

background

Report # 58

Behavioral Problems in Very Young Children

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Troubling Behavior

Child behavior problems rise; little help for parents, teachers

From stubborn defiance to indifference to others and outright aggression, more and more serious behavior problems are being reported among young children – problems that jeopardize early learning, raise the risk of school failure, disrupt home life, and stress parents.

At the same time, concerned parents, child care staff, and early education teachers say few services are available to help them deal with troubled children, according a University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development study.

“This study is a flashing neon light that says, ‘Pay attention to this,’” said Robert Nelkin, Director of Policy Initiatives at the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development (OCD).

The study, which covered Allegheny County, was commissioned by The Jewish Healthcare Foundation, which had received numerous requests to support training for early care and education teachers and staff who deal with children with behavioral problems. The study was based on focus groups and interviews with parents, early care and education staff, early childhood consultants, and national studies of relevant topics. An advisory group of practitioners, education leaders, and others drafted findings and conclusions.

The result is a first-ever account of a growing population of young children with behavioral problems in Allegheny County and the fragmented array of services that falls short of providing all

of the help that parents, teachers, and the children themselves need.

In addition to the study, OCD has begun projects to improve access to services for programs and families.

Behavior Problems Rise

Parents and early childhood programs nationwide are reporting an increase in children with behavioral problems. “Young children with more serious emotional problems are being seen across the board – the public mental health system, schools, pediatricians, child care,” said Ray Firth, Director of Behavioral Health Policy, Partnerships for Family Support, University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development.

In Allegheny County, most early care and education providers in the study reported an increase in children with behavior problems. They estimated that the prevalence of such problems has increased to a level of 10% to 20%. Consultants to early childhood programs

A study finds a growing population of children with behavioral problems and services that fall short of providing help to parents, teachers, and the children themselves.

in Allegheny County said they are fielding more requests from parents and program staff for help in dealing with challenging behaviors among very young children. Aggression toward other children was the most common problem referred to them. Other frequent referrals were for problems such as aggression toward adults, tantrums, and separation issues.

Concerns about serious behavior problems among young children are also reported statewide, according to a survey conducted by OCD for the Governor’s Task Force on Early Care and Education. More than half of the early care and education programs surveyed said they had sought help with aggressive behavior problems during the past two years.

The precise reasons for the reported increase in behavioral problems remain elusive. What is clear is it comes at a time when the characteristics of growing up in America are profoundly changing. Child

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care outside the home has become the norm. And more young children are spending more hours in the care of others during developmentally-critical years when relationships and environment are highly influential.

Troubling Consequences

Serious behavioral problems at an early age put children at risk for experiencing any number of poor outcomes, particularly failure in school. Behavioral problems, for example, can result in children being excluded from quality child care or preschool – a serious setback to any effort to prepare them for school and position them for success.

Nearly 71% of child care centers and preschools in Pennsylvania reported they excluded or threatened to exclude a child for aggressive behavior over the past two years, the OCD survey for the Governor's Task Force revealed.

"That exclusion effects the kid's development and adds tremendous tension in families and not infrequently leads to trouble with their parent's jobs," Firth said. "We interviewed parents who had to take medical leaves, had to change their jobs or lost their jobs because of it."

Help Hard To Come By

Evidence suggests that policy and practices, for the most part, are not keeping pace with the spike in young children with behavioral problems.

Only Early Head Start and Head Start offer a support system for these children that would anticipate and quickly respond to their social and emotional needs and help to improve the confidence and competence of caregivers and parents.

Parents are desperate, the OCD study reports. They say services to help troubled children are nearly impossible

to find and difficult to access. Early care and education staff say fewer services are available today than in the past. And behavioral health consultants are concerned that without additional training, teachers and aides are not able to adequately help these children.

Few early childhood programs are equipped to deal with the mental health needs of young children. Other obstacles include a confusing maze of agencies, eligibility rules, and jurisdictions, and a serious shortage of specialists trained to help troubled children under the age of 5 years.

Building Hope

Only recently has the mental health system begun to broaden its focus to include the mental health issues of young children. In Allegheny County, a Community Advisory Group offered several recommendations, including the need to:

- Develop effective collaborations.
- Enhance training for early childhood staff and others.
- Increase the number of behavioral health providers with the appropriate expertise to address the special needs of these children.
- Increase funding to improve the identification of early behavioral

signs of children who need serious emotional support for preventive mental health services.

One product of the study is Service Pathways, a project begun by OCD that uses a dedicated Internet web site to guide families of children with behavioral problems and early childhood staff and teachers toward helpful resources. The website will use child-specific characteristics such as age, residence, and insurance benefits to retrieve information about available resources that best fit the family's circumstances. The web technology will also collect data such as the needs, concerns, and experiences of families with a child who has demonstrated behavioral problems. Such data are expected to inform policy by helping to identify areas where service improvements are needed.

Complementing Service Pathways is the Exploratory Study, which provides a case manager or helps an existing case manager work with parents and early childhood providers who are having trouble accessing services for these children.

Nelkin said the need to order a second printing of the report suggests the study "strikes a chord" among concerned parents and early childhood professionals nationwide.

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references

Are We Leaving Them Behind? The Case for Helping Childcare Providers and Parents Address Behavioral Problems in Very Young Children can be found on the OCD website at: <http://www.education.pitt.edu/ocd/publications/policyreports.asp>

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