

# Research Brief

## External Transitions Early Care & Education Settings

### Introduction

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Human development is built on transition. Each progression from infancy to childhood to adolescence to adulthood is a series of smaller developmental transitions that occur in individual minds and bodies over time. Early childhood is particularly full of social and emotional transitions that occur because of external circumstances. Navigating these external transitions in early childhood is critical to healthy development.

Some children have additional challenges that make these transitions more difficult. For example, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), diagnosed or undiagnosed disability, or structural social inequities may be additional impediments impacting the ability to successfully transition from one stage to another. If a transition is sudden or unexpected, such as a family move or an expulsion from an early care setting, these challenges may be heightened even more.

This research brief will focus on the external transitions of children from one early care and education (ECE) setting to another. Child Care Aware of Kentucky has conducted research on this topic in order to provide professional development for childcare providers and directors across the state of Kentucky. Our offerings include a series of modules on External Transitions in Early Care and Education – Implications of Suspension and Expulsion on Children, Families, and Providers that include a focus on prevention and evidence-based practices, impacts on children and families, and programmatic impacts. Modules can be accessed at the HDI Learning Center, [www.hdilearning.org](http://www.hdilearning.org).

## Child Impact of External Transitions in ECE

All children experience routine transitions in ECE programs as they move from one classroom activity or area to another. ECE centers often use strategies to make these changes easier for children. External transition, the relocation of a child from one setting to an alternate setting, is typically less routine and has a greater impact on the ability of children and families to adjust. Such transitions may result from parental choice, an agency decision, or an ECE program discontinuing services to a child.

In a 2016 report, the United States Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Deputy Assistant Secretary's Office on Early Childhood Development discouraged external transitions because of potential negative impact. The DHHS reports that such transitions place young children at greater risk for suspension and expulsion in later school years. In school, children who are suspended or expelled are ten times more likely to drop out than other children, to experience school failure or be retained, and are at greater risk for developing negative attitudes and higher risk for incarceration. External transitions may also impact social-emotional and behavioral development. Such transitions may have the negative impact of delaying identification of disabilities and developmental delays (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2016).

External transitions may cause loss of previously learned skills, learning delays, and regression in development. Multiple research studies in both children and adults have found that regression in skills occurs when people of any age start a new project or activity. Regression is a natural part of adjustment to new learning situations. When children are placed in new situations, they may lose the ability to perform complex tasks that they could previously complete in familiar situations. Research suggests that the change itself directly impacts the ability to cope with such disruption in their learning (Sternberg & Williams, 1998).

Continuity of care ensures that children experience predictable routines, expectations, curriculum, teaching and learning practices, and more. External transitions disrupt participation in quality learning programs. External transitions translate into lost time for children to learn and grow in the supportive, high-quality learning environments that are critical to their development. Such quality experiences increase children's likelihood of success throughout their school years and promote general success and well-being. Further, high staff turnover in ECE programs may worsen the impact of external transitions. This places children at higher risk for attachment difficulty. Attachment is necessary for healthy emotional and social development (Zwolak, 2017). These points show the importance of regular and consistent participation in ECE programs and highlight the potential risks associated with external transition. During external transition,

physical, mental, and emotional development continues without the support of a quality ECE program. Children are then affected by gaps, overlaps, and mismatches in services when they move from one program to another (Zwolak, 2017).

## **Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in External Transitions in ECE**

Center-initiated external transitions, both temporary and permanent, are often the result of challenging behaviors in young children. Children experiencing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are at greater risk for exhibiting challenging behavior. These children may also be more likely to experience center-initiated external transitions. Such transitions do not equip children or families with the skills they need to resolve challenging behavior. On the contrary, children who are transitioned from centers because of behavior issues are at greater risk for future external transitions. They are also more likely to experience suspension and expulsions within the K-12 environment, dropping out, and involvement in the criminal justice system (Policy Snapshot: Suspension and Expulsion, 2018).

Further, external transition alone does not address the needs of children whose behavior stems from ACEs. An estimated 35 million children have experienced one or more ACEs incidents. This translates to nearly half of the nation's children experiencing some degree of significant trauma with potentially life-long implications. More prevention and intervention initiatives are crucial, and if "our educational, juvenile justice, mental health and medical systems are not changed to stop traumatizing already traumatized children, many of the nation's children are likely to suffer chronic disease and mental illness" (Stevens, 2017).

ACEs can have negative impacts on children's social-emotional, behavioral, and neurological development that can have a serious long-term impact on all aspects of their physiological development and social, and intellectual functioning (CDC, 2020). ACEs can include a broad range of difficult or traumatic experiences wherein a child is directly affected, or experiences wherein the child observes others being affected such as:

- Emotional, physical, and sexual abuse and/or neglect
- Bullying and/or violence
- Physical or mental illness
- Incarceration
- Racism, sexism, or other discrimination
- Homelessness
- Natural disaster, terrorism, or war

Exposure to ACEs can have long-term serious impacts on children that can plague them into adulthood (CDC, 2020). Effects of this exposure can:

- Weaken a child's ability to respond appropriately, learn, remember, and problem-solve
- Reduce ability to tolerate stress, including increased fighting, opposition/defiance, disengagement
- Reduce social and emotional skills necessary to create and maintain important social relationships with peers and adults
- Increase the body's production of stress hormones and reduce its ability to regulate its stress responses, which can lead to long-term health problems
- Create a constant state of fight-or-flight arousal that increases heart rate, blood pressure, respiration, and muscle tension

ECE programs may be the only stable environment for children experiencing trauma and have the opportunity to provide critical intervention services for these children. Consequently, center-initiated external transition represents a lost opportunity to provide services that can potentially mitigate the impact of ACEs for young children. Without intervention, children in traumatic situations may demonstrate increasingly challenging behaviors, which places them at risk for increased incidents of external transition without services. Should this occur, these children are also at risk for suffering impacts that potentially compound the impact of ACEs.

## **Role of Implicit Bias in External Transitions in ECE**

Implicit bias refers to the unconscious thinking processes that affect our understanding of people and situations and how we respond to those situations. Everyone experiences implicit bias in decision-making. Implicit biases occur involuntarily, meaning that individuals are not aware of their impact on their thoughts or actions. The biases may include positive and negative perceptions about external stimuli, and they shape decisions and actions without individuals' conscious intentions. Implicit biases differ from conscious beliefs and attitudes in that they are believed to reside in the subconscious. Prejudice and racism are very different from implicit bias in that individuals are typically aware of their thoughts on these matters, or they can develop an awareness of them through reflection and introspection. In contrast, implicit biases cannot be discovered through reflection and introspection. Implicit biases are acquired through our life experiences and can be influenced by external information derived from others or media through direct or indirect messages.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has conducted research into the potential impact of implicit bias on interactions in ECE classrooms, and their preliminary findings seem to suggest it may play a role in teacher and staff behaviors. Early findings include demonstration of implicit

bias in behavior expectations and behavior severity from ECE teachers where a relationship exists between race and outcomes. Findings include that ECE staff, regardless of race, tend to expect challenging behaviors and observe these more often-in African American children, especially boys. White ECE teachers may demonstrate lower behavioral expectations in African American children and may see those behaviors as typical of African American children. African American teachers may have higher behavior expectation standards for African American children than White teachers. African American teachers may be more likely to recommend longer amounts of external transitions in response to behavior problems (“Statement Regarding New Research on Implicit Bias and Early Childhood Educators,” 2016).

Potentially, implicit bias has implications for managing challenging behaviors in ECE classrooms, which in turn, suggests it could also play a role in center-initiated external transitions. Implicit bias can be meaningfully addressed, and the negative impacts of the phenomenon can be mitigated through professional development and training.

## **Family Impact of External Transitions in ECE**

Loss of care can create significant challenges for working parents as they attempt to procure new child care placements and may find a lack of suitable programs conveniently located near workplaces and with availability during times care is needed (Oldham, 2018). When one child is asked to leave a center, families may be forced to disrupt the care of siblings as well due to the logistical problems of dropping their children off at different centers. Parents seeking care may be unable to work while they seek new services, and may be at risk for reduced income, disciplinary actions on the job, or loss of a job. Family finances can be impacted if comparable care at the same cost is not available. Lack of adequate transportation can become an issue as well. Families living in child care deserts are especially vulnerable in the event of an unplanned external transition. Lack of available child care may result in more women leaving the workforce on a temporary or permanent basis. Women leaving the workforce after having children may be a factor in the gender wage gap (Redden, 2018).

Loss of child care may also influence family dynamics. Parents may experience a range of emotional responses as their child experiences disruption in his or her programs. Child behavior issues may emerge, and regression can occur. This can elicit feelings of frustration, sadness, anger, helplessness, and powerlessness in the parent and the child, which can affect relationships with other family members and peers. External transition has the potential to impact all family members’ social interactions and their participation in the community.

## Programmatic Impact of External Transitions in ECE

Classrooms can be conceptualized as social systems, and transitioning any child can impact other children in the program. Children may worry about a classmate who disappears without any explanation, and young children may not have the language or cognitive skills necessary to understand that the missing child is okay or that they, themselves, are not at-risk. This may be especially concerning for children in the classroom who are already in unstable or changeable environments such as foster care, migrant families, homelessness, or coping with a family loss such as death, divorce, or a recent move.

Additionally, if the targeted child was externally transitioned without the benefit of any intervention occurring, other children miss the opportunity to observe effective behavior management in action in their programs. The modeling of positive behavior change as struggling students learn replacement behaviors helps all students to learn. Peers can learn and demonstrate age-appropriate skills that replace unacceptable behaviors for their peers. All such learning opportunities can help vicariously develop and reinforce positive behavior skills in all children in the classroom social system.

## Conclusions

Children in early care and education settings experience transitions for various reasons. Research suggests that external transitions can have negative impacts on young children and families. Children experiencing traumatic experiences such as ACEs may experience significant health impacts that could result in a lifetime of physiological and emotional challenges, and external transitions can disrupt vital continuity of early care and education programs that might otherwise have provided important support services to these children and their families. Further, research indicates that children and families may experience negative impacts resulting from external transitions in ECE. The potential disproportionate impact of center-initiated external transition and the role of implicit bias in staff/child interactions is another salient factor.

Many aspects of early care and education present potential obstacles to maintaining continuity. These include lack of availability of programs, inconsistency of programs, parent-initiated external transitions, external transitions that occur because of programs offering limited services, and center-initiated external transitions. Even children (and families) who are not transitioned may experience negative consequences when other families' children are transitioned from centers.

Child care centers are impacted by external transitions in ways that could inadvertently encourage more external transitions and teacher resistance to change. Centers may also experience negative impacts on their businesses resulting from the inability to fill vacant spots, potential reduction of staff hours or loss of positions,

and negative consequences from parents and the community resulting from poor public relations. To reduce the need for center-initiated external transitions, it is recommended that centers consider adopting and implementing evidence-based policies and program practices that promote high-quality ECE environments, including comprehensive educational, social-emotional, and behavioral supports and practices consistently implemented throughout their facilities.

When transition is unavoidable or is in the child's best interest, ECE programs can provide support that may ease the transition for the child. Ending center-initiated external transitions alone, however, will not address the social-emotional and behavioral needs of young children. Initiatives such as targeted professional development and center-wide behavioral supports are needed to meet children's social-emotional and behavioral needs.

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