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## Introduction to Special Focus

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# **Introduction to Special Focus**

*Zachary C. LaBrot, Kayla Bates-Brantley, and Sarah Wright Harry*

## **Abstract**

Early childhood is a period that is marked by rapid changes in development. Exposure to enriched experiences such as positive family interactions, participation in early childhood education, and community engagement can foster healthy development and prevent many behavioral and mental health difficulties. Conversely, young children's development can be negatively influenced by a variety of risk-factors that have unfortunate long-term outcomes. Given the pervasive impact of behavioral development on young children's overall developmental outcomes, research examining strategies to enhance young children's positive behavioral outcomes is needed. The purpose of this paper is to introduce Part 1 of a two-part special issue in Perspectives on Early Childhood Psychology and Education that pertains to enhancing young children's behavioral outcomes. Rationale for the special issue, content of included articles, and special considerations for readers are described.

**Keywords:** *Early childhood; early childhood education; behavioral assessment; behavioral interventions; behavioral outcomes; early childhood development.*

## **Introduction**

Early childhood is a period that is marked by rapid changes in development. Enriched experiences provided through family, early childhood education programs, and the community have potential to bolster developmental competencies, such as cognitive abilities, social skills, effective communication, and activities of daily living (Bick & Nelson, 2017; McWayne et al., 2004). Conversely, early exposure to various risk factors can negatively impact children's

development. Poverty, family discord, exposure to violence, and low parental education place young children at high risk for the development of internalizing (e.g., anxiety, depression) and externalizing (e.g., oppositional defiant disorder, conduct problems) problems (Carter et al., 2010; Egger & Angold, 2006; Wichstrom et al., 2012). These risk factors are even more pronounced for young children with neurodevelopmental disabilities (e.g., autism, ADHD; Flouri et al., 2015; Midouhas et al., 2013). As such, it is imperative that these risk factors are mitigated through evidence-based practices.

Fortunately, a variety of strategies have been empirically evaluated and found to be effective for altering young children's behavior and subsequent developmental trajectory (e.g., Filcheck et al., 2004; Kuhn et al., 2020; LaBrot et al., 2018; Pasqua et al., 2021; Radley et al., 2017; Trimlett et al., 2021; von Schulz et al., 2018). This is often accomplished by directly targeting young children's behavioral outcomes in home, school, and clinic. Because young children are sensitive to the effects of their immediate environment, arranging antecedents and providing contingencies to occasion and reinforce adaptive behaviors are ideal strategies to promote behavioral outcomes that lead to healthy development (LaBrot et al., 2018; LeGray et al., 2013; von Schulz et al., 2018). Relevant behavioral outcomes include appropriate behavior (e.g., compliance with instructions), social skills, and academic responding.

Despite the plethora of empirical studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of various behavioral interventions that target these relevant outcomes, risk factors that threaten healthy development persist (Carter et al., 2010; Egger & Angold, 2006; Wichstrom et al., 2012), especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, parents and teachers in early childhood programs often report feeling ill-equipped to address young children's unique developmental and behavioral needs (Snell et al., 2012; Worcester et al., 2008). As such, additional research examining effective, efficient, and novel assessment and intervention techniques to address common presenting concerns in early childhood is needed.

The primary aim of Part 1 of this two-part special issue is to introduce research on assessment and intervention strategies that directly impact young children's behavioral outcomes. More specifically, this special issue will provide practitioners and researchers who work with early childhood populations tools to improve a variety of behavioral outcomes that have been demonstrated to prevent difficulties and promote long-term, healthy development. Articles in this issue range from empirical to conceptual and have implications for both school and clinic.

Two articles in this issue provide insights on universal screening practices in early education settings. Taylor et al. (2022) thoroughly discusses recommendations to overcome barriers to universal screening practices in kindergarten through fifth grade educational settings. Drymond et al. (2022) reviews commonly utilized early childhood universal screening tools for their usability, technical adequacy, and appropriateness. Collectively, these articles provide evidence-based insights and strategies for using universal screening to identify young children at risk for social-emotional, behavioral, and academic difficulties. Further, implications for using universal screening data to inform effective intervention is discussed.

Four articles in this issue provide empirical evaluations of behavioral interventions utilized with young children in early childhood education settings. McGoey et al. (2022) examined the effectiveness of an eight-lesson curriculum designed to improve young children's social skills and behavior with a primary objective of bullying prevention. Similarly, Helbig et al. (2022) evaluated the effects of a social skills intervention for improving eight children's social skill use on the playground and in classroom settings. Hayes et al. (2022) conducted a systematic review of the literature to determine whether implementation of token economy interventions in preschool settings meet design standards to be considered an evidence-based practice and further discuss methodological limitations to be addressed in future research. Finally, Smith et al. (2022) conducted a meta-analysis of single-case design research

studies that evaluated social-emotional interventions implemented in rural settings, with a focus on assessing the effects on teacher and parent practices to support young children. Given their empirical nature, these articles offer evidence for effective and practical strategies that can be used in educational settings for directly enhancing young children's behavioral outcomes.

In addition to examining behavioral interventions for enhancing behavioral outcomes, this issue also contains two articles that examine strategies for improving young children's academic outcomes. Bates-Brantley et al. (2022) examined the effectiveness of a novel early literacy intervention and found that it was useful for improving both early literacy skills and behavior in a seven-year-old student. Szydlo and Farnsworth (2022) conducted a systematic review of the literature to synthesize research evaluating kindergarten readiness transition practices. They found that multi-component interventions that target children's self-regulation skills in addition to parent involvement can lead to children's successful transition to kindergarten. Together, these two studies highlight the importance of interventions that target relevant behavioral outcomes (i.e., academic skills) for enhancing early academic success in early childhood populations.

Finally, Ripple et al. (2022) provides evidence-based interventions to address young children's picky eating and disruptive behaviors during mealtimes. Specifically, recommendations for parents and teachers to prevent and address tantrums and food refusal during mealtimes are described. This article provides valuable insights into approaches that are beneficial to promote behavioral outcomes for common presenting concerns that often occur during mealtimes.

Taken together, the findings and insights from the articles in Part 1 of this special issue enhance our understanding of strategies to promote young children's behavior outcomes across school, home, and even clinical settings. Furthermore, this special issue delineates strategies that are not only effective, but practical to implement. Because some of the articles in this issue focus on

enhancing behavioral outcomes in early elementary age children, we encourage readers to consider the components of each article in the context of a broad range of early childhood (i.e., birth to 8). It is our hope that this collection of articles emphasizes the impact of the various strategies discussed to promote young children's behavioral and subsequent development outcomes.

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