

Study finds discipline disparities in preschool driven by racial bias

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Why are Black children more likely to be expelled or disciplined in preschool than their white peers?

A new Northwestern study finds that teachers tend to complain more about Black students and identify their behavior as problematic compared to white students—even though researchers found no differences when the children observed in a laboratory setting designed to elicit typical vs. atypical patterns of misbehavior. The researchers' work builds on the well-known fact that Black children are disproportionately excluded from preschool because of biases in disciplinary practices.

This study, which followed more than 400 racially diverse 4-year-olds from the Chicago-Based [MAPS study](#) is one of the first to leverage standardized developmental methods specifically designed to identify "when to worry" about young children's disruptive behavior via direct observations. This methodology allowed the researchers to uncover [racial biases](#) in the adult reports of preschoolers' misbehavior because no such racial differences were present when objective methods were used.

"A Window into Racial and Class Disparities in Preschool Disciplinary Action Using Developmental Methodology" published today, Sept. 23, 2021, in the Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, is particularly concerning as childcare provider complaints were related to how children fared in [elementary school](#), the researchers argue.

"The rate of and disparities in preschool disciplinary action is a matter of considerable concern. Yet, our work finds that less-studied and more subtle interactions in the classroom, such as teachers identifying a child as problematic or complaining to parents about their child's behavior, also vary based on race and have long-term implications for children's success in school and beyond," said lead author Terri Sabol, assistant professor of human development and [social policy](#) at Northwestern's School of Education and Social Policy and faculty fellow at the University's Institute for Policy Research.

Prior research has found large racial disparities in school discipline practices. This so-called "discipline gap" begins as early as preschool, where Black children are three times as likely to be expelled compared to white children.

The major policy response to well-documented disparities has been to prohibit exclusionary discipline. For example, Head Start, the nation's largest publicly funded preschool program, now prohibits expulsion on the basis of student behavior. This prohibition, while important, only addresses the final endpoint (e.g., suspensions or expulsions), but leaves unaddressed the more nuanced and implicit biases, behaviors, and identities that led to expulsions and less optimal learning experiences in the first place.

Despite a surge of interest in preschool exclusionary discipline practices, this is an extreme outcome of a long process. However, researchers know very little about this process, including day-to-day patterns and consequences of discipline practices at the classroom level, including childcare providers' and teachers' complaints and associated discipline about students' behavior to parents. This study was designed to "look under the hood" in terms of possible mechanisms by which these disparities occur.

In addition to Sabol, the paper is co-authored by Courtenay Kessler (Ph.D.21), Leoandra Onnie Rogers, assistant professor of psychology in the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences; Amelie Petitclerc, professor of medical science in the Feinberg School of Medicine, Jamilah Silver, a Northwestern graduate and doctoral student at Stony Brook University, Margaret Briggs-Gowan of UConn Health, and Lauren Wakschlag, professor of medical social sciences in the Feinberg School of Medicine and director of Northwestern's Institute for Innovations in Developmental Sciences (DevSci).

Existing research in this area generally falls into two categories. The first focuses on teachers and finds that some teachers have implicit biases that lead to a negative attribution bias towards students of color. For example, recent studies tracked the eye gaze of preschool teachers watching videos of children and found teachers spend significantly more time gazing at Black versus white students, even though none of the students demonstrated disruptive behaviors.

The second category comprises research that relies on parent or teacher survey-based reports to measure children's disruptive behavior—both of which introduce different informant perspectives and biases.

Because children may behave differently across school and home, it is difficult to know when differences are due to bias versus true behavior problems in school discipline and exclusionary practices.

In this case, the researchers get around these limitations by leveraging a direct observation tool created by Lauren Wakschlag and her team. Wakschlag is director of the Institute for Innovations in Developmental Sciences at Northwestern and a principal investigator of the original study. Wakschlag developed the tool specifically designed to distinguish between normative misbehavior and disruptive behavior in young children via [direct observations](#) that provide an objective window on [behavior](#) in the context of early development.

"The application of this method, from our 'science of when to worry' toolkit, takes these issues beyond the sociologic and public health realm to highlight how the developmental sciences can shed light on this very troubling problem that is foundational to childhood health inequities," Wakschlag said. "Pinpointing underlying processes within the context of early childhood development is key to generating effective strategies for their amelioration."

The findings speak to the need for research on racial bias in school discipline to move beyond documenting the problem to understanding the mechanisms and intervening, the researchers argue.

"This requires examining old assumptions and asking different questions," said Rogers, who leads the Development of Identities and Cultural Environments (DICE) lab at Northwestern. "One thing we are especially concerned about and paying attention to is the micro or subtle ways that racial biases show up in preschool classrooms and what preschool children learn about race—about their selves as a result."

As the debate continues about the best approach to redress disparities in school discipline this study can shed light on a possible intermediary pathway for intervention.

"This study provides timely evidence that can inform the current policy debate regarding school discipline, providing a first step in understanding how to identify race-based differences in [discipline](#) practices at classroom and [school](#) level," Sabol said.

More information: Terri J. Sabol et al, A window into racial and socioeconomic status disparities in preschool disciplinary action using developmental methodology, *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/nyas.14687](https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.14687)

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