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The Voices of Maine's Early Care and Education Teachers: Children with Challenging Behavior in Classrooms and Home-based Child Care

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The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) is a non-partisan public policy research center at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. Founded in 1989 with endowments from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Ford Foundation, NCCP is dedicated to promoting the economic security, healthy development, and well-being of America's low-income children and families. Using research to inform policy and practice, the center seeks to advance family-oriented solutions and strategic use of public resources at the state and national levels to produce positive outcomes for the next generation.

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INTRODUCTION

This report presents findings from a survey of Maine’s early care and education (ECE) teachers and providers about their experiences related to young children with challenging behavior. These experiences included young children displaying different types of challenging behavior, children leaving the program due to challenging behavior, and teachers’ and providers’ efforts to address the needs of children experiencing behavior problems. The survey also asked teachers and providers about the resources they need to help them meet the needs of young children with challenging behavior and promote their positive social-emotional development.

The *Social-Emotional Learning and Development (SELD) Survey* was part of a larger study assigned by a committee of the Maine State Legislature to the Maine Children’s Growth Council and two state agencies. In June 2015, the Maine State Legislature’s Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs asked the Maine Children’s Growth Council, the Department of Education, and the Department of Health and Human Services to undertake a study of conditions affecting the social and emotional learning and development of young children in Maine and develop recommendations to strengthen supports for young children’s well-being and growth in this critical domain. The committee charged the state departments and the Growth Council to establish an ad hoc committee to gather data and information on current policies and programs, as well as young children’s social-emotional status in Maine, and to partner with national organizations to help conduct this work. In addition to the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP), which led the design and implementation of the SELD Survey, two other

national organizations participated in the larger initiative: Ounce of Prevention and ZERO TO THREE.

The Maine Children’s Growth Council led the work of convening stakeholders with an interest in the design of the survey and use of the results to form recommendations. Established by statute in 2008, the Council is charged with promoting sustainable social and financial investments to support the healthy development of Maine’s young children and their families and working with a diverse group of legislators, business leaders, providers, parents, researchers, community leaders, and government officials to build a unified, statewide early childhood services system. Another key partner in the survey and the larger study was Maine Children’s Alliance, the state’s leading child advocacy organization. Through its ongoing discussions about policy with stakeholders in the early care and education community, this organization created wider awareness that teachers in early care and education settings were reporting difficulties addressing the needs of young children with challenging behavior. The efforts of Maine Children’s Alliance to bring this issue to light led to the larger study conducted by the Growth Council in collaboration with the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services, and to the SELD Survey.

The results of the SELD Survey are described in the following sections that address these questions:

- **What are the key characteristics of participating ECE programs and teachers?**
- **How many children with challenging behavior do teachers have in their classrooms or child care homes in the course of a year?**
- **How common are different types of challenging behavior?**

¹ This survey is available upon request, along with assistance on adapting it for use in a different state.

² See letter in appendix of final report of study to legislature, <http://mekids.org/assets/files/earlychildhood/seld/3.29.17%20SELD%20Report.pdf>

- **What are the consequences of challenging behavior?**
- **What are the family circumstances of children with challenging behavior?**
- **How do teachers address challenging behavior and what barriers do they face?**
- **What supports do teachers believe will help them address the needs of children with challenging behavior?**

In the sections that follow, we refer to center-based teachers and home-based child care providers as “teachers” both for convenience, and in recognition of the supports for early learning and development that most adults try to provide for children across different types of early care and education settings.

Methods

All lead teachers in publicly funded center-based child care, Head Start/Early Head Start, and preschool programs, and family child care providers in Maine who could be reached by a working email, were invited to participate in the survey. The survey was administered through Qualtrics, a secure online data collection system. Maine’s state child care and preschool education administrators and an association of Head Start directors provided the email lists. Lead center-based teachers were contacted through center directors who were asked to forward survey invitations, while family child care providers received the invitations directly. The email invitation to participate as well as an attached information sheet about the study provided a link to the survey on Qualtrics. Two reminder emails and an offer of a \$15 Amazon gift card to teachers who completed the survey were used to encourage participation.

Results

What are the key characteristics of programs and teachers?

Lead teachers who submitted surveys (n=471) work across the range of rural to urban settings in the state. Most teachers and providers (54%) are in small cities, towns, or villages, defined as places with populations of 1,000 to 9,999 residents. Others are in rural towns (18%) with populations under 1000 residents, cities (17%) with

populations of 10,000 to 20,000 residents, and large cities (11%) with populations over 20,000 residents. Teachers from four types of programs are represented in the sample³.

- **34 percent are from center-based child care (this group includes child care nursery school and child care-preschool partnerships)**
- **31 percent are family child care providers**
- **24 percent are from Head Start programs (this group includes Head Start, Early Head Start, Head Start-preschool partnerships and Head Start-child care centers)**
- **10 percent are from school-based public preschools**

Overall, education levels are higher in center-based compared to family child care settings, where roughly twice the number of providers have bachelor’s and master’s degrees or higher. About three times the percentage of teachers in school-based public preschool programs have master’s degrees compared to teachers in Head Start programs, where about a quarter have an associate’s degree, Child Development Associate (CDA) credential, or some college. See **Table 1** for complete results.

The highest percentage of teachers with an Early Childhood Teacher Certificate Birth to Age 5 is in school-based public preschools (59%), with Head Start programs showing the second-highest percentage of teachers with this credential (39%). More than 50 percent of teachers across center-based and family child care settings and Head Start programs have Maine Roads to Quality credentials. See **Table 2** for complete results.

Longer work hours were reported by family child care providers compared to teachers in all other programs. Nearly all family child care providers (95%, n=140) reported having children in their programs for more than 8 hours a day (10 hours on average), while most teachers in other programs (81%, n=263) reported having children for 8 hours or less a day.

³ Three teachers did not identify their program.

Table 1: Teachers' Education Level by Type of Program

	Center-based Child care Programs (n=159)	Family Child Care Providers (n=148)	Head Start Programs (n=115)	School-based Public Preschool (n=46)
Master's degree or higher	13%	7%	11%	35%
Bachelor's degree	40%	18%	62%	63%
Associate's degree, CDA Credential, or some college	43%	55%	26%	2%
HS graduate or GED	4%	20%	0	0

Table 2: Teachers' Credentials by Type of Program

	Center-based Child care Programs (n=159)	Family Child Care Providers (n=148)	Head Start Programs (n=115)	School-based Public Preschool (n=46)
Early Childhood Teacher Certificate Birth to Age 5	10%	2%	39%	59%
Early Elementary Endorsement K-3	3%	1%	10%	17%
Teacher of Students with Disabilities 90 to age 5)	13%	2%	12%	17%
Maine Roads to Quality credentials ⁴	63%	58%	69%	15%
No certifications	21%	31%	7%	7%

⁴ Maine Roads to Quality, the state's Quality Rating Improvement System, provides professional development and documentation for ECE teachers to earn credentials focused on particular topics or care of children of different ages. See <http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/maineroads/pd/credentials.htm>

Most teachers reported that they have four or more years of experience teaching children under age six. A small percentage have more experience teaching older children, and 4 percent report inexperience (i.e., less than 4 years) with children under age six as well as with children age six and older:

- **93 percent of teachers (n=437) reported having four or more years of experience teaching children under age six**
- **2 percent of teachers (n=9) reported having more years of experience teaching children six and older than children under age six**

How many children with challenging behavior do teachers have in their classrooms or family child care homes in the course of a year?

“Challenging behavior” was defined in the survey as “a repeated pattern of behaviors that interfere with the child’s ability to play, learn, and get along with others.” Teachers reported on the prevalence of challenging behavior among children in their classroom or family child care settings over the past 12 months, which might include children from the previous school year.

A high percentage of teachers (92%, n=435) reported having at least one child with challenging behavior; on average, teachers reported that five children had challenging behavior. The percentage of teachers reporting children with challenging behavior varied by age of children in the classroom or family child care setting, with the highest percentage for teachers of preschoolers.

- **Among teachers of infants, 21 percent (n=30) identified at least one infant with challenging behavior; on average, they reported 1 infant with challenging behavior**
- **Among teachers of toddlers, 69 percent (n=147) identified at least one toddler with challenging behavior; on average, they reported 3 toddlers with challenging behavior**
- **Among teachers of preschoolers, 86 percent (n=342) identified at least one preschooler with challenging behavior; on average, they reported 5 preschoolers with challenging behavior**

- **Among teachers of children over age five, 52 percent (n=87) identified at least one child over age five with challenging behavior; on average, they reported 3 children over age five with challenging behavior**

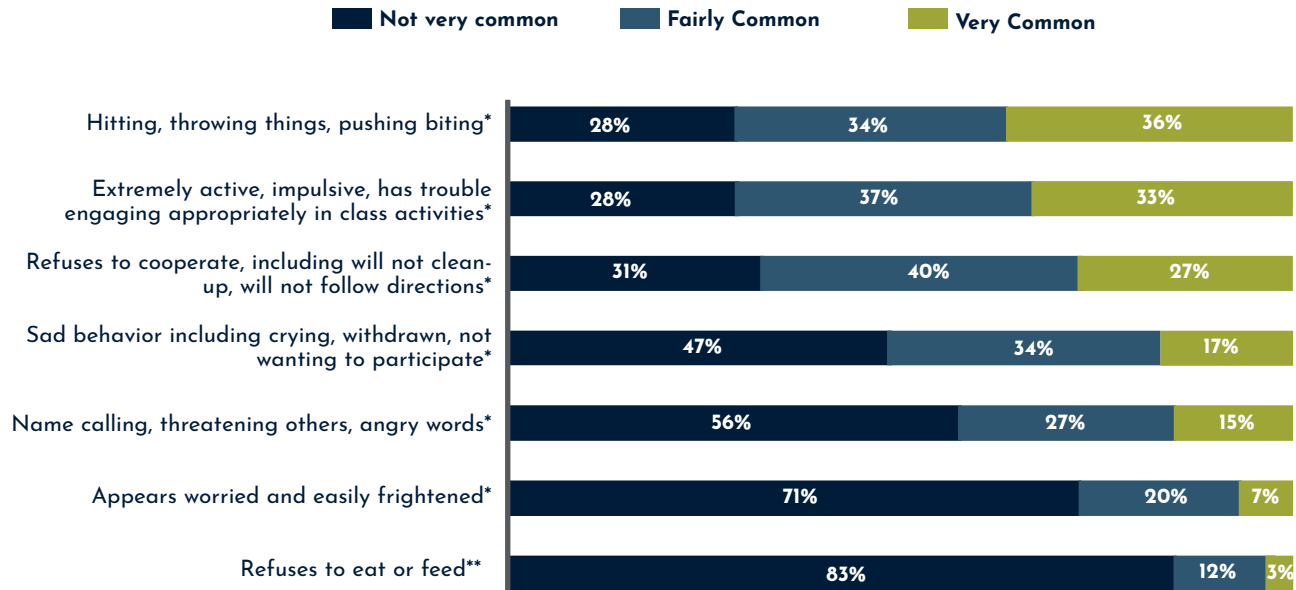
How common are different types of challenging behaviors?

As shown in **Figure 1**, sizable percentages of teachers reported that several types of challenging behavior are “very common” or “fairly common.” The challenging behaviors that the highest percentages of teachers reported as “very common” were among the most potentially disruptive to activities and routines: “Hitting, throwing things, pushing, biting”; “extremely active, impulsive, has trouble engaging appropriately in class activities”; and “refuses to cooperate, including will not clean up, will not follow directions.” At the same time, about a quarter to half the teachers also rated “sad behavior, including crying, withdrawn, not wanting to participate” and “appears worried and easily frightened” — as “fairly common” or “very common.” These challenging behaviors are often associated with more withdrawn children.

What are the consequences of challenging behaviors?

When teachers were asked about different negative impacts of children’s challenging behavior in their classrooms or family child care settings, about one-third of teachers reported that children’s challenging behavior had “quite a lot of negative impact” on the “teacher’s ability to attend to the needs of the other children.” As shown in **Figure 2**, almost 40 percent or more of teachers reported that challenging behavior had at least “some negative impact” on four other features of the early care and education setting — other children’s ability to learn, other children’s feelings of security and well-being, other children’s safety, and teachers’ feeling of well-being.

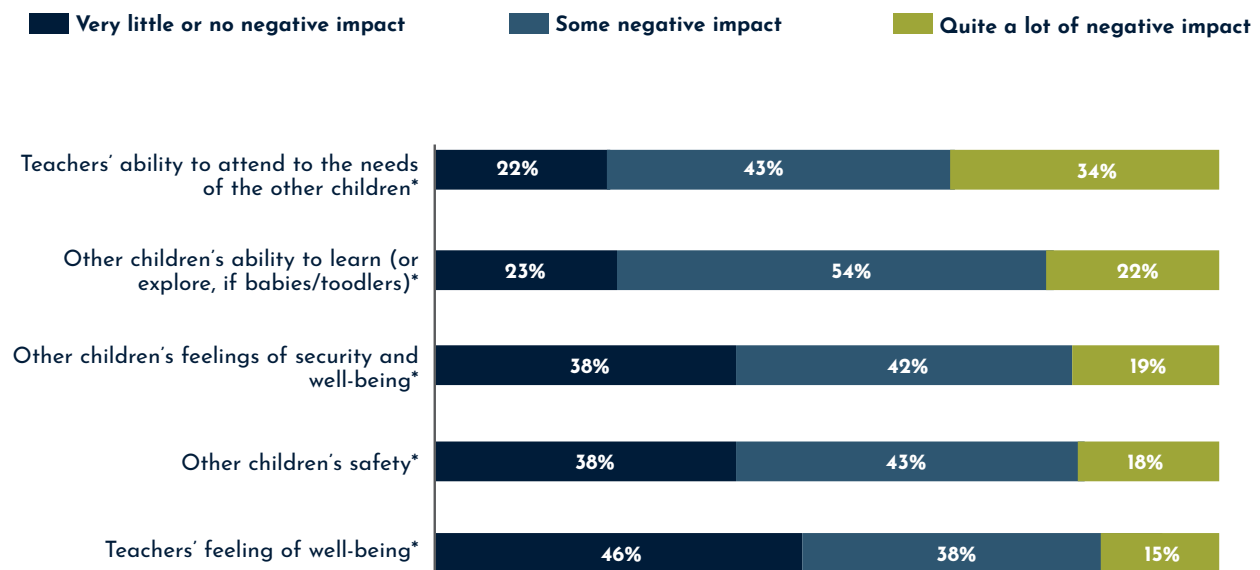
Figure 1: Percentage of Teachers Rating Different Challenging Behaviors as “Very Common,” “Fairly Common” and “Not Very Common”



*2% of teachers who reported observing challenging behavior in the past 12 months did not respond to this question

**3% of teachers who reported observing challenging behavior in the past 12 months did not respond to this question

Figure 2: Percentage of Teachers Rating Impacts of Challenging Behaviors on Different Features of ECE Settings



*1% of teachers who reported observing challenging behavior in the past 12 months did not respond to this question

Teachers reported on the number of children with challenging behaviors who left their classroom under three different conditions: (1) **Parents told staff** that they were leaving because the program could not meet the child’s needs; (2) **Staff told parents** that the child must leave because the program could not meet the child’s needs; or (3) **Parents and staff agreed** that the child must leave because the program could not meet the child’s needs. Overall, 25 percent of teachers (n=108) reported that children with challenging behavior were removed from their class or family child care setting under any of these three conditions; on average, teachers reported that two children with challenging behavior were removed.

Across these three conditions:

- **8 percent of teachers reported that children with challenging behavior were removed when parents told staff that they were leaving because the program could not meet the child’s needs; on average, they reported one child with challenging behavior was removed.**
- **10 percent of teachers reported that children with challenging behavior were removed when staff told parents that the child must leave because the program could not meet the child’s needs; on average, they reported two children with challenging behavior were removed.**

■ **15 percent of teachers reported that children with challenging behavior were removed because parents and staff agreed that the program could not meet the child’s needs; on average, they reported two children with challenging behavior were removed.**

Among the different program types, center-based child care, child care nursery school, and child care preschool partnerships had the highest percentage of teachers (42 percent) reporting that at least one child with challenging behavior left their program; on average they reported the removal of two children. See **Table 3** for complete results.

The condition described in the survey as, “staff told parents that the child must leave because the program could not meet the child’s needs,” can be considered “involuntary dismissal” of children, or “expulsion.” Teachers reported involuntary dismissal of preschoolers at much higher rates compared to other age groups. Among the teachers (n=43) who reported involuntary removal of children, 84 percent were reporting the removal of preschoolers (two preschoolers on average), 26 percent were reporting the removal of children over five (one child over five years on average) and less than 5 percent were reporting the removal of infants and toddlers (1 infant and toddler on average).

Table 3: Percentage of teachers reporting the removal of children with challenging behavior across different early care and education settings

	Center-based Child care, CC, Nursery school, & CC Preschool Partnership (n=145)	Head Start, Early Head Start, & Head Start Partnerships (n=111)	Family Child Care (n=131)	School-based Public Preschool (n=45)
Percentage of teachers	42%	18%	15%	13%
Average number of children who left setting	2	2	2	1

Table 4: Percentage of teachers reporting the removal of children across different early care and education settings due to the challenging behavior of peers

	Center-based Child care, CC, Nursery school, & CC Preschool Partnership (n=145)	Head Start, Early HS, & HS Partnership (n=111)	Family Child Care (n=131)	School-based Public Preschool (n=45)
Percentage of teachers	23%	13%	11%	9%
Average number of children who left their program	2	1	1	1

Among the teachers (n=108) who reported the removal of children with challenging behavior for any reason, 81 percent were reporting the removal of preschoolers (two preschoolers on average), 16 percent were reporting the removal of children over five (two children over five years on average), 14 percent were reporting the removal of toddlers (two toddlers on average) and 2 percent were reporting the removal of infants (1 infant on average).

Teachers also identified another group of children who leave classrooms and family child care homes; these are children whose parents remove them due to concerns about the challenging behavior of other children. Sixteen percent of teachers (n=68) reported that this happened for at least one child. The highest percent are in center-based child care programs; 23 percent of teachers in center-based child care reported that, on average, 2 children were removed due to the parent's concerns about the challenging behavior of children's peers. See table **Table 4** for complete results.

Teachers also reported on the types of settings that children moved to when they were removed from their programs or family child care settings due to challenging behavior. They were asked to estimate the percentage of programs that were regulated. Most teachers (55%, n=59) reported that when children with challenging behavior

leave their program or family child care homes, not many are likely to move to regulated settings; they estimated that "0-25%" of the settings children move to are regulated. Only 19 percent of teachers (n=21) indicated that children move to programs/settings that are likely to be regulated, reflected in their response that "75-100%" of the settings children move to are regulated.

What are the family circumstances of children with challenging behavior?

Teachers reported on their knowledge of whether children with challenging behavior were experiencing certain adverse family circumstances and also whether they received Child Development Services (CDS) due to a disability or developmental delay. A high percentage of teachers reported that children with challenging behaviors face adverse child and family experiences.

■ **49 percent of teachers (n=215) reported that children's families have health, mental health, substance abuse, or domestic violence challenges; on average, they reported 4 children in families with these circumstances**

■ **44 percent of teachers (n=190) reported that children's parents have serious financial problems (e.g., may have trouble with child care co-payments,**

asked program staff for information about food or housing assistance); on average, they reported 5 children in families with these problems

- 33 percent of teachers (n=144) reported that children have been or are currently in foster care; on average, they reported 2 children in foster care
- 15 percent of teachers (n=64) reported that children are currently homeless; on average, they reported 1 child who is homeless
- 63 percent of teachers (n=272) reported that children receive Child Development Services (CDS); on average, they reported 4 children who receive CDS

How do teachers currently address challenging behaviors and what barriers do they face?

Teachers used a variety of practices when children demonstrated challenging behavior:

- 75 percent of teachers (n=328) reported that they request a special meeting with parents to discuss child's behavior
- 60 percent of teachers (n=260) reported that they recommend/facilitate referral for Child Development Services Evaluation (evaluation for Early Intervention Services for children up to age three and evaluation for Preschool Special Education for children age 3 to 5 years)
- 40 percent of teachers (n=174) reported that they request a consultation with an early childhood mental health specialist
- 35 percent of teachers (n=154) reported that they request assistance from other program staff
- 15 percent of teachers (n=66) reported that they request that parent pick child up early from the program

When asked about barriers to addressing children's challenging behavior, the most common responses highlighted:

- The challenge of the CDS referral process (e.g., "a lengthy process," "a lot of paper work," "slow to evaluate")
- The scarcity of qualified early childhood behavioral

specialists, leading to long waiting periods before securing a consultation, and time-limited consultations

- The need for greater support in working with parents who may fear that a child will be stigmatized for receiving services to address behavioral concerns, or need help understanding the child's challenging behavior in the early care and education setting

What supports do teachers believe will help them address the needs of children with challenging behavior?

Among the different types of support listed on the survey, a high percentage of teachers identified "group training," "on-site consultation," and "increased support for families" as ones that could help them address the needs of children with challenging behavior:

- 61 percent of teachers selected increased opportunities for group training on how to support young children's social-emotional development and address challenging behavior
- 57 percent of teachers selected increased access to early childhood specialists who can visit the classroom or family child care setting and provide consultation about strategies for helping children with challenging behavior
- 48 percent of teachers selected increased support for families, such as staff to help families access services that address housing, mental health, substance abuse problems, and other challenges
- 34 percent of teachers selected a curriculum that has a strong focus on children's social-emotional development
- 21 percent of teachers selected additional staff

CONCLUSION

Results of the survey suggest that Maine's early care and education teachers and providers commonly encounter young children with serious challenging behavior. More than half of the teachers voiced the view that these behaviors have at least some negative impact on other children's learning and safety. One in five teachers reported that children with challenging behavior were removed from an early care and education setting when a parent, teacher, or both concluded the setting could not meet the child's needs, and children typically did not move into another regulated setting. Almost half of the teachers also reported caring for children with challenging behavior who live in families that experience adverse circumstances, including health and mental health problems, substance abuse, or domestic violence. When asked about what would help them address children's challenging behavior, almost half of the teachers recommended increasing supports to families to help them with poverty-related problems, substance abuse, mental health, and other challenges. Over half of the teachers also recommended increased opportunities for group training and on-site assistance from specialists who can provide consultation to help teachers address children's challenging behavior and promote positive social-emotional development of young children. Overall, the results tell a compelling story of a multi-faceted problem and potential approaches to addressing it that could increase the well-being and opportunities for school success for large numbers of Maine's youngest citizens.

A similar version of this report is embedded in the full report to the Joint Standing Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs of the Maine Legislature on the larger study. The following recommendations were made in the full report:

- 1. Implement a statewide early childhood consultation program to help teachers and families**

strengthen supports for children with challenging behavior.

- 2. Create a partnership with the Technical Assistance Center on Social-Emotional Intervention (TACSEI) in order to expand our state's capacity for professional development.**
- 3. Leverage and coordinate federal, state, and local funding for parent engagement.**
- 4. Develop and implement consistent screening and assessment tools for three-to-five-year-olds, using the same process the Developmental Screening Initiative used to implement screening and assessment for zero-to-three-year-olds.**
- 5. Establish the Help Me Grow (HMG) system in Maine. HMG is a systems-level initiative that connects early learning providers, health care providers, and child-serving state and local agencies to help families find medical homes and access timely developmental screening, assessment, and services for their young children. Maine Quality Counts for Kids has already completed the planning to bring HMG to Maine.**
- 6. Develop voluntary guidelines for suspension and expulsion that rely on evidenced-based practices for use by early childhood programs.**

As a result of these findings and recommendations, legislation to implement a pilot, statewide early childhood consultation program was introduced on April 4, 2017. The bill was enacted, but due to lack of funding, it was carried over to a future legislative session. Maine Children's Alliance plans continued efforts to engage stakeholders in discussions about policies that are needed to strengthen supports for young children's social-emotional development and family well-being.



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