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Early Childhood Education Journal

ISSN 1082-3301

Early Childhood Educ J

DOI 10.1007/s10643-015-0713-6



VOLUME 43, NUMBER 4

JULY 2015

ECEJFA 43(4) 249-346 (2015)

ISSN 1082-3301

Early
Childhood
Education
Journal

 Springer

 Springer

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Using the Teaching and Guidance Policy Essentials Checklist to Build and Support Effective Early Childhood Systems

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Abstract The prevalence of preschool expulsion, coupled with racial disparities in expulsion rates and the potential long term negative effects of challenging behaviors in the early years, has created an urgent need to build early childhood systems to address these issues. The teaching and guidance policy essentials checklist (TAG-PEC) has been developed to assess nine essential features of high quality early childhood discipline policies and can be used by early childhood programs in a variety of settings to evaluate, refine, and revise existing policies or guide in the development of new policies. Using data from 282 guidance policies assessed using the TAG-PEC, the authors use a framework for systems building developed by Coffman (A framework for evaluating systems initiatives, 2007) to position the TAG-PEC as a powerful tool that can be used to help build and support an effective and cohesive early childhood system. Findings indicate that, overall, discipline policies were not high quality and there was a great deal of variability in the TAG-PEC scores. By bringing evidence based practices to the field via a simple to use checklist, the authors hope to help

contribute to the development of a comprehensive early childhood system and that supports programs in the provision of high quality services to children and families.

Keywords Discipline policies · Child guidance · Early childhood systems · Challenging behavior

Introduction

It is estimated that between 10 and 21 percent of preschool children exhibit challenging behavior (Snell et al. 2012), and preschoolers are expelled at more than three times the rate of their K-12 peers (Gilliam 2005). Furthermore, it has been shown that children identified with aggressive behavior in preschool are more likely to experience continuing behavior problems throughout elementary school and into adolescence (Campbell et al. 2006; McCartney et al. 2010). Data on preschoolers from low-income backgrounds suggest that they may be at higher risk for problem behaviors, with estimates ranging from 7 to 31 % for internalizing disorders in Head Start samples and as high as 57 % for externalizing problems in community-based samples (Qi and Kaiser 2003). The need for early intervention with children with challenging behaviors is critical in order to prevent ongoing behavior problems (Campbell 1995; Campbell et al. 2006; Shaw et al. 2000) and support children's future success.

While numerous evidence-based practices exist for effectively reducing challenging behaviors and promoting prosocial behavior in young children (Conroy et al. 2005; Fox et al. 2003, 2010; Webster-Stratton and Taylor 2001), the lack of system-level support is a major impediment to the widespread adoption of these practices. Kagan et al. (2007) have referred to early childhood education as a

Electronic supplementary material The online version of this article (doi:10.1007/s10643-015-0713-6) contains supplementary material, which is available to authorized users.

Copies of the checklist can be obtained by contacting either the first (sgarrity@mail.sdsu.edu) or second author (slongstreth@mail.sdsu.edu).

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“non-system”, noting that it lacks the overarching governance, funding, and accountability mechanisms present in the K-12 environment. Moreover, early childhood programs represent a “hodgepodge” of programs (for profit, non-profit, faith-based, Head Start, state preschool, co-ops, and family child care homes), many of which have disparate and oftentimes “comingled”, “braided”, or “layered” funding streams and programmatic requirements. Kagan and Kauerz (2012) notes that the lack of a comprehensive early childhood system leads to variability in the services provided to young children and their families, particularly in the areas of equity, replicability, sustainability, accountability, and quality. As such, efforts are currently underway to institutionalize early childhood programs and policies into robust systems that can make the “promise of preschool” a reality.

Policies are an inherent component of effective and systemic service delivery, as they represent an intentional set of guiding principles designed to help translate the goals of the system into practice. Research in K-12 settings over the past 35 years has consistently shown that discipline policies that are systemic in nature and are understood, accepted, and consistently enforced by administrators, teachers, students, and families correlate with lower levels of challenging behaviors (e.g., Brown and Beckett 2006). Early childhood discipline policies that promote developmentally appropriate practices and are grounded in research 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. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Division for Early Childhood, Council for Exceptional Children (DEC/CEC) 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 (National Association for the Education of Young Children 1999; Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children 1998). 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 (1) predominantly rely on the use of exclusionary measures for addressing challenging behavior; (2) contain poorly written, age-inappropriate behavioral expectations; and (3) only reference working with families in reaction to addressing challenging behavior (Colvin et al. 1993; Doolittle et al. 2007; Longstreth et al. 2013; Martella et al. 2003; National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality 2007; Netzel and Eber 2003). This extant data clearly point to the need for additional systems-level support to help early childhood programs develop and implement high quality discipline policies in order to prevent and address challenging behavior in the early years.

The Teaching and Guidance Policies Essentials Checklist (TAG-PEC)

The Teaching and Guidance Policies Essentials Checklist (TAG-PEC) is a 28 item checklist that captures nine essential features of high quality discipline policies for programs serving children 0–8 years of age. The purpose of this manuscript is to position the TAC-PEC as a powerful tool that can be used by early childhood programs in a variety of settings (Head Start, state preschool, family child care homes, faith based programs, and for and non-profit programs) to evaluate, refine, and revise existing policies or guide in the development of new policies. By bringing evidence based practices to the field via a simple to use checklist, the authors hope to help contribute to the development of a comprehensive early childhood system and that supports programs in the provision of high quality services to children and families. Coffman (2007) has proposed a framework for building early childhood systems that reflects an intentional, organized approach to creating or improving both the system and the outcomes it is designed to produce. Coffman’s typology addresses the need for a common understanding about systems-building efforts and describes five areas of focus, presented in Table 1.

Using Coffman’s framework as our guide, we present data from a national survey of 282 early childhood programs accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) to illustrate how

Table 1 Systems building areas of focus

1. Context	Changing the political environment that surrounds the system and affects success
2. Components	Establishing high-performing and quality programs and services
3. Connections	Creating strong and effective linkage across the system
4. Infrastructure	Developing the supports the system needs to function effectively and with quality
5. Scale	Ensuring the system is comprehensive and works for all children

the TAC-PEC supports the 5 areas of systems building described by Coffman. We will first provide a description of the TAG-PEC, followed by the presentation of data highlighting the need to bring evidence based practices to the field. Finally, we will discuss how the TAG-PEC can be used to help build a high quality, comprehensive early childhood system via its focus on preventing and addressing challenging behavior in the classroom.

Development of the TAG-PEC

The TAG-PEC originated from the recognition that 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 et al. 2007; Nelson et al. 2002; Netzel and Eber 2003) and to support programs in the provision of evidence based practices to prevent and address challenging behavior in preschool settings. Longstreth et al. (2013) developed an earlier version of the TAG-PEC, *The Early Childhood Discipline Policy Essentials Checklist* (EC-DPEC) via an extensive review of the literature in the fields of general education, special education, early childhood education, early care and education, early childhood special education, educational administration, and school psychology. Citations from high quality publications (peer-reviewed, government or university publications) were reviewed for relevance to the development or implementation of checklists to evaluate the quality of system-wide early childhood discipline policies. Forty-eight sources were selected for detailed review, were thematically coded, and corresponding themes were grouped into nine key coding categories, termed essential features. Additional information on the development of the EC-DPEC, including information on its reliability and validity, has been reported elsewhere (see Longstreth et al. 2013).

In a pilot study, the EC-DPEC was used to assess the quality of 65 discipline policies from state-licensed early childhood programs in the state of Arizona. Results indicated that programs addressed fewer than half (10/28) of the items essential to high-quality discipline policies, and researchers concluded that early childhood program discipline policies, for the most part, failed to sufficiently address the essential features known to contribute to reducing challenging behavior and promoting prosocial behavior in young children. Because of the small sample size of the study and its focus on a specific geographical region, investigators saw the need to conduct further research to determine the extent to which the nine essential features are addressed on a national level. While preparing to implement this larger study, the authors revised the name of the checklist to reflect their philosophical orientation

towards the centrality of teaching and guidance in early childhood education. As such, the *Teaching and Guidance Policy Essentials Checklist* is based on humanistic values in which all children are viewed as having an innate capacity for self-actualization and should be treated with dignity and respect. From this vantage point, the role of the caregiver is to assist children to reach their highest potential (Rogers 1961), and the use of strategies that are punitive, degrading and/or dehumanizing are prohibited (Horner et al. 1990). This view is further concretized by the tool's focus on guidance rather than discipline. Traditional discipline approaches typically involve punishing children for misbehavior, valuing obedience over learning, power assertions between the caregiver and child, and strategies that may hurt, shame, or belittle children (Kaiser and Rasminsky 2011). Behavior guidance, in contrast, focuses on teaching children the appropriate ways to behave. It involves identifying appropriate and inappropriate behavior, teaching children appropriate strategies for expressing their emotions and solving their conflicts, and developing self-regulatory skills such as impulse control, empathy, and perspective-taking (Kaiser and Rasminsky 2011). Moreover, whereas discipline tends to be reactive, child guidance is preventative. Finally, TAG-PEC is grounded in the belief that child behavior is *transactional* in nature, with both caregivers and the child contributing to the relationship (Ciciolla and Gerstein 2013). In this approach, problem behavior occurs within the context of caregiver-child relationships; consequently, problem behaviors are best resolved within these relationships via the socialization practices of the caregivers.

Description of the TAG-PEC

The TAG-PEC defines the following nine essential features for the development of a systems-level early childhood program guidance policy. Guidance policies should:

1. Reflect an instructional, proactive approach to guidance that supports the learning and practice of appropriate pro-social behavior.
2. Identify primary, secondary, and tertiary preventative and intervention practices for promoting prosocial behavior and reducing challenging behavior in young children.
3. Describe clear and consistent expectations for behavior.
4. Describe behavioral expectations that are developmentally appropriate and essential to social and academic success.
5. Recommend evidence-based and developmentally appropriate guidance strategies for promoting prosocial behavior and reducing challenging behavior.

6. Emphasize the importance of sufficient and active adult supervision of all children.
7. Reflect the family-centered nature of early childhood education.
8. Ensure that staff has access to training and technical assistance in implementing policy guidelines and promoting the social competence of young children.
9. Reference the use of a data collection system by which the relative success or failure of the guidance policy will be evaluated.

The 28 items on the checklist guide users to rate a policy's adherence to these nine essential features and include statements such as: *Is there an emphasis on teaching acceptable social norms and desired behaviors?* (Essential feature 1), *Are program-wide behavioral expectations (e.g., rules) written with clarity? Do the behavioral expectations describe behaviors that are observable and measurable?* (Essential feature 3), *Are the behavioral expectations designed to enhance children's self-perceptions, promoting external to internal foci from staff to self?* (Essential feature 4) and *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?* (Essential feature 7). Each item is rated along three dimensions: (1) a rating of "no" if the feature was not addressed; (2) a rating of "emerging" if there was at least minimal evidence the feature was addressed; and, (3) a rating of "yes" if the feature was clearly addressed. A point value of 0 is assigned to items marked no, a point value of 1 is assigned to items marked emerging, and a point value of 2 is assigned if the item is marked yes. The highest possible score a program can obtain on the TAG-PEC is a 56, indicating that all nine essential features and the corresponding 28 items have been sufficiently addressed in the policy. This 3 point rating scale was revised from the 2 point scale used in the pilot study, as the authors concluded that a 3 point scale would provide a more refined and nuanced assessment of the quality of discipline policies.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

Centers accredited by the NAEYC were recruited for this study upon approval from the university's Institutional Review Board. Centers were identified through the NAEYC Accreditation database. Center administrators were sent a short survey via email asking about demographic characteristics of the center and were asked to upload their program's discipline policy. Surveys were sent

to 6,931 programs. Two hundred and ninety-three emails were returned, resulting in a final sample size of 6638. Surveys were completed by 1546 (23 %) of the center directors contacted, and we received 308 discipline policies. Of these policies, 282 were able to be coded (in three of the cases we were unable to open the policy, and in the remaining cases the directors had uploaded something other than a discipline policy).

Data Analysis

To begin, three members of the research team independently coded 10 of the policies using the TAG-PEC. Results were compared and the investigators met to reach consensus on discrepant ratings. Discrepancies primarily centered around what constituted second tier support strategies (Item 4), and the research team concluded that in order for a policy to be rated with a two on this item, there needed to be explicit mention of intentional, one-on-one or small group teaching strategies targeting social emotional development. Policies were then divided among members of the research team, and 10 % of policies ($n = 30$) were independently coded by the first two authors. An interrater reliability analysis using the Kappa statistic was performed to determine consistency among raters. Frequency counts were used to assess the quality of the discipline policies reviewed.

Results

Twenty-six of the Kappa values were found to be above 0.8, indicating very good agreement between raters. The remaining three Kappa values were 0.6 and above, indicating good levels of agreement (Altman, 1991).

The minimum score received on the TAG-PEC was a 1, while the center with the highest score received a 46. The mean score was 20.78 ($n = 282$, $SD = 9.12$), indicating that the programs in our sample, on average, received fewer than half of the possible number of points. Moreover, there was a great deal of variability in the TAG-PEC scores, as indicated by the standard deviation of 9 points.

Discussion

Using the TAG-PEC to Help Build a Cohesive Early Childhood System

Our data indicate that, overall, the discipline policies reviewed failed to address the 9 essential features identified

by the TAG-PEC, further highlighting the need for systems level support to prevent and address challenging behavior in the early years. In this section, we describe how the TAG-PEC can be used to build effective early childhood systems in the areas of context, components, connections, infrastructure, and scale.

Area 1: Context

The first area of systems building described by Coffman is context. Recalling Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (1967), context involves improving the political environment in which the system is embedded. By doing so, the hope is that decision-makers will enact policy and make funding decisions that both create changes to the system and continue to sustain the system once these changes have been made. Fortunately, the political climate is ripe for these types of changes. Gilliam's (2005) now seminal report on the alarming rate of preschool expulsions has served as the impetus for many reform efforts currently underway and has foregrounded the pressing need to address expulsion rates and challenging behavior in young children. Gilliam's study drew attention to the variability in expulsion rates based on state and program type and highlighted the important role of classroom-based mental health consultation in preventing expulsion in early childhood settings. More recently, the US Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (CRDC) (2014) published a report highlighting racial, gender, linguistic, and disability disparities in preschool disciplinary practices nationwide. Specifically, the report noted that while Black children make up 18 % of preschool enrollment, they represent 48 % of the children who are suspended. Moreover, boys receive more than three out of four preschool suspensions, and English learners represent 12 % of preschool children suspended. Students with disabilities (served by IDEA) represent 19 % of students suspended. The data set included every public school and district in the nation, allowing an accurate depiction of nationwide trends. The CRDC data suggest that preschools are disproportionately suspending our nation's most vulnerable children. Adding to the extant literature on the variability in program practices related to challenging behavior, our data also highlight the need for systems-level support to help prevent and address challenging behavior in the preschool years. Currently, there is a movement to build consensus for national action about how to create fair and effective discipline practices at the early childhood level. The recently reauthorized Child Care and Development Block Grant, for example, now requires that states publish their policies related to the expulsion of preschoolers and allows quality-improvement funds to be used to support provider training on behavior issues. Moreover, on 10

December 2014 the United States Department of Education released a policy statement announcing a series of federal actions aimed at preventing and reducing expulsions and suspensions in early childhood settings and improving school climates. The TAG-PEC is designed to do just this, as it was developed to provide guidance to programs as they examine their discipline policies systematically and take a more objective look at current discipline practices. We propose that this opportunity for evaluation and reflection could contribute to profound and substantial changes in the way early childhood programs go about the business of reducing challenging behavior and promoting prosocial behavior in the young children they serve.

Changes in context are evident at a more global level as well, and Kagan and Kauerz (2012) has noted that the field of early childhood is at a "developmental juncture" (p.4). Changes in decision maker attitudes about the importance of early childhood education were evident in President Obama's 2013 state of the union address calling for universal preschool, and his 2016 budget proposal reflects substantial increases in funding for state child care programs, Head Start, early intervention and home visiting programs, and calls for child care tax credits for families. The 2014 Summit on Early Childhood Education drew attention to a myriad of issues in the field, and this national focus on early childhood has led to the garnering of new advocates and additional funding, all of which are important indicators of the very real potential for systems building.

Area 2: Components

Components refers to the development of high quality programs that affect positive changes for children and families. In this way, the system produces results for its consumers through the establishment of high-performance programs and services. Our data come from programs accredited by the NAEYC, long recognized as the "gold standard" in early childhood education. NAEYC accreditation began over 30 years ago with the goal of raising the quality of early childhood programs, and programs must undergo a rigorous four step process to be considered for accreditation. Our data gleaned from the review of 282 discipline policies from centers who have received this accreditation indicates that the majority of policies reviewed could not be considered high quality and failed to reflect evidence based practices. Moreover, the wide variability in the policies indicates the need for a tool such as the TAG-PEC that can systematize what high quality, evidence based discipline policies should look like. While the NAEYC program standards require programs to address many of the evidence based practices found in the literature, including a focus on relationships, engaging

curriculum, adequate supervision, and creating authentic partnerships with parents, these requirements are presented throughout the accreditation criteria and are not presented as a cohesive approach for preventing and addressing challenging behaviors. The TAG-PEC can address this gap by providing programs with an easy to use checklist to assist with the design and implementation of high-quality guidance policies.

Area 3: Connections

In Coffman's model, connections refers to linkages across components of the system that bring coherence. Coffman identifies four components of an early childhood development system developed by through her work with the Build Initiative: early care and education; family support; health, mental health and nutrition; and special needs/early intervention. Strong and effective links across components of the system improve outcomes for children and families, and the TAG-PEC encourages these linkages via its focus on coordinated efforts that support young children's attainment of social emotional skills.

Survey data collected as part of this study point to the presence of existing cross component connections that can be leveraged to create an infrastructure of support (area 4 in Coffman's model). For example, 77.3 % (n = 218) of center directors in our sample indicated that they had access to mental health consultation services, one of seven recommendations for preventing preschool expulsion described in the Foundation for Child Development's policy brief *Implementing Policies to Reduce the Likelihood of Preschool Expulsion* (Gilliam 2008). Mental health consultation (MHC) is designed to build program capacity while preventing, identifying, and treating mental health problems in young children (Cohen and Kaufmann 2005). Using a collaborative approach to problem solving, MHC focuses on building the skills of the adults that interact with the child and creating a supportive system that supports the child to be successful. Another promising area of practice highlighted by our data is the routine screening of young children for social emotional challenges. Almost sixty-four (63.6 %) of center directors in our sample indicated that they screen children on a regular basis, using the Ages and Stages-Social Emotional (ASQ-SE) (Squires et al. 2002) or another social emotional screening tool. These findings indicate that centers in our sample are moving in the right direction in terms of implementing evidence based practices and support our contention that the field is ripe for context-level change.

An area that warrants additional attention based on our data is the connection between special education services, which are typically provided by local school district serving as the local education agency responsible for providing

services to children with disabilities, including initial screening and diagnosis. The majority of centers in our study (66 %) did not have a contract with the local school district (or another entity if appropriate) to provide prekindergarten special education services, and special needs/early intervention programs can oftentimes provide centers with access to supportive services from the other components of the early childhood system identified by Coffman and colleagues: family support and health, mental health, and nutrition.

Area 4: Infrastructure

Infrastructure requires the development of the governance and administrative support structures that are essential if the system is to function effectively. Infrastructure also ensures that services are high quality. The fact that the center discipline policies failed to meet high quality standards, as well as the wide variability of scores, add to the extant literature and indicates a lack of infrastructure for the development and implementation of policies and practices associated with the reduction of challenging behaviors in early childhood classrooms. We propose that the TAG-PEC can help to build an infrastructure of support by providing programs with features essential to high quality discipline policies. The TAG-PEC addresses provisions for system maintenance via Essential Features 8 and 9 which describe the need for the ongoing training and support of staff and continuous improvement efforts driven by data collection and analysis. It was in these areas that our centers scored the lowest: only 11 % of programs prepared or trained staff to ensure their understanding of the program discipline policy (item 25) while only 6 % had provisions in place to provide ongoing training and support (item 26). Moreover, less than 3 % had systems in place to evaluate the effectiveness of the discipline policy (item 27), and less than 2 % described provisions for formative and summative evaluations of the policy's effectiveness. The need to use data to monitor progress towards limiting suspensions and expulsions in the early years is a key recommendation of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education's *Policy Statement on Expulsion and Suspension Policies in Early Childhood Settings* (2014), and we believe that the TAG-PEC can support programs to do this.

Area 5: Scale

The final area in Coffman's model is scale. Scale refers to making sure that a comprehensive system is available to as many individuals as possible so that it produces broad and inclusive results for system beneficiaries. The TAG-PEC is a simple way to bring research on high quality discipline

policies, social emotional teaching strategies, and evidence based practice to the field. It is easy to use, cost effective, and can be effectively utilized by the multitude of program types that make up the early childhood landscape.

Conclusion

The need to effectively address challenging behavior in the early years has become a national priority. Given the extant data on the prevalence of preschool expulsion, the racial disparities in expulsion rates, and the potential long term negative effects of challenging behaviors in the early years, there is an urgent need to build early childhood systems that address these issues. While our sample size is small and cannot be considered representative of all NAEYC accredited centers, our data points to the need for systems building efforts to support programs in the development and implementation of high quality, evidence based discipline policies. The TAG-PEC is a promising tool that can be used by early childhood professionals to build a system of support for children, families, and teachers.

Acknowledgments The authors would like to thank the San Diego State University University Grants Program for support of this research.

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