

Kindness Project Year 2: 2019-20 Short Report Expanded Teacher Training to Include the Waitlisted Control Group

Please see detailed Year 2 Reports on: 1) Social-Emotional Outcomes & 2) Cognitive/Academic Outcomes for further information!

Goals & Overview of the Kindness Project in Year 2

In year 2, teachers from the 6 classrooms who were in the waitlist control group in the first year, and any new teachers hired by the agencies, attended the 26-hour training taught by our CELC mindfulness coaches. Consequently all 16 preschool and 4K classrooms from Bridges Child Enrichment Center, Head Start CELC, Appleton Even Start Family Literacy, and University Children's Center taught the *Kindness Curriculum (KC)* in the second year of the project. Our main goals were to:

1. Study the impact of the KC on children's social-emotional & cognitive/academic skills by measuring performance before and after the KC.
2. Assess whether greater exposure to the KC and high-quality early childhood education benefitted children more, by comparing children continuing at the agencies to those new to the agencies in year 2.
3. Study whether all groups of children benefitted from the KC by comparing: younger (preschool-3 years) and older (4K) children, those from lower and higher socioeconomic families, and boys and girls.
4. Learn teachers' impressions of the benefits and challenges of using the KC and of the mindfulness training, by gathering their reflections on all 24 KC lessons and their feedback on training and classroom impact.

Unanticipated challenges came from the onset of the *COVID-19 pandemic* in the spring of 2020. Thankfully, all but one agency had fully implemented the KC prior to school closures in March 2020. Therefore, teachers completed spring outcome measures as did some parents. However, children could not be individually tested by the research team in the spring due to the closures.

Participants, Measures, & Procedure

Participants. About 250 children participated in year 2. Child participants were diverse:

- 48.4% female, 51.2% male
- 66.1% 4K, 33.9% preschool
- 62.6% lower income, 37.4% higher income
- 55.1% non-White, 44.9% White.

Measures: Teachers, parents, and the children themselves completed several outcome measures as listed below.

Teachers reported on:

- Children's social competence (e.g., prosocial behavior, emotion regulation)
- Children's behavioral strengths and difficulties
- Children's cognitive (e.g., attentional focus, memory, mental flexibility) & academic skills (e.g., math, language arts)
- Classroom impact of the KC

Parents reported on:

- Children’s social competence (e.g., prosocial behavior, emotion regulation)
- Children’s empathy skills (e.g., understanding others’ perspectives, emotional empathy)
- Impact of the KC that they noticed at home

Child Measures—only done in fall due to the COVID pandemic closures:

- Children did a sharing task where they could distribute stickers to others (e.g., a friend) or keep them for themselves
- Children responded to 3 short stories about how they would handle seeing another child in need, a child being teased, or being left out
- A card sorting task where children were asked to match cards by color or shape on an iPad

Procedure. Teachers and parents completed social-emotional and cognitive/academic measures on each child in fall, before implementation of the KC lessons and in spring, after the KC. The Kindness Curriculum (KC) includes 8 themes on topics such as self-calming, understanding emotions, kindness to self, others, and our world, and caring. Each theme includes 3 lessons, and teachers reinforce concepts from the lessons like attention, caring, and kindness on an ongoing basis.

Main Findings***Social-Emotional & Behavioral Outcomes***

Children continuing in the agencies often started the year stronger in measured skills, though new children showed significant gains over time.

Teachers observed improvement in prosocial and empathetic behavior, and improved emotional regulation, especially for girls and the older (4K) students. Parents also saw improved empathy skills and positive changes in behavior, including increased patience and sharing with others. Both parents and teachers noted that children were better able to calm down when dealing with challenging situations.

Teachers reported *reduced peer problems, impulsivity, and attention problems*. Gains were seen across age, socioeconomic, and gender groups.

Cognitive/Academic Outcomes

Children continuing in the agencies tended to demonstrate stronger skills than those new to the programs, though new children also improved significantly.

The Kindness Curriculum showed positive impact on children’s executive function skills including working memory, shifting attention, emotional control, planning/organizing and mental flexibility. Lower income children sometimes started the fall weaker in these areas but showed *larger* gains over time in some areas, such as in planning and working memory skills.

Children in all groups improved significantly in academic skills such as literacy, physical, and math skills following KC enrichment, with many groups, such as lower income children, showing very high rates of improvement.

Classroom & Home Impact

Both teachers and parents reported positive impact of the Kindness Curriculum on children. Teachers commented on children’s increased kindness and better abilities to understand their own and others’ emotions. Parents provided many examples of their children

offering to help more, expressing concern for others' emotions, and noticing acts of kindness. They also commented that their children were better able to self-calm, describe their feelings, and ask for help when upset.

Conclusions, Future Implications, & Next Steps

In spite of the challenges of the pandemic, we were very happy to see positive outcomes associated with the Kindness Curriculum for all groups of children: older and younger, girls and boys, and lower and higher income. Further, we saw benefits to children's social-emotional skills and their cognitive and school readiness skills. Greater exposure to high quality programming was beneficial, suggesting that it is optimal to introduce the KC and mindfulness training as early as possible (3-year-olds or even younger) and continue to teach the KC throughout the preschool years, reinforcing the lessons during the school year.

Teachers found the KC to be doable and beneficial even for three-year-olds, and suggested adding simple mindfulness lessons (Kindness Curriculum "nuggets") for toddlers as well. They saw benefits in mindfulness practices for themselves and their students. Teachers highlighted positive impacts in their classroom as well as benefits of the mindfulness training to themselves in supporting their well-being. They found the mindfulness coaches to be helpful and willing to help with their classroom needs and personal practice.

In the upcoming year, year 3 2020-2021, the primary goals are: 1) to continue to implement the Kindness Curriculum in all agencies as well as possible, given the continuing pandemic challenges, and 2) to offer a shorter training (5 hours) to leaders of other early childhood agencies to encourage additional programs to implement mindfulness training and the KC. The Kindness Project held a smaller, in-person training during the summer of 2020 to allow for social distancing during the pandemic.

The Bell Practice (shown below) is included in every lesson of the Kindness Curriculum. Children learn to pay attention on "the inside" and on "the outside."

