

“Meet Charlie – A Young Child Expelled in Preschool”

Adapted from story told at the “What’s Behind Preschool Expulsion” Congressional Briefing, by Claire Lerner, *Zero to Three*

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“My job today is to guide us into tuning into the perspective and experience of the child who is expelled; in this case it’s Charlie.”

“So, this is Take #1 – Charlie and Ms. Tina:”

“Hi, everyone! My name is Charlie. I just turned three and I am on my way to preschool. My mommy is really stressed out. We had a crazy morning. There is so much to do and my daddy leaves for work super early so my mommy has to do it all by herself: Get my brother and sister ready to make their bus on time, and then get me to school so she can go to her daytime job. That’s right - Mommy has to work TWO jobs – one at night and one during the day – so we can keep our apartment and not have to move in with Aunt Teresa.”

“Our car ride is super tense. Mommy isn’t happy with me because I dilly-dallied. I have a really hard time getting organized in the morning and I wasn’t ready in time. I’m not feeling too good about myself right now.”

“When we get to school, I don’t want to say good-bye to mommy. I hate it when she’s mad at me. I start to cry and won’t let her go. My teacher, Ms. Tina, tells me “It’s time to say goodbye,” and that I “need to find something to do.” I am frozen. I look around the room at all the kids playing, but I am so upset I can’t even think. My feelings are taking over my brain.”

“Then Joey arrives. I am so happy to see him! I pull on his arm to take him over to the sand table to play, but oh no! He says I’m hurting him! Ms. Tina comes over with an angry scrunched up face and tells me, “Let go of Joey immediately!” She shouts, “Charlie, I’ve told you a thousand times that you cannot grab your friends! You need to use your words. No one will want to play with you if you hurt them.” She acts like I did it on purpose! I didn’t *mean* to hurt Joey. I’m just not so good with words yet. Ms. Tina tells me I can have a seat at the table all by myself. I am sad and alone and all the kids are looking at me like, “There goes Charlie again, back in timeout.”

“Then it’s circle time, which I LOVE, but it’s very hard for me to sit still. I feel all jumpy inside! My brain is telling me *not* to move, but my body just wants to keep going. I get this idea to hop up and down like the frog in the book we’re reading. The other kids start to get up and jump just like me, but in her angry voice, Ms. Tina tells everyone to sit right back down. Then she looks at me and says that since I can’t control my body, I have to go sit at a table away from the group. I am always getting into trouble.”

“Later on the playground, a bunch of kids are playing a chasing game that looks like so much fun. I join in! I’m going really fast and I’m getting so excited! I get really close to Layla and tag her, but she falls down and shouts, “You can’t play Charlie!” Ms. Tina shouts, “Charlie, you can’t play with your friends if you’re going to hurt them! Tell Layla you’re sorry and take a timeout!” But I didn’t *mean* to hurt Layla. I am so mad I pick up a whole handful of mulch and throw it. Ms. Tina says, “Ok, Charlie. You’re done. Time to call mom to pick you up.”

“Mommy arrives and is fuming, like in the cartoons where the fire comes out of people’s ears. Ms. Tina tells her as if I’m not even there, “Charlie has no self-control and is putting other kids in danger. He can’t come to school if he can’t behave.”

“My mommy starts to cry. She asks what in the world is wrong with me and how is she supposed to work if she can’t take me anywhere? If I can’t go back to school, I won’t get to learn how to be a good friend, which I want so badly. And I won’t get to learn all that cool stuff Ms. Tina shares with us at circle time, or make those fun projects, or be in charge of the calendar or give out snack... all those things that make me feel like such a big boy and a team player!”

“Now I feel even more out of control inside. Not less.”

“So now let’s go to Take #2 – Charlie and Ms. Patty:”

“Hi everyone! My name is Charlie. I just turned three and I am on my way to preschool. So, you already know we had a really stressful morning, that my mommy is mad about my dilly-dallying this morning, and then I had a really hard time separating from her at school because we were in a bad place.”

“But this time Ms. Patty is in charge! She comes over with the warmest smile and says to my mommy, “Tough morning, huh? Don’t I know about those.” Wow! My mommy relaxes a little. Then Ms. Patty crouches down to my eye level and says, “Charlie, we are so glad to see you! I know it’s hard to say goodbye to mom sometimes, but she needs to go do her job and guess what? You also have an important job to do! That’s right, feeding the fish!” I see mommy give a big smile to Ms. Patty. Then she give me a big hug and tells me that she knows I’m going to be a great helper and have a great day. I am so proud and excited to help Ms. Patty that I don’t even watch my mommy go out the door.”

“Then Joey arrives. I am so happy to see him! I pull on his arm to take him over to the sand table to play. Oh no! He says I’m hurting him! But I didn’t mean to; I just wanted him to play! Ms. Patty comes over and gently puts her hand on mine and says, “Are you trying to get Joey’s attention, Charlie?” Exactly, Ms. Patty! Spot-on! Then she explains, “Grabbing someone’s arm hurts, and I KNOW you don’t want to hurt Joey, so let’s find another way to let him know what you’re thinking, like using your words. Can you tell Joey what you want to do with him?” And with her help, I do. Then Joey and I have SO much fun at the sand table building a sand cave for our animals.”

“Next, it’s circle time! Ms. Patty knows how hard it is for me to sit still, so she gives me a squishy ball to squeeze so I can move my body without disturbing the group. Ms. Patty *really* gets me. And then, when I start to hop up and down like the frog in the book, instead of getting mad at me, she suggests that we ALL get up and act out the story! She turns my idea into something that makes everyone happy!”

“Later on the playground, a bunch of kids are playing a chasing game that looks like so much fun. I join in and get really close to Layla and tag her. But I push her too hard by accident and she falls down. Ms. Patty comes over and says, “Charlie, it looks like your body got really revved up and you didn’t know your own strength. You didn’t mean to push Layla down, but it’s still important to apologize and make sure Layla is ok,” which Ms. Patty helps me do. Then she has another great idea! She announces that we’re all going to get our energy out by playing a game where we push each other on scooter boards to

the other side of the playground. This way I can use all my pushing power, but in a fun, safe way that I can do with my friends.”

“Now it’s time to go home. When mommy picks me up, Ms. Patty tells her how much energy I have and how my body craves movement and that it’s not my fault, it’s just how I’m “wired.” (I think that’s the funny word she used.) She explains that we are working on ways to help me learn to control my body and my feelings and how proud she is of me for trying SO hard, because it IS really hard work. Mommy looks so happy and she gives me a big hug. “Yay!” Ms. Patty also tells mommy that she has put a list in my backpack of stuff she and daddy can do at home to help me be more in control at home, so we can have less anger and more love.”

“So, in the second scenario, we seem the same behaviors but a completely different reaction on the part of the teachers and a completely different outcome for the child. Why? Because Patty has had specific training on understanding the root causes of challenging behaviors. She has also benefitted from the modeling and support of her supervisor on how to remain empathic and loving while also setting appropriate limits, providing Charlie the tools he needs to cope and adapt in a group setting, skills he will need to succeed and thrive in the outside world. Equally important, Patty’s program sees parents as partners. They don’t blame or criticize, which alienates families, they are empathic to the challenges parents face and see their role as helping parents understand and nurture their children’s healthy development. Indeed, while we are focused today on early childhood programs and supporting caregivers, it’s important to note that we also need to support parents in nurturing positive social-emotional development starting from birth. Quality programs do both.”