

Kindness Project Year 3: 2020-21 Short Report Maintaining the Kindness Curriculum During the Pandemic: Supporting New & Continuing Children & Teachers

Beth A. Haines & Kathy Immel, 2023

Please see detailed Year 3 Report on both Social-Emotional & Cognitive/Academic Outcomes for further information!

Goals & Overview of the Kindness Project in Year 3

In Year 3, the Kindness Project focused on supporting all 16 continuing classrooms and added 4 toddler classrooms. Teachers who were not previously trained attended the 26-hour training taught by our CELC mindfulness coaches. The mindfulness coaches also provided “booster sessions” for continuing teachers. Teachers in 20 classrooms from Bridges Child Enrichment Center, UW-Oshkosh Head Start, Appleton Even-Start Family Literacy, and University Children’s Center implemented the KC in the third year of the project. Some teachers did partial implementation or adapted implementation due to pandemic-related challenges. Our main goals in Year 3 were to:

1. Bring the Kindness Curriculum (KC) to children & measure impact on children’s social-emotional and cognitive skills during the difficult pandemic year. In year 3, children received the KC beginning in Fall 2020 if the agency was teaching in-person: Bridges toddler and preschool classrooms, UWO Children’s Center, and Head Start’s morning program. The KC started in January or February in 4K classrooms when they returned to in-person instruction. Similarly, Even Start began the KC when they returned to in-person or hybrid instruction in spring 2021.
2. Compare the effectiveness of the Kindness Curriculum across age, socioeconomic status, previous KC training (new to KC or continuing), & gender.
3. Mitigate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic by supporting agencies, teachers, children, and families. Lawrence interns helped with staffing at Bridges Child Enrichment Center and UWO Children’s Center in the spring and summer of 2021.

As the pandemic lingered during 2020-21, many children, their families, and their teachers faced a variety of additional stressors. These additional stressors caused interruptions in programming and contributed to staffing shortages. We hoped that mindfulness-based training and support would help all to cope.

Participants, Measures, & Procedure

Participants. 16 preschool and 4K classrooms received the Kindness Curriculum, which included 240 children:

- 43.3% female, 56.7% male
- 46.7 % 4K, 53.3% preschool
- 53.3% lower income, 36.7% higher income, 10% unknown
- 42.9 % non-white, 48.8 % white, 8.3% unknown
- **Four toddler classrooms** were taught “KC nuggets”—simplified mindfulness lessons for 1 to 2-year-old children.
- **Four agencies participated-** Bridges Child Enrichment Center, UW Oshkosh Head Start CELC, Appleton Even Start Family Literacy, and UWO Fox Cities Children’s Center.

Measures: In consideration of pandemic challenges, we removed one longer outcome measure (the BRIEF-P measure of executive functioning) and the parent measure of social competence. Teachers and parents completed several focused outcome measures as listed below.

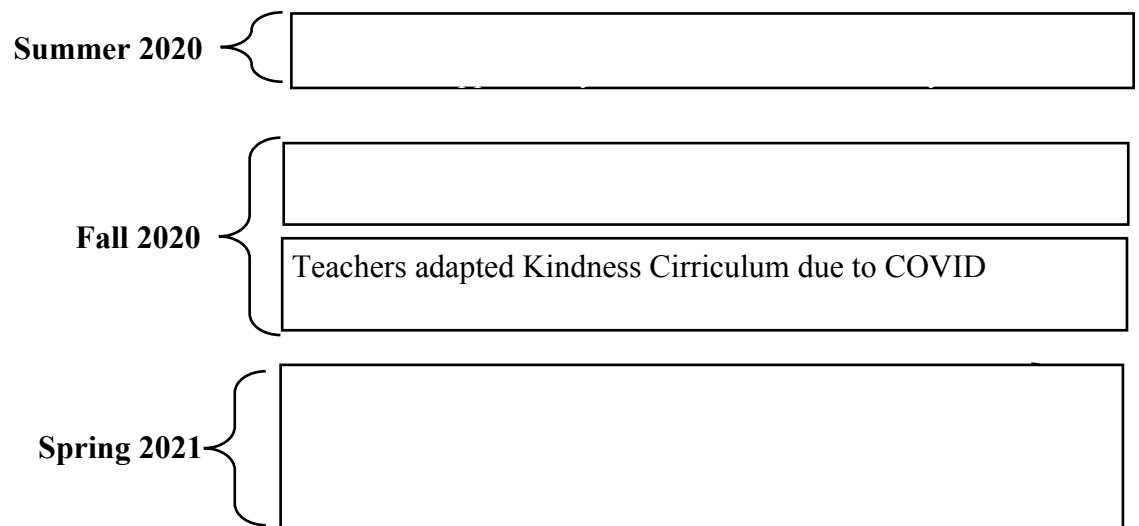
Teachers reported on:

- Children’s social competence (e.g., prosocial behavior, emotion regulation)
- Children’s behavioral strengths and difficulties (e.g., conduct problems)
- Children’s developmental skills & progress (e.g., TS-Gold)
- Children’s academic achievement (e.g., language arts, mathematical skills) & school progress (e.g., social-emotional skills, health/physical skills)
- Classroom impact of the KC

Parents reported on:

- Children’s empathy skills (e.g., understanding others’ perspectives, emotional empathy)
- Impact of the KC which parents noticed at home.

Design & Timeline



Main Findings

Social-Emotional & Behavioral Outcomes

In the fall, children continuing in the programs demonstrated stronger emotional regulation and empathic concern and tended to show stronger skills in these areas overall. However, both continuing and new children showed significant improvement over time in prosocial and empathy skills. Children of both lower & higher socioeconomic status significantly improved in: Prosocial Behavior, Empathy Skills, and Emotional Regulation.

The findings on behavioral problems were more mixed. Continuing children showed fewer problems with hyperactivity, whereas new children showed fewer peer problems over time. Teachers observed fewer peer problems and total difficulties over time in higher SES children and did not see significant improvement in lower SES children's behavioral difficulties suggesting that lower SES children may have experienced greater pandemic-related stressors.

Younger children showed more improvement over time in prosocial behavior and emotional regulation than older children. Both younger and older children improved significantly in teacher-reported empathy skills. Parents reported that younger children improved in affective empathy and empathetic concern, while older children improved in empathetic understanding. Only younger children showed significant decreases in most problem behaviors (emotional, conduct, hyperactivity, and peer problems). Older children did not significantly improve in behavioral difficulties suggesting that the pandemic stressors may have been harder on them.

Cognitive/Academic Outcomes

Both continuing and new children significantly improved from 1st to 2nd semester in all report card areas: language, math, health/physical development, and social-emotional skills. Both continuing and new children improved significantly in all TS-Gold developmental areas, though continuing children had higher scores overall in all areas.

Both lower and higher SES children improved in all report card and TS-Gold areas over time.

Children across all sub-groups improved in cognitive skills and academic skills over the difficult pandemic year, suggesting that the Kindness Curriculum helped to support academic achievement in addition to social-emotional skills.

Classroom & Home Impact

Both teachers and parents reported positive impact of the Kindness Curriculum on children. Teachers also offered feedback on implementing the Curriculum in the future.

Teachers commented that the Kindness Curriculum had a positive impact on their classroom environment and noted that the mindfulness coaches were "amazing" in providing support both in the classroom and with their own personal mindfulness practices. However, they acknowledged it was more challenging to implement and utilize the KC than in the previous two years due to COVID-19. Therefore, they thought the KC may have not been as impactful during the difficult pandemic year as it wasn't as much of a focus in 2020-21. Teachers also commented that it would be helpful for the teachers to have continued training and more book options added to the Curriculum.

Parents provided examples of their children sharing more, helping more, and saying kind things to others. They also commented that their children talked about caring for the Earth and were better able to self-regulate and calm their "big" emotions. For example, one parent commented that her child had been very kind to kids at school and that the teachers noticed this too, and similarly was doing kind things at home such as picking flowers for her and helping without being asked.

Conclusions, Future Implications, & Next Steps

Even with the ongoing challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw *significant* improvements in social-emotional skills, some behavioral skills, and cognitive and academic skills for all groups of children. Our results show that children, whether 4K or preschool, continuing or

new to the program, higher income or lower income, boys or girls, can positively benefit from learning mindfulness-skills through the Kindness Curriculum.

However, we also noted some challenges during this difficult pandemic year. The *percentage of children* that improved in some areas, particularly behavioral difficulties and prosocial skills, decreased to about 50% compared to our first two years of the Kindness Curriculum where the percentage of children showing gains was as high as 79%. These findings suggest that certain subgroups of children may need more support as they recover from stressors and reduced educational programming during the pandemic. Fortunately, developmental gains on measures like the TS-Gold (91 – 98%) and report cards (80 – 90%) remained high during the year.

Thus, emphasizing key components of the Kindness Curriculum may facilitate social-emotional recovery. Specifically, strong emphasis on handling emotional strain and peer problems, as well as on developing emotional and behavioral self-regulation may help to support recovery. Other suggestions include adding additional movement activities that help children to pause when encountering something new, unexpected, or unsettling, and helping parents to promote application of skills at home and beyond the classroom.

In the upcoming year, year 4 2021-2022, the primary goals are: 1) to continue to implement the Kindness Curriculum in all agencies in face of the continuing pandemic challenges, and 2) to expand the Kindness Curriculum to more agencies in the nearby communities for further impact.

