

90% of Virginia's early childhood educators face challenging behavior by children, survey finds

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A survey of 918 early childhood teachers across Virginia found that the vast majority—90 percent—reported having at least one child with

challenging behavior in their classroom or childcare facility.

And, on average, the teachers reported having four [children](#) who displayed challenging [behavior](#) or a repeated pattern of behavior that interferes with the child's ability to play, learn and get along with others.

The survey of providers who educate or care for infants, toddlers and preschoolers in group settings across Virginia was part of a study, "Learning about Young Children's Challenging Behavior and Impacts on Programs and Families: A State-wide Survey of Virginia's Early Care and Education Teachers," that was conducted by the National Center for Children in Poverty on behalf of the Early Childhood Mental Health Virginia initiative—part of the Partnership for People with Disabilities in the School of Education at Virginia Commonwealth University.

The study was designed to provide Virginia stakeholders with information that could help inform the need for additional support for early childhood education settings and the types of support that would be most effective and welcomed by teachers.

"We wanted to find out, in their words, what [the teachers] felt would be most helpful to them, and in turn, inform our work," said Bonnie Grifa, the early childhood mental health coordinator for Virginia who oversees the Early Childhood Mental Health Virginia initiative. "[This] Virginia data and information will help inform our decisions as well as support our funding requests to provide the identified supports."

The Early Childhood Mental Health Virginia initiative is focused on the development, implementation and sustainability of a comprehensive and coordinated early childhood system of care for infant and early childhood mental health serving children from birth through age 5 and their families/caregivers and providers in Virginia.

Among the study's key findings:

- About half the teachers rated two types of disruptive behavior (extremely active, unable to engage in activities and refuses to cooperate) as very common; more than one-third identified hitting, pushing or biting as very common; and about one-quarter rated sadness and withdrawn behavior as very common.
- More than half the teachers rated as moderate or a lot the amount of negative impact challenging behavior had on other children's learning and safety and on teachers' ability to attend to the needs of other children.
- Rates of removal of children from classrooms due to challenging behavior varied across types of programs, with the [highest rate](#) found in licensed child care, where almost one-third of teachers reported an average of two children removed; across different types of programs, almost half of the teachers reported that children did not move into another regulated setting.
- About 40 percent of teachers reported that children with challenging behavior live in families that experience health and mental health problems, substance abuse, domestic violence and/or severe financial difficulties.
- More than half of the teachers recommended increasing access to early childhood mental health consultants, increasing supports for families and increasing opportunities for group training linked to on-site coaching.



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"We ultimately wanted to ensure that children who are displaying behavior challenging to teachers [and] providers in Virginia receive the most appropriate services and individualized supports that are assessment-based and address the cause of the challenging behavior in order to prevent a progression to more serious mental health issues and/or learning problems," Grifa said.

One in five children and adolescents in the United States has a [mental disorder](#) that interferes with daily functioning. Fewer than one in five of these children, however, receive the mental health services they need, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services

Administration in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Anxiety disorders, mood disorders (such as depression) and disruptive disorders (such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder) are the most common mental disorders among children. Of these, [anxiety disorders](#) are the most common, affecting about 13 percent of children ages 9 to 17, according to the SAMHSA. When left untreated, childhood mental disorders can lead to school failure, substance abuse, violence, suicide, and increase the risk of coming into contact with the juvenile justice system.

"The high incidence of young children's challenging behavior and expulsion has been found in early care and education programs across the country," said Sheila Smith, Ph.D., director, early childhood, at the National Center for Children in Poverty at Columbia University.

"Fortunately, states are increasingly investing in early childhood mental health consultation and other resources for programs that are known to benefit children. When teachers and parents get the support they need, children with early social-emotional problems can thrive."

The study made a number of recommendations in light of the survey's findings of widespread challenging behavior among young children in early childhood education settings and that removal of children from these settings is fairly common.

Included among the recommendations: Build on the strengths of Virginia's current infant and early childhood mental health consultation program to support the healthy development and school readiness of young children through age 5 years in early [childhood](#) education settings; expand professional development and coaching focused on practices that promote children's social-emotional growth; establish a process for further developing Virginia's [early childhood](#) education expulsion policy; and implement a system called "Help Me Grow" that would help address

the needs of families and children with [challenging behavior](#).

"We need to fully support early care and education settings by implementing the recommendations from this report, so Virginia's children can be successful in those settings and be ready for school, and to prevent future mental [health](#) issues," Grifa said.

More information: Learning about Young Children's Challenging Behavior and Impacts on Programs and Families: A State-wide Survey of Virginia's Early Care and Education Teachers:
www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_1213.pdf

Provided by Virginia Commonwealth University

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