



# Child Retention in Wisconsin Child Care Settings: Understanding the Attitudes, Beliefs, and Behaviors that Impact Expulsion and Retention in Early Care and Education

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## Executive Summary

In the winter of 2009/2010, the Supporting Families Together Association (SFTA) collected information from child care providers across Wisconsin on the issue of child care retention and expulsion. Nationally, child care expulsion has been recognized as a significant problem as pre-school age children are three times more likely to be expelled in early care and education settings than in K-12 (Gilliam, 2005). The early care and education expulsion epidemic is indicative of the level of unmet needs in early childhood settings. Expulsion is a symptom of lack of supports for social emotional development (Gilliam, 2005) and unmet economic needs (Southward, Blanchard, Costello, Hanna, & Buffum, 2006). Expulsion interrupts child bonding with the caregiver; increases parental stress within the family and the workplace; and has negative economic impacts on the parents and child care professionals.

The study provided invaluable information on the problem of expulsion in child care settings in the state of Wisconsin. More than two-thirds of respondents asked a family to leave at some point in their career and more than one-half had done so within the past two years. Common reasons included: (1) negative provider perceptions of child or family behavior; (2) provider inability to meet child needs; (3) financial issues; and (4) poor attendance, late pick-up and changes in the family's circumstances.

Although many child care providers reported in the survey that they were confident in their own ability to address the challenging behaviors of children, the amount of training on these issues providers reported receiving was relatively low. Additionally, providers who participated in the guided interviews expressed doubt that the confidence level reported in the survey was reflective of overall competency in the workforce.

Although the majority of providers reported having adequate policies and procedures in place for meeting the needs of children, 1 in 5 reported that they had little to no confidence in their ability to deal with challenging behaviors. 1 in 4 reported little to no confidence in their ability to supervise others who are dealing with challenging behaviors.



## Methodology

### Overview:

SFTA offered an online survey to 2,800 licensed or certified child care providers and there was a 14% response rate (387 providers). Additionally, 30 providers participated in a guided interview. Through the online survey and key-informant guided interviews, providers were given an opportunity to respond to questions about attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors linked to expulsion and retention. Given the disparity of expulsion of children with special needs compared to typically developing children (Gilliam & Shahar, 2006) and higher expulsion rates among children with diverse language and cultural experiences (Gilliam, 2005), the survey and guided interviews specifically explored training, experience, and confidence related to inclusion.

### Literature Review:

A literature review was conducted to understand the driving causes and effects of expulsion in early care and education environments. In addition, lessons learned from statewide professional development efforts guided the development of the survey and interviews.

### Online Survey:

The online survey was developed to build understanding of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors resulting in either expulsion or parents opting to change providers. The survey was disseminated electronically to certified and licensed providers through The Registry and Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies.

### Guided Interviews:

Certified and licensed providers were recruited to participate in a 30-60 minute guided interview. Providers had an opportunity to reflect on the data from the online survey results and identify professional development supports that could reduce the likelihood of expulsion. Interviews were conducted February through April of 2010.



## Study Participants

**“As a whole in the field, I think we do lack the training we need for special needs children. Early intervention is critical. We don’t have the financial resources to support an adequate training program. Bottom line... without early intervention for children, their needs are not going to be understood. Without staff training, some staff will think that the child is ‘just not listening’ or being ‘naughty.’ Without training, children are not understood.”**

- WI Child Care Provider

Supporting Families Together Association, Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, and The Registry invited 2,800 licensed or certified early care and education providers with current e-mail addresses from around Wisconsin to participate in an on-line survey.

There was representation from each licensing region, including both rural and urban communities. Respondents had a wide range of experience, ranging from less than 1 year to over 20 years of experience in early care and education.

Participation was voluntary and all responses were confidential.

### Longevity in the Field:

- ◆ 71% of providers reported working in the field for over 10 years. Of that group, 30% of participating providers have been in the field over 20 years
- ◆ 63% of respondents worked in an early care and education setting that had been in operation 10 or more years
- ◆ 45% of participants had worked in their current setting for more than 10 years

**79% of providers said that experience in guiding behaviors is an important or very important factor in hiring decisions**

### Type of Early Care and Education Program:

- ◆ 47% were Group Center Family Child Care
- ◆ 31% were Licensed Family Child Care
- ◆ 14% were Certified Family Child Care
- ◆ 22% were 4-K sites
- ◆ 10% were Head Start or Early Head Start

### Commitment to Quality:

- ◆ 11% of survey participants worked in an accredited child care program
- ◆ 85% of accredited sites are National Association for the Education of Young Children accredited
- ◆ 13% are City of Madison accredited
- ◆ 1% are National Association of Family Child Care accredited
- ◆ 1% are National Accreditation Commission accredited

## Expulsion in Early Care and Education Settings in Wisconsin

**68% of WI providers have asked a family to leave their program at some time during their career and 52% of providers have asked a family to leave within the last two years.**

Challenges managing **child and family behaviors** are a root cause for expulsion. Providers were asked to reflect on behaviors related to retention and expulsion within the last two years.

- ◆ 42% of providers reported asking a family to leave their program at least once because of the behavior of the child. 7% took this action more than once in the last two years
- ◆ 25% acknowledged awareness about a family removing a child from their setting due to the child’s behavior
- ◆ 18% asked a family to leave their program due to the provider’s inability to meet the needs of the child
- ◆ 21% of providers asked a family to leave at least once because of family behavior

- ◆ One provider reported family behavior leading to expulsion more than 8 times within the childcare due to conflict with staff or management
- ◆ 22% reported knowing a family removed a child from the child care due to conflict with staff or management

**Financial issues** are a **significant contributing factor** to expulsion.

- ◆ 49% of providers asked a family to leave based on the family’s inability to pay their Wisconsin Shares co-payment
- ◆ 38% believed a family had removed a child from care due to financial issues

42% of providers reported asking at least one family to leave due to lack of tuition payments and 20% of providers took this course of action 2 or more times



**“Frequent changes in arrangements or caregivers are assumed to have negative implications for children’s outcomes, as stable caring relationships with adults are key for healthy child development” (Adams, Zaslow, and Tout 2007).**

**One provider reported, “The child went from full time to part time and I needed to find a full time child. So, I asked them to leave.”**

Other trends identified are a conflict between **family circumstances and provider business practices**. Poor attendance, changes in the family schedule, and persistent late pick-up and no shows were identified as common reasons to ask a family to find another provider.



## Professional Development— An Ounce of Prevention is Worth a Pound of Cure

Key ongoing statewide professional development initiatives require greater levels of implementation and access than are currently available.

- ◆ 61% of providers stated that no one in their setting had been trained on the Five Protective Factors, the Strengthening Families Initiative
- ◆ 67% of survey participants reported receiving no training in the Pyramid Model of the Social Emotional Foundations of Early Learning
- ◆ 36% of those surveyed had not received any training in the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards. Of those receiving training in the early learning standards, learning ranged from 1 hour overviews to 18 hours of training

Participants felt confident that support to early care and education providers and professional development could reduce expulsion, despite relatively low levels of training in key initiatives in the field. In the online survey, providers expressed confidence in their **own** ability to appropriately address challenging behaviors.

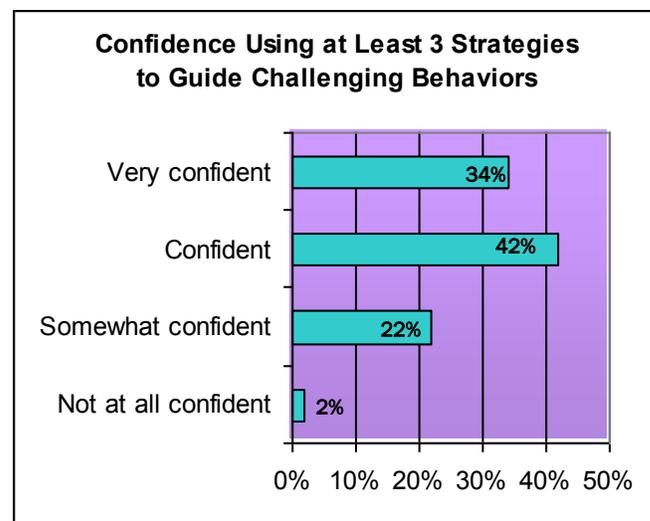
- ◆ **77% believe that they are adequately trained to address atypical development in children**
- ◆ **73% believe that they are adequately trained to meet the social emotional needs of children**
- ◆ **89% reported that clearer standards about inclusion and special needs and resources should be enhanced in entry level courses**

When asked to explain high confidence levels in light of high expulsion rates, 93% of guided interview participants discussed the possibility that “people don’t know what they don’t know.” With out a common understanding of best practices, providers may believe they are appropriately meeting child needs while perpetuating the expulsion epidemic.

High confidence in one’s **own** ability and lower confidence in the broader field emerged related to special needs training and experience too.

Providers spoke to the need to learn about the special needs of each individual child and the necessity to partner closely with parents. Each participant identified the importance of ongoing high-quality training to address the special needs of children.

Confidence, and self-efficacy are key to behavior change (Miller & Rollnick, 1991). High levels of confidence may prove to be a strong basis for professional development geared toward reducing expulsion.



## Child Retention— The Ground Work to Prevent Expulsion

Clear policies, procedures, communication, training, experience, and confidence are key to using strategies to reduce expulsion. The online survey and guided interviews allowed professionals to reflect and report on the foundations for retaining children and families in their programs.

### Policies & Procedures to Meet the Needs of Children

- ◆ 83% of providers said policies are in place and 79% said procedures are in place to guide expulsion
- ◆ 95% of providers reported having adequate policies and procedures in place to meet the physical needs of children
- ◆ 95% of providers reported having adequate policies and procedures in place to meet the cognitive needs of children

- ◆ 96% of providers reported having adequate policies and procedures to meet the social emotional needs of children
- ◆ 84% of providers reported having adequate policies and procedures to meet the cultural needs of children
- ◆ 73% reported having adequate policies and procedures to meet the linguistic needs of children

### Confidence in Identifying Challenging Behaviors Before They Become Problems

- ◆ 29% Very Confident
- ◆ 54% Confident
- ◆ 17% Low to No Confidence

### Confidence in Dealing with Challenging Behaviors

- ◆ 24% Very Confident
- ◆ 56% Confident
- ◆ 20% Low to No Confidence

### Confidence Supervising Others Dealing with Challenging Behaviors

- ◆ 24% Very Confident
- ◆ 50% Confident
- ◆ 26% Low to No Confidence

### Confidence Seeking Outside Support to Deal with Challenging Behaviors

- ◆ 47% Very Confident
- ◆ 38% Confident
- ◆ 15% Low to No Confidence

During the guided interviews, providers were asked to identify best practices they would like to see generalized to reduce or prevent expulsion. Five themes emerged:

- ◆ The importance of parent/provider partnership and constructive written and face-to-face communication
- ◆ The importance of providers having a solid foundation in child development
- ◆ The value of building a relationship and finding a good fit between family and program prior to enrollment
- ◆ The importance of planning and clear and consistent program policies and parent handbooks to facilitate communication
- ◆ The belief that expulsion should be the last resort after many other approaches have been tried



## Implications for Policy and Practice

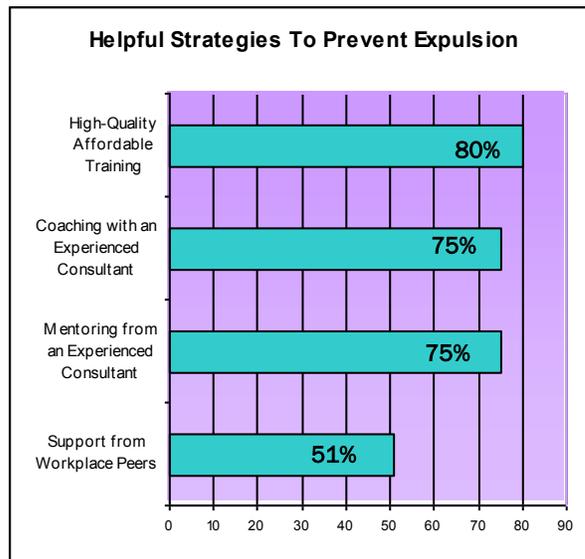
“When teachers reported having access to a behavioral consultant who was able to provide classroom-based strategies for dealing with challenging student behaviors, the likelihood of expulsion was nearly cut in half” (Gilliam 2005). In the chart (right) participants identified the value of training and on-site learning opportunities to support best practices related to preventing expulsion.

### Cross-system Collaboration

- ◆ 61% of providers reported using County Birth to Three resources to meet child needs
- ◆ 54% utilized school-based special education consultants
- ◆ 42% accessed support through Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies
- ◆ 26% identified Family Resource Centers as a source of support
- ◆ Head Start programs reported access to mental health consultants to support partnering between parents and providers

### Adequate Supports to Parents

- ◆ Interview and online survey responses recommended training for parents in child development so that early care and education professionals and parents could be “on the same page”
- ◆ 93% of interview participants emphasized the importance of parent/provider communication to prevent escalation of issues that result in expulsion
- ◆ Several providers reported a range of policies and practices related to collecting tuition and or co-payments from highly standardized business practices to a flexible approach with leniency toward late or impartial payment of fees
- ◆ Providers identified the prevalence of families ineligible for Wisconsin Shares child care subsidy program who struggle to afford child care costs



## Recommendations

### I Increase Investments in Competency Driven Professional Development in Early Care and Education:

- ◆ Promote the Wisconsin Early Childhood Professional Development Model and increase funding for comprehensive approaches including:
  - \* Combining the 15 hour **Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards** training with on-site walk throughs and technical consulting
  - \* Training, coaching, and consultation related to the **Pyramid Model of Social Emotional Development**
  - \* The **Head Start** professional development system focuses on performance standards and improving practice rather than a limited focus on acquiring new information
- ◆ Fund credit-based learning through the Wisconsin Early Childhood Association T.E.A.C.H. program as a core resource to support professionals in accessing credit-based professional development opportunities
- ◆ Deepen knowledge and enhance provider practice through opportunities such as The Registry Inclusion Credential and the UW Madison Infant Mental Health Certificate

### II Prioritize Investments in Parent Education:

- ◆ Fund evidence-based home visiting models such as Parents as Teachers to directly support families in developmentally appropriate learning and parenting
- ◆ Deliver joint community-based educational opportunities to parents and child care providers to learn in collaboration and develop a common framework and language for meeting the needs of children

### III Streamline Access to Services for Families with Special Needs Children:

- ◆ Increase communication and clarify protocols across county Birth-to-three programs to facilitate referrals to services by the child care field
- ◆ Provide training and information to child care providers and parents on Medicaid requirements related to infant mental health services
- ◆ Involve regional and local organizations with an established role in supporting early child care in delivering systematic training, coaching, and resource sharing with child care professionals

### IV Increase Eligibility for Wisconsin Shares

- ◆ Child care providers recommended additional funding for families and specifically mentioned families who are currently not eligible for child care subsidies under Wisconsin Shares yet are struggling to meet child care costs

### Conclusion

During their early years, children are growing and developing rapidly. A strong early care and education setting is vital to children reaching their full potential. Strong partnerships between parents and providers are good for children. By increasing the level and amount of quality professional development providers receive and providing additional support to help families afford high-quality early care and education settings, we have the opportunity to prevent expulsion and help children become strong and healthy.

For more information about the study, please e-mail SFTA at [info@supportingfamilies.together.com](mailto:info@supportingfamilies.together.com) or call SFTA at 1-888-713-KIDS  
 SFTA is a non-profit, 501(c)(3) organization  
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