his or her program discipline policies for review and analysis. Of the early childhood facilities in the sampling frame, 41% ( $n = 65$ ) responded. Table 1 provides the demographic characteristics of the 65 participating early childhood care and education programs.

Each submitted program discipline policy ( $n = 65$ ) was uniformly coded using the EC-DPEC (see Study 1, Results). Given how little information existed on discipline policy evaluation, particularly in early childhood, the intention of the first version of the instrument was to simply identify and pilot the criteria for evaluating discipline policies. Attempting to make subtle variations within criteria without having analyzed sufficient data was, in the opinion of the researchers, premature. However, the data from this study will be used to determine differences between each coding category.

TABLE 1  
Individual and Family Characteristics as a Percentage of the Sample

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Early childhood programs (N = 65)</i>	
	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>
Geographical region in Arizona		
Urban	46	30
Suburban	38	25
Rural	16	10
Program type		
Early childhood state block grant	7	5
Head Start	9	6
Title I	2	1
Independent for profit	20	13
Independent nonprofit	17	11
Family child care provider	14	9
Corporate child care center	5	3
Other	25	16
Average number of children enrolled		
Children ages 0–5		58
Racial background of children enrolled		
Euro-American	58	
Hispanic American	27	
African American	5	
American Indian/Alaska Native	5	
Asian or Pacific Islander	3	
Other	2	
Program accreditation		
National Association for the Education of Young Children	29	19
Association Montessori International/USA	2	1
Association for Christian Schools International	2	1
National Association for Family Child Care	2	1
National Early Childhood Program Accreditation	2	1
No accreditation	17	11
No response	52	34
Education level of program administrators		
Child Development Associate credential	9	6
High school	12	8
Associate's degree	15	10
Bachelor's degree	34	22
Master's degree	23	15

## Results

The results, presented here, were analyzed to convey the quality of these discipline policies in terms of three different criteria: (a) the overall ratings for all 65 discipline policies, (b) the extent to which each of the nine essential features was addressed across policies, and (c) the extent to which each of the 28 items (by essential feature) was addressed across policies.

### *EC-DPEC Overall Ratings*

The average EC-DPEC rating for all 65 discipline policies was 10.2 out of the 28 total points possible ( $SD = 4.34$ ), indicating that on average policies positively addressed 10 out of a possible 28 items related to the nine essential features. The majority of policies (51%) positively addressed 11–20 items, and the remainder of the policies (49%) addressed fewer than 10 of the items.

Essential Feature 1, the need for discipline policies to reflect an instructional, proactive approach to discipline, was the most often addressed essential feature (66%) within the 65 policies reviewed. The least often addressed features included Essential Feature 8, the need for discipline policies to ensure that staff have access to training and technical assistance in implementing the policy and promoting social competence (3%); and Essential Feature 9, the need for discipline policies to reference the use of a data collection system to evaluate the effectiveness of the policy (0%).

### *Ratings of EC-DPEC Items*

Table 2 provides descriptive information for each of the 28 items on the EC-DPEC. The item mean score (the average number of policies that were scored positively for each item) was calculated by dividing the total number of policies that were scored positively for the item by the total number of policies ( $n = 65$ ). For example, the item “tertiary preventative and intervention practices” scored positively in 28 of the 65 discipline policies, resulting in an item mean score of 0.43. To obtain a percentage score, we multiplied the item mean score by 100. For example, an item mean score of 0.43 multiplied by 100 would yield 43%, meaning that the item was scored positively in 43% of the policies.

Item 3, which relates to the use of primary preventative and intervention practices, was the most often addressed item within the 65 policies. The mean score for Item 3 across all 65 policies was 0.93 out of 28, indicating that on average this item was scored positively in 93% of the policies. The following is an example of a policy statement that was scored positively for this item: “Through the consistent use of positive guidance techniques, all teachers will teach children to share with friends, take turns, be good listeners, finish tasks, clean up after themselves, follow rules, solve disagreements, and make good decisions.” This policy statement references universal prevention techniques that are effective for students without serious problem behaviors.

However, the average for the secondary preventative and intervention practices Essential Feature 4 was 0.03, indicating that on average this item was scored positively in only 3% of the policies. The policies that did contain evidence of secondary practices ( $n = 2$ ) referenced the use of a social skills curriculum. For example,

The School has adopted the Discipline with Purpose program in order to provide for our children a positive means of teaching them to become self-directing people... Discipline with Purpose identifies a hierarchy of 15 disciplinary skills which are coordinated with a person's growth and development to provide an objective standard to define self-disciplined behavior.

Secondary practices are necessary for supporting the 5% to 15% of students who are not responding to primary-level prevention efforts. The absence of secondary practices in the

TABLE 2  
Inductively Developed Thematic Categories and Checklist Item Means and Standard Deviations for Early Childhood Discipline Policies (N = 65)

<i>Essential feature</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>EC-DPEC item</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Reflect an instructional, proactive approach to discipline that supports the learning and practice of appropriate prosocial behavior.	EF1	(Item 1) Follows an instructional versus a legal approach	0.66	0.48
Identify primary, secondary, tertiary preventative and intervention practices for promoting prosocial behavior and reducing challenging behavior in young children.	EF2	(Item 2) Emphasis on teaching acceptable social norms and desired behaviors (Item 3) Primary preventative and intervention practices	0.66	0.48
Describe clear and consistent expectations for behavior.	EF3	(Item 5) Tertiary preventative and intervention practices (Item 4) Secondary preventative and intervention practices (Item 9) Policy contains a mission statement (Item 6) Behavioral expectations are written with clarity (Item 7) Consistency across staff	0.43 0.03 0.60 0.48 0.35	0.50 0.17 0.49 0.50 0.48
Describe behavioral expectations that are developmentally appropriate and essential to social and academic success.	EF4	(Item 8) Connection to individual classroom rules (Item 12) Behavioral expectations stated positively	0.35 0.72	0.48 0.45
Recommend evidence-based and developmentally appropriate guidance strategies for promoting prosocial behavior and reducing challenging behavior.	EF5	(Item 13) Enhances children's self-perceptions (Item 10) Behavioral expectations are developmentally appropriate (Item 11) Teach setting specific social skills (Item 14) Developmentally appropriate guidance strategies	0.08 0.60 0.91	0.27 0.49 0.29
Emphasize the importance of sufficient and active adult supervision of all children.	EF6	(Item 15) Multiple strategies recommended (Item 16) Identification of unacceptable guidance strategies (Item 18) Ecological arrangements (Item 17) Engaging curriculum (Item 19) Sufficient adult supervision	0.91 0.42 0.15 0.11 0.25	0.29 0.50 0.36 0.31 0.43
Reflect the family-centered nature of early childhood education.	EF7	(Item 20) Active adult supervision (Item 22) Promote staff-family collaboration in dealing with challenging behavior	0.00 0.58	0.00 0.50

(Continued)

TABLE 2  
Continued

<i>Essential feature</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>EC-DPEC item</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
		<i>(Item 21)</i> Promote proactive collaborative relationships with families	0.11	0.31
		<i>(Item 24)</i> Promote embedding individual behavior plans into family/home routines	0.08	0.27
		<i>(Item 23)</i> Obtain contextual and culturally relevant information	0.05	0.21
Ensure that staff members have access to training and technical assistance in implementing policy guidelines and promoting the social competence of young children.	EF8	<i>(Item 25)</i> Preparation and training of staff	0.05	0.21
Reference the use of a data collection system by which the relative success or failure of the discipline policy will be evaluated.	EF9	<i>(Item 26)</i> Continued professional development <i>(Item 27)</i> Policy evaluation procedure	0.02 0.00	0.12 0.00
		<i>(Item 28)</i> Formative and summative evaluations	0.00	0.00

*Note.* EC-DPEC = Early Childhood Discipline Policy Essentials Checklist; EF = Essential Feature.

discipline policies in this study indicates a lack of systematic efforts for targeting students who are considered at risk for chronic problem behaviors.

The average for the tertiary preventative and intervention practices item (Item 5) was 0.43, indicating that on average this item was scored positively in 43% of the policies. Statements such as “establishing an individual behavior plan” and “collaborating with the family to create a plan to improve the child’s behavior” provided evidence of tertiary practices. It is important to note that despite the relatively high mean for tertiary preventative and intervention practices, policies frequently cited expulsion and suspension as intervention practices used to address chronic problem behaviors ( $n = 31$ ).

The two next most frequently addressed items related to the policy’s recommendation of developmentally appropriate guidance strategies (Item 14;  $M = 0.91$ ) and the use of multiple strategies (Item 15;  $M = 0.91$ ); each was scored positively in 91% of the policies. The item pertaining to behavioral expectations stated positively (Item 12;  $M = 0.72$ ) was the next most frequently addressed item, scoring positively in 72% of the policies. Positively scored Items 14, 15, and 12 are illustrated in the following policy statement:

The following are samples of positive guidance techniques you may observe or hear the teacher use during a school day: *Positive Statements*—“We walk in the class room. We run outside.” *Acknowledgement*—“You remembered to walk in the classroom instead of running.” *Modeling*—“Watch how I walk in the classroom. I am practicing keeping myself and others safe.” *Behavioral Choices*—“Children are given the opportunity to think about their behavior and to choose appropriate ways to express their emotional needs.” *Time Away from Group*—(used by teaching staff only) Children are given the opportunity to regain self-control in the classroom by taking a brief time away from the group.

It is interesting to note how infrequently policies referenced the use of indirect strategies, such as arranging indoor/outdoor environments, arranging temporal environments, and implementing an engaging curriculum, to promote prosocial behavior. The item related to the need to offer an engaging curriculum (Item 17) was scored positively in only 11% of policies, and the item related to ecological arrangements (Item 18) was scored positively in only 15% of policies. A policy that scored positively on both of these items stated,

Guidance takes several forms including the environmental design (e.g., a place designed for children, furniture is child-sized, activities are planned for children to have lots of hands-on experiences) and the curriculum (e.g., is developmentally appropriate, based on the children’s interests and level of readiness).

Policies reflecting developmentally inappropriate behavioral guidance strategies and coded as no by investigators focused primarily on suspension and expulsion. For example, “Violation of the rules will result in one or more of the following: Incident Form, Referral, Parent Conference, Suspension or Expulsion.”

The least often addressed items included Item 26, the need for discipline policies to ensure that staff have access to training and technical assistance in implementing the policy and promoting social competence; and Items 27 and 28, the need for discipline policies to reference the use of a data collection system to evaluate the effectiveness of the policy. The mean score for each of these items across all 65 policies was 0.0, indicating that none (0%) of the items were scored positively. In other words, none of the 65 discipline policies referenced a data collection system

for determining the relative success or failure of the policy. In addition, the item related to sufficient adult supervision (Item 19) also scored a mean of 0.0, indicating that none of the 65 policies referenced the importance of sufficient adult supervision (e.g., adult-to-child ratios).

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

The results of Study 2 revealed that the development of system-wide discipline policies in early childhood care and education programs in Arizona has, for the most part, been given scant attention. Our findings imply that promoting the social competence of young children is not an educational priority that is currently reflected in the discipline policies reviewed for this study. Without question, promoting social competence is an educational priority for individual teachers and the groups of children they serve, but individual efforts are insufficient to address a system-wide issue. Early childhood care and education discipline policies must conform to federal and state statutes and district policy; however, by addressing the essential features described in this article, policies are more likely to contribute to an infrastructure that promotes the social and academic success of *all* young children.

### Limitations of the Present Study

Although the results from the pilot study indicate that the EC-DPEC is a promising tool for evaluating early childhood program discipline policies, it is necessary to note weaknesses. First, this instrument is intended for use by early care and education administrators and other experts who are engaged in evaluating the quality of early childhood programs. The instrument itself lists 28 heuristics for evaluating early childhood discipline policies that are based upon evidence-based findings in the early care and education professional literature. Although we have tried to be comprehensive, experts may decide to add new heuristics deemed relevant to the types of discipline policies being evaluated or to the expert's specific expertise. Second, the instrument will never reveal complete discipline practices, and this is one reason to use the EC-DPEC in combination with other discipline policy evaluation tools, such as direct observation records. Finally, the data from the present study are useful for developing criteria for discipline policy evaluations in early childhood but are limited in terms of their generalizability because of the small and geographically limited sample size used. Little information is known, for example, about the discipline policies and the characteristics of the 59% of early childhood facilities that did not participate in this study. Future research should utilize a larger sample size to determine the reliability of the EC-DPEC.

Despite these limitations, these two studies shed light on an as yet incompletely understood phenomenon—the significant role of systems-level discipline policies in early care and education programs. Although data from these studies indicate that the importance of discipline policies in early childhood care and education is largely unrecognized, the EC-DPEC is a promising tool for supporting early childhood programs as they work to create a system-wide discipline policy.

### Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research Efforts

This article has reported on the development of a measure for assessing the quality of early childhood discipline policies (Study 1) and the implementation of this measure using a sample of 65

randomly selected discipline policies collected from licensed child care centers in Arizona (Study 2). Based on an extensive review of the literature and on expert opinion, we identified nine essential features of high-quality discipline policies in early childhood education. Previous research has demonstrated that systematic, program-wide universal, secondary, and interventional practices can lead to positive preventative and remedial outcomes for young children (Center for Evidence-Based Practice: Young Children With Challenging Behavior, 2004; Dunlap et al., 2004; Smith & Fox, 2003). The EC-DPEC provides an infrastructure for programs to ensure that they are implementing such practices. Preliminary findings on the interrater reliability of the EC-DPEC indicate that there is a high level of consistency in the use of the checklist among different raters ( $r_s = .723-.921$ ). Future research will need to be conducted to further assess the validity and reliability of the checklist.

The results of Study 2 revealed that on average discipline policies in early childhood care and education programs in Arizona are only addressing 10 out of a possible 28 items on the EC-DPEC; 49% of the policies addressed fewer than 10 of the items on the checklist. One unexpected finding is the high percentage of policies (93%) that addressed the use of primary preventative and intervention practices. Previous research suggests that discipline policies tend to emphasize practices at the tertiary (or intervention) level, despite the fact that numerous evidence-based practices exist at the universal and secondary levels (e.g., Conroy, Dunlap, Clark, & Alter, 2005). Our data, however, revealed that universal prevention techniques are explicitly mentioned in a majority of policy statements. Secondary preventative and intervention practices, which focus on teaching social skills to students who may be at risk for challenging behaviors, were only addressed in 3% of the policies, however. Although tertiary practices were addressed 43% of the time, they were still more punitive in nature (focused on the punishment that the child would receive rather than the intervention). These findings suggest a strong need for practitioners to become more explicit and intentional with regard to their approaches to interventional practices.

The results of Study 2 also demonstrated the need for discipline policies to ensure that staff have access to training and technical assistance in implementing the policy. Not one of the 65 policies addressed the items related to staff training and technical assistance. Although early childhood care and education programs may in fact be providing this support, it is imperative that expectations for training and assistance be explicitly stated in the discipline policy. Doing this ensures that discipline practices are widely accepted and enforced by teachers (Brown & Beckett, 2006). In addition, teachers who are trained and provided with support are more likely to be committed to implementing the discipline policy over time, which is especially beneficial for children who need multiple levels of support (Munn, 1999).

Based upon the synthesis and the results, we make the following recommendations for further research. First, to strengthen the validity and reliability of the EC-DPEC, a more expansive field study should be conducted with a group of national experts in the field of early childhood education and care. This group could be recruited from national early childhood organizations (NAEYC, DEC) as well as from a national sample of early childhood education and care programs. Such a study could further verify the validity of the items on the checklist and could also provide information regarding the need for additional items. For example, although the EC-DPEC currently addresses the link between discipline policies and curricular engagement and ecological arrangements, it may be beneficial to add an additional item addressing other organizational features that could impact discipline (e.g., schedules, routines, classroom layout).

Second, the data from this pilot study should be reevaluated using a 3-point rather than a 2-point rating scale (in this study, items scored as yes or as emerging were both worth 1 point). Such an analysis would provide a more refined picture of the current quality of discipline policies in Arizona as well as in other states. This more nuanced scoring system should be incorporated into future versions of the EC-DPEC.

Third, descriptive studies are needed that document the extent to which high-quality, system-wide discipline policies are consistently enforced in the classroom. Such descriptive studies could document the current gaps in teacher preparation and training of discipline policies as well as behavior outcomes of children impacted by these discipline policies.

Lastly, agencies currently involved in early childhood education and care (e.g., the Arizona Health Board, Arizona Department of Education) should launch a collaborative, multiyear effort to study the development and implementation of high-quality, system-wide discipline policies. Such a study could build upon several small programs that are experimenting with discipline policies. In addition, this study could determine whether problems in implementing high-quality discipline problems stem from policies developed at agency/state levels or at program levels. The study should incorporate a rigorous research design and data collection system that can be replicated and brought to a national scale.

### Implications for Educators

High-quality discipline policies in early childhood programs promote practices that are developmentally appropriate and enhance the optimal development of *all* children. The two major professional organizations that work on behalf of children between birth and 8 years of age are the NAEYC and the DEC/CEC. NAEYC and DEC/CEC have both issued position or policy statements advocating for developmentally appropriate early childhood environments for all children, as well as individualized supports and strategies to meet the unique needs of children with challenging behaviors (DEC, 1998; NAEYC, 1999). Conversely, discipline policies that are in direct contrast to NAEYC and DEC/CEC recommended practices (a) do not emphasize the significance of teaching young children appropriate social behaviors; (b) rely predominantly on the use of exclusionary measures for addressing challenging behavior; (c) contain poorly written, age-inappropriate behavioral expectations; and (d) only reference working with families in reaction to addressing challenging behavior (Colvin et al., 1993; Doolittle et al., 2007; Martella et al., 2003; National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, 2007; Netzel & Eber, 2003).

### *Evaluation Tool*

The EC-DPEC may be a useful tool for administrators of early childhood care and education programs to use to evaluate, refine, and revise existing discipline policies as needed or to use as a guide in the development of new discipline policies for programs serving children between birth and 8 years of age. The EC-DPEC may provide administrators with their first opportunity to examine their discipline policies systematically and to take a more objective look at current discipline practices. This opportunity for evaluation could contribute to profound, substantial changes in the way in which early childhood care and education programs go about the business of reducing challenging behavior and promoting prosocial behavior in the young children they serve.

It is important to note that although high-quality discipline policies can assist programs and providers in building an infrastructure for social and academic success, strong leadership is critical to the success of any policy. Administrators must provide the resources and support to ensure that the policy is understood and accepted by early childhood professionals and families and consistently implemented by program personnel. In addition, administrators must establish structures and procedures for a data collection system to evaluate the relative effectiveness of the discipline policy. Identifying important and positive outcomes of a discipline policy can (a) maintain the morale of staff, (b) build a case for the sustainability or expansion of the discipline policy, and (c) reaffirm the program's mission to promote the social and academic success of young children.

### *Teacher Training*

Teachers who consistently implement high-quality discipline policies can enhance children's prosocial behavior and may decrease incidences of challenging behavior (Sugai & Horner, 2002). Consequently, effective teacher preparation and training may be a key component in successfully implementing high-quality, system-wide discipline policies. The EC-DPEC could guide program administrators and teacher educators as they train teachers to address the nine essential features of high-quality discipline policies.

In sum, the data from these two studies indicate that the EC-DPEC is a promising tool for early childhood programs to use when creating and refining high-quality, system-wide discipline policies. Future research would benefit from a larger sample size, as well as greater sample diversity in terms of early childhood center characteristics and regional background.

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## APPENDIX

### The Early Childhood Discipline Policy Essentials Checklist (EC-DPEC): A Self-Assessment

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- 1) *Early childhood discipline policies should reflect an instructional, proactive approach to discipline that supports the learning and practice of appropriate prosocial behavior.*
1. Does the policy follow an instructional versus a “legal” approach to discipline?
  2. Is there an emphasis on teaching acceptable social norms and desired behaviors?
- 2) *Early childhood discipline policies should identify primary, secondary, and tertiary preventative and intervention practices for promoting prosocial behavior and reducing challenging behavior in young children.*

3. Does the policy describe primary strategies to teach and reinforce prosocial behaviors in all children?
  4. Does the policy describe secondary strategies for children at risk for problem behaviors?
  5. Does the policy describe tertiary strategies for children who exhibit chronic and intense problem behavior?
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3) *Early childhood discipline policies should describe clear and consistent expectations for behavior.*

6. Are the behavioral expectations written with clarity? Do the behavioral expectations describe behaviors that are observable and measurable?
  7. Are the behavioral expectations written in such a way as to promote consistency in understanding and implementation across staff?
  8. Is a connection between policy behavioral expectations and individual classroom rules possible and probable?
  9. Does the policy contain a mission statement? Is the long-term objective of the discipline policy clearly articulated?
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4) *Early childhood discipline policies should describe behavioral expectations that are developmentally appropriate and essential to social and academic success.*

10. Are the behavioral expectations developmentally appropriate, reflecting the natural learning abilities typically associated with the age groups of the children?
  11. Does the policy address the need to teach children setting specific social skills (e.g., playground, classroom)?
  12. Are the behavioral expectations stated positively, emphasizing what children can and should do versus what they cannot do?
  13. Are the behavioral expectations designed to enhance children's self-perceptions, promoting external to internal foci from staff to self?
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5) *Early childhood discipline policies should recommend evidence-based and developmentally appropriate guidance strategies for promoting prosocial behavior and reducing challenging behavior.*

14. Are the suggested guidance strategies developmentally appropriate?
  15. Are multiple evidence-based and developmentally appropriate strategies recommended?
  16. Have guidance strategies that are unacceptable for use by staff (e.g., humiliation, depriving meals, snacks, rest, etc.) been identified? Note: This is often a requirement of state early care and education licensing agencies.
  17. Does the policy stress the value of an engaging curriculum as a deterrent to challenging behavior?
  18. Does the policy address the use of ecological arrangements as a means for promoting positive, prosocial behavior?
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6) *Early childhood discipline policies should emphasize the importance of sufficient and active adult supervision of all children.*

19. Does the policy emphasize the importance of the sufficient and active adult supervision of all children?
  20. Does the policy establish provisions for ensuring that staff continuously (at all times) monitor and respond to children's behavior?
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7) *Early childhood discipline policies should reflect the family-centered nature of early childhood education.*

21. Does the policy promote proactive (not just reactive) collaborative relationships with families as a means of promoting social competence in children?
  22. Does the policy promote authentic staff–family collaboration in effectively dealing with challenging behavior? Are families given an opportunity to participate in developing and implementing interventions?
  23. Does the policy describe the need for obtaining contextually and culturally relevant information (e.g., at-home sleeping and eating habits, family events, favorite toys and activities) from families in order to understand children's inappropriate behavior?
  24. Does the policy promote embedding individual behavior support plan goals and objectives into family/home routines and activities?
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8) *Early childhood discipline policies should ensure that staff members have access to training and technical assistance in implementing policy guidelines and promoting the social competence of young children.*

25. Does the policy ensure the preparation and training of staff in understanding the school/center discipline policy?
  26. Does the policy provide for the preparation and training of staff to increase their repertoires of discipline strategies? Is access to opportunities for continued professional development discussed?
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9) *Early childhood discipline policies should reference the use of a data collection system by which the relative success or failure of the discipline policy will be evaluated.*

27. Does the policy describe if/how the success or failure of the policy will be measured? Are policy evaluation procedures in place?
28. Does the policy provide for both formative (i.e., policy integrity research) and summative (i.e., impact of the policies on children, staff, etc.) evaluations?