Promoting Positive Preschool Climate with Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation

Grace E Schoessow, MS | Early Childhood Mental Health Program Coordinator | Greene County Educational Service Center

The Problem

Too many kids never achieve their potential because they are labelled as having "**problems**" or "**bad behavior**" when they're very young. The focus is on "fixing" the child rather than helping the adults understand what's going on.

Child
- Unmet social, emotional, behavioral and mental health needs

Classroom
- Unsafe classrooms with under-prepared teachers

School/Program
- Disconnected and isolated homes, schools, programs and providers

Community
- Community with vague awareness of the importance of early childhood mental health

- Too many children with challenging behavior are expelled from preschool classrooms when adults decide their behavior makes the classroom are unsafe.
- Children with the highest SEBMH needs often end up in the lowest quality classrooms.
- **Only 1 in 5** Preschool Teachers has had training in Social Emotional development in the past year.
- **1 in 4** children entering Kindergarten have social emotional, behavioral or mental health (SEBMH) needs.
- Preschool teachers report the SEBMH needs of the children are more extreme and more frequent than ever before.
- For the children with SEBMH needs, Early Childhood Mental Health services are either unavailable or inaccessible.
- **Only 34%** of Preschool teachers believe they have the skills necessary to meet their students mental health needs.
- Most preschool programs report missing a connection and communication with the public schools, community service providers, and other preschools.
- Discipline Policies- like Zero Tolerance- promote preschool suspension and expulsion as the solution.
- No follow up, referral or transition process is in place to support children with SEBMH needs when they leave a school or program.
- Family engagement and parent involvement is not central to the intervention planning.
- Mental Health is stigmatized and punished or denied.
- Multiple factors adversely impact the early learning & SE development of children and their families, including: trauma and toxic stress, military service/ deployment; opiate addiction/ drug use; and poverty.
- Nationwide **23%** of preschool programs have regular access to onsite mental health professionals. Locally, **0%** of preschool programs have regular access to onsite mental health professionals.

Sources: Safe Schools Healthy Students Greene County Community Team Needs and Readiness Assessment; Yale University Child Study Center; Journal of Educational Psychology; American Psychological Association; SAMHSA IECMHC Center of Excellence

Proposed Solution

Implementation of Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (ECMHC) to improve children's lives by supporting their social, emotional, and behavioral health with positive classroom environments.

ECMHC is a preventative intervention that pairs a mental health consultant with families and adults who work with young children in the classrooms where they learn and grow. The aim is to build adults' capacity to strengthen and support the healthy social and emotional development of children early and before more costly mental health intervention is needed.

The Rationale

ECMHC equips teachers and caregivers to facilitate children's healthy growth and development by working to promote both strong relationships and supportive classroom environments for children- which is fundamental to brain-building.

- **Supports schools and preschool programs** by enhancing their capacities to address children's and families' mental health needs.
- **Builds the capacity of the adults** in children's lives, so children are supported in all settings where they learn and grow.
- Is provided by consultants who are highly-trained licensed or credentialed professionals with **specialized knowledge** in childhood development, the effects of stress and trauma on families, and the impacts of adult mental illness on developing children.
- Is an **Evidence Based** and **Trauma Informed** intervention.
- Helps **families thrive** and **children succeed** in school.

ECMHC Preventative Interventions

Child Level

Child — Address specific child behaviors of concern to parent or teacher that compromise the learning environment

Classroom — Address issues undermining the quality of the relationships between adults and children.

School/Program — Address policies and practices that benefit the mental health and wellness of all staff and children.

Community — Promote awareness of SE development as the foundation for learning and de-stigmatize MH.

When a child's behavior is of concern to parents or teachers, the consultant helps the adults understand, assess, and address the child's needs by developing an individualized plan with the parents and providers. A plan includes specific strategies for the teacher and family to use to address the social-emotional, behavioral and mental health of the child. Intervention can also include case consultation to share tools and insights to address specific families' mental health needs and to refer them to outside mental health services when appropriate.

Classroom Level

The consultant works with teachers and early learning professionals to improve the quality of care by helping to identify and address attitudes, beliefs, practices, and conditions that may be undermining quality relationships between adults and children. Consultation helps teachers by processing through their complex work with children and families. Positive interventions and support strategies are modeled and coached to create a **positive classroom climate**.

Program Level

Directors, administrators and other leaders are supported by the consultant in making positive changes in their practices and/or policies. Technical assistance, support and guidance is offered for administrators related to policy development and implementation of evidence-based practices to support mental health, trauma, and behavioral challenges. Consultants offer professional development that focuses on building adult caregiving capacity and capabilities and promoting stress reduction, mental wellness and resiliency.

Community Level

Community partners are engaged in a conversation about the importance of social-emotional development and early childhood mental health. Consultants encourage and empower community partners to take an active role in changing attitudes, beliefs, practices that may be undermining mental wellness.

State and National Level

In Ohio, technical assistance and leadership for ECMHC is provided by **Ohio Mental Health and Addiction Services** through the Whole Child Matters and Ohio Preschool Expulsion Prevention Partnership initiatives. Ohio's Healthy Schools and Communities Resource Team provides multi disciplinary leadership, guidance and support for Ohio's Safe Schools/Healthy Students, Project AWARE, and School Climate Transformation grant communities.

Nationally, ECMHC is an evidence based, indirect intervention service with technical assistance provided by SAMSHA's **Center of Excellence for IECMHC** and **Georgetown University Center for ECMHC (CECMHC)**.

PARENT SUPPORT — REFERRAL OF CHILD, OBSERVATION, ASSESSMENT, EARLY ID OF DD

POSITIVE CLIMATE — TEACHER SUPPORT, COACHING & TRAINING, FEEDBACK

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT — TRAUMA AWARENESS, STAFF WELLNESS, POSITIVE CULTURE

COLLECTIVE IMPACT — COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS, PROMOTION AND ADVOCACY, CHANGE IN POLICIES

FOUNDATION OF LEARNING — AWARENESS OF SOCIAL EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND CHILD MENTAL HEALTH AS

Positive Outcomes

ECMHC has been shown to improve children's social skills, increase emotional regulation, promote healthy relationships, reduce challenging behaviors, reduce the number of suspensions and expulsions, improve classroom climate, and reduce provider stress, burnout, and turnover.

98% Expulsions were prevented when preschoolers were given access to early childhood mental health services.

70% Reduction in Challenging Classroom Behaviors

$1 Every dollar invested in early childhood development saves more than **$8.00** down the road

$8

Increased positive strategies in classrooms and Improved classroom climate

Parents and caregivers involved with ECMHC services

ECMHC helps improve the Quality of early learning environments.

miss less work and report lower levels of stress

71 community partners engaged in Social and Emotional development.

51% of parents engaged in services

Devereux Adult Resilience Survey (DARS) showed **increase in adult resilience.**

Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool for Preschool Classrooms (TPOT) showed **increase in positive classroom strategies.**

100% satisfaction rating for ECMHC services

Partnerships with early childhood professionals and programs to develop plans and policies that support the families of children with delays

Reduced Caregiver/ Teacher stress

Improved Caregiver/ Teacher Resilience

Conclusion

Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation works to create a positive classroom climate that promotes children's mental health.

Social and emotional health—the ability to form strong relationships, solve problems, and express and manage emotions—is critical for school readiness and lifelong success. Without it, young children are more likely to have behavior problems that often lead to difficulty with learning, suspension or expulsion, and later school dropout. Without early intervention, these children are also on tract for costly mental health services well into adulthood.

Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation works because it brings the community together to create a climate conducive to learning.

Acknowledgments

GREENE ESC — GREENE COUNTY EDUCATIONAL SERVICE CENTER

MIAMI UNIVERSITY — COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCE, Center for School-Based Mental Health Programs

Ohio MHAS — Promoting wellness and recovery

Safe Schools Healthy Students

Ohio | Department of Education

FAIRBORN — A CITY IN MOTION