

# THE BLAME GAME: THE MEDIA "EXPLAINS" THE PRESCHOOL EXPULSION STUDY



ALAMEDA COUNTY CHILD CARE PLANNING COUNCIL STEERING COMMITTEE  
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BY ERICA NELSON, PLANNING COUNCIL INTERN

## HOW THE MEDIA COVERED THE STUDY: THREE TRENDS

Reading through the massive coverage of the preschool expulsion study, released on May 17, I noticed several trends in the ways in which the media's coverage of the story and their explanations of the study's findings. These trends significantly impact the ways in which the national audience is introduced to and understands the study and its implications.

### ROUND ONE: THE FACTS

The first round of coverage gave an **overview of the study and its findings** with a main focus on the **need for mental health support** in preschool classrooms. Essentially, these articles gave the information listed in this side panel to the right.



### ROUND TWO: WHO TO BLAME?

The second trend in the media coverage began the **real blame game**: these articles blamed **teachers** for lack of training and qualifications, **preschools** for developmentally inappropriate expectations and standards, and **parents** for selfishness, irresponsibility, and poor parenting skills. By spreading the blame around, the articles complicated the issue by introducing so many other variables – variables that were more controversial,

### ABOUT THE STUDY: PREKINDERGARTENERS LEFT BEHIND

Walter Gilliam led the research team for "Prekindergarteners Left Behind," a study at the Yale Child Study Center. The study surveyed nearly 4,000 preschool teachers in 52 state-funded preschool programs in 40 states, and asked teachers to report the number of children they had asked to leave the classroom in the previous year. Gilliam then compared this data to the K-12 expulsion data from a recent national study.

A look at the findings:

- Nationally, 6.67 per 1,000 preschoolers are expelled versus 2.09 per 1,000 K-12 students;
- State figures range from 21 per 1,000 in New Mexico to 0 per 1,000 in Kentucky;
- California ranks 16<sup>th</sup> with 7.49 per 1,000 enrolled;
- Boys are expelled 4.5 times more often than girls;
- African-American children are expelled at least twice as often as their Caucasian, Latino, and Asian-American peers;
- Faith-affiliated and for-profit child care programs expel more often than Head Start and school-based programs;
- Teachers who report having regular access to mental health care consultation, resources, and support are half as likely to expel a student as those reporting no access.

provocative, and likely to get more media attention and hype. Unfortunately, these hot-button controversial issues detracted from the real conclusion of the study: the need for early childhood mental health support for teachers.

### **SAMPLE READER REACTIONS...**

“His behavior is so bad that his parents ship him off to a preschool where they expect the teacher to handle him with the patience they admit they lack. Then they're outraged that Elijah has been kicked out of preschool for the same reasons that the parents want to kick him out of their home for the summer.”

“In the wake of Enron and Tyco we demand accountability from corporations, yet society demands little from parents who bring children into this world.”

### **ROUND THREE: ANECDOTAL APPEALS**

The final trend of media coverage that I saw introduced the **anecdotal appeals to emotion**. These articles told the heart-breaking stories of children and families who were affected by expulsion: children who had been kicked out of multiple classrooms and suffered from low self-esteem, parents who lost their jobs and had to struggle to find child care and preschool options, limited by their children's difficult behavior. These articles appealed to readers' emotions more than reason, further pushing away the possibility for constructive solutions. One article in particular, “When toddlers get fired,” posted on salon.com by Neal Pollack, spurred extreme reactions from the readers, who attacked his parenting skills, his career and his child care decisions.

**HOW DO WE REACT** to what the media has “explained” about this study? Parents, teachers, preschools, and the general public will react in different ways – each of which could be potentially harmful to the children at the heart of the issue. The media will pick up on the flashy, controversial issues and run with them – right past the substantial questions that need to be addressed. This is *your* field of expertise: you know the issue, the questions, what's really at stake. **Don't let the media pass by the opportunity for discussion!** Write to the papers, hold information and discussion sessions – keep talking about your experiences and ideas about the issue.

### **FOR FURTHER READING**

The full text of the Prekindergarteners Left Behind Study may be accessed at:

[http://fcd-us.org/PDFs/NationalPreKExpulsionPaper03.02\\_new.pdf](http://fcd-us.org/PDFs/NationalPreKExpulsionPaper03.02_new.pdf)

Several articles presenting the main facts of the study:

- <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/05/16/AR2005051601201.html>
- <http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2005/05/20/BAGQCCS7OO1.DTL> (featuring the interview with Grace Manning-Orenstein)

An article blaming preschools and standards: “Maybe preschool is the problem” - Jennifer Steinhauer, *The New York Times*. Link unavailable without subscription: e-mail Erica at [erica.nelson@acgov.org](mailto:erica.nelson@acgov.org) if you would like a copy.

Neal Pollack's article, and the readers' letters:

- [http://archive.salon.com/mwt/feature/2005/05/28/expulsion/index\\_np.html](http://archive.salon.com/mwt/feature/2005/05/28/expulsion/index_np.html)
- [http://archive.salon.com/mwt/letters/2005/06/01/toddler\\_letters/index.html](http://archive.salon.com/mwt/letters/2005/06/01/toddler_letters/index.html)

An article about the media's (lack of) coverage of pre-K and early education:

- <http://www.cjrdaily.org/archives/001592.asp>