

The Kindness Project: Bringing Mindfulness Support to Teachers & Young Children during a Pandemic

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Problem: The COVID-19 pandemic hit in the second year of our 4-year project bringing the mindfulness-based Kindness Curriculum (KC) to preschool and 4K children. In year one, a randomized waitlist control study established that KC participation led to significant improvement in social competence, self-regulation, and academic skills, compared to control classrooms. Consequently, our challenge was to expand mindfulness training for teachers and KC implementation throughout our community despite the pandemic. Pandemic adaptations included three main components. First, mindfulness coaches provided support to help teachers handle transitions to virtual and hybrid instruction. Second, smaller teacher training classes (e.g., 12 teachers/class in 2020) incorporated pandemic challenges into the 26-hour KC training. Third, two 5-hour virtual Leadership Training Sessions for 22 community and program leaders demonstrated the benefits of mindfulness programming during these challenging times. The leadership outreach brought in many new classrooms: in this 4th year, 42 classrooms (about 700 children) are implementing the KC.

Methods: See Table below. Year 1 tested the efficacy of training teachers on mindfulness and KC with a randomized control design. In year 2, control-group teachers were trained and the KC was implemented prior to the pandemic in all classrooms. Years 3 and 4 focused on expansion to new programs.

In 2020-2021, some classrooms did not start implementation until January when they returned to in-person classes. Other programs started the KC in fall but experienced temporary closures due to COVID cases.

Results: Despite the pandemic challenges, most children improved over time on social-emotional, self-regulation, cognitive, and academic skill measures. Children continuing in the KC program had higher scores on several measures (e.g., report cards, social skills) demonstrating that more mindfulness experience led to even better outcomes.

In years 2 and 3, teachers used KC activities to help children cope (e.g., breathing techniques, mindfulness stories). Teachers reported that mindfulness practices (e.g., reflection, body scans, mindful breathing) personally helped them cope.

Conclusions: The pandemic posed unique challenges to spreading the mindfulness-based KC. However, we were able to substantially expand KC participation from 10 to 42 classrooms. Teachers truly appreciated the mindfulness training, practices, and support from mindfulness coaches. They successfully adapted the KC to their mode of instruction, meeting the needs of children and families. The majority of children either maintained or improved their social and cognitive skills during these difficult times. In many ways the pandemic challenges highlighted the importance of the mindfulness-based training as a resource for teachers, children, and families.

Time Period & Goals	Number of Classrooms; Children	Number of New Teachers Trained	Measures Completed Pre- and Post 12-14 week Curriculum
Y1 (2018-19): Randomized Control Comparison: Test whether training classroom teachers (vs. mindfulness experts) to implement KC has positive impact on children & teachers	10 KC classes 6 Control 272 children <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 65% low SES • 57% ethnically diverse 	21 Teachers & Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual child assessments on 6 tasks (social skills, two executive function tasks, social self-efficacy, self-regulation, mindfulness skills) • Teacher-reported child measures: Executive Function skills, social competence, academic performance, development progress, classroom impact • Parent-reported child measures: Empathy skills, child impact • Teacher-reported self-measures: job stress, mindfulness skills
Y2 (2019-20): Waitlist control classrooms trained	16 KC classes 261 children <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 70% low SES • 57% ethnically diverse 	23 Teachers & staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher-reported child measures: Executive Function skills, social competence, academic performance, development progress, classroom impact; behavioral problems • Parent-reported child measures: Empathy skills, social competence, child impact • Teacher-reported self-measures: job stress, mindfulness skills
Y3 (2020-21): Continue with trained teachers, Outreach & Expansion to New Programs	20 KC classes 245 children <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 59% low SES • 47% ethnically diverse 	12 Teachers & staff (class size reduced due to pandemic) 22 Program/Community Leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher-reported child measures: social competence, academic performance, development progress, classroom impact; behavioral problems • Parent-reported child measures: Empathy skills, child impact • Teacher-reported self-measures: job stress, mindfulness skills
Y4 (2021-22): Continue with trained teachers, Outreach & Expansion to New Programs	42 KC classes 668 children <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 62% low SES • 45% ethnically diverse 	43 Teachers & staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher-reported child measures: social competence, classroom impact; behavioral problems • Parent-reported child measures: Empathy skills, child impact • Teacher-reported self-measures: job stress, mindfulness skills

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