

Pediatricians say no to expulsions, suspensions at schools

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'Zero-tolerance' policies don't have the desired effect, American Academy of Pediatrics says.

(HealthDay)—Suspending or expelling a child from school should be a rare last resort and not a routine punishment for bullying, drug use or other infractions, according to a new policy statement from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP).

The AAP, a leading group of pediatricians, said [school](#) "zero-tolerance" policies toward [kids](#)' behavior problems do no good.

If the parents are at work when a child is out of school, more [inappropriate behavior](#) often occurs, the authors said in the statement, which was published online Feb. 25 in the journal *Pediatrics*. Students who are suspended or expelled are more likely to never get a [high school diploma](#), end up in the [juvenile justice system](#) or eventually land a low-paying job or no job at all.

"There's a tremendous price to pay not just for the kid involved, but for society," said Dr. Jeffrey Lamont, a [pediatrician](#) at Marshfield Clinic in Weston, Wis., who wrote the new AAP statement.

But if zero-tolerance policies keep troublemakers out of school, don't the "good" kids benefit? That's not what the research shows, Lamont said.

What's more, Lamont said, the policies are not only targeting kids who are a danger to their peers but also students with a wide range of behavior issues.

U.S. schools started turning to the zero-tolerance approach in the 1980s, as a way to curb drug use and violence. The idea got a boost in the 1990s with the passage of the Gun-Free School Zone Act, which required schools to expel students caught with firearms on school grounds.

"The problem was that schools adopted zero-tolerance policies that extended to lesser offenses, like disrespecting a teacher," Lamont said.

In 2006, a task force set up by the [American Psychological Association](#) found after a decade of research that there was no evidence that zero-tolerance policies had made schools any safer or helped kids' school performances. But there was evidence, the task force found, that the policies were disproportionately targeting black and Hispanic kids.

"You have to ask yourself why that is," Lamont said.

The AAP had no estimate for how many U.S. school districts had zero-tolerance policies. But they are "very common," said Katherine Cowan, director of communications for the National Association of School Psychologists.

Cowan said the new AAP policy is in line with her group's thinking on

the issue. "It's great to have pediatricians weighing in on this now," she said, noting that pediatricians play a big role in spotting kids' behavioral and health issues early on.

Cowan said there are "obvious, silly examples" of zero-tolerance being too rigidly applied, such as suspending elementary school kids because their parents packed a butter knife with their lunch. Last month, a Pennsylvania kindergartener was suspended for threatening classmates with her Hello Kitty "bubble gun."

Most often, however, suspensions and expulsions are doled out when kids do misbehave. The issue, Lamont and Cowan said, is that the punishment doesn't fit the crime.

"And we have alternatives that are proven to work," Cowan said.

One example the AAP points to is a program called Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports, already used in more than 16,000 U.S. schools. Many state education departments have "technical assistance" centers that help schools implement the plan.

The program's goal is to prevent behavior problems or keep them from escalating. The first step is for schools to come up with expectations for all students' behavior—such as keeping your hands to yourself when you're in the hallway or speaking up when you see a student being bullied—and making those expectations clear.

The response to rule-breaking is also made clear; if it's minor, a teacher might handle it with a simple reminder of the school's expectations. If it's serious, parents might be called in or the child might get counseling from a school psychologist or other professional.

The other key is that kids are also recognized for good behavior, Lamont

said. "Put yourself in the kids' place," he said. "Not many adults would stay with a job where all they hear is criticism. Why do we expect something from children that we wouldn't expect of adults?"

Lamont said there is evidence that the program does improve [behavior problems](#) in schools. "From the federal government on down, people support this," he said.

Cowan said that although many schools still have zero-tolerance policies, a shift is taking place. "I think we are seeing a trend of schools moving away from it," she said, "because the research is pretty clear."

More information: Learn more about getting [Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports](#) into schools.

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