

The Kindness Project: Bringing Mindfulness to Young Children, Teachers, and Families

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Problem: The Kindness Project brings mindfulness training to preschoolers, their teachers, and families. It assesses the impact of a mindfulness-based Kindness Curriculum (KC) on children's social-emotional competence and cognitive self-regulation skills. The project is a collaborative community endeavor with four agencies serving young children, three local universities, and the Center for Healthy Minds (CFHM) at UW Madison. Three of the agencies co-locate in the Community Early Learning Center (CELC), and serve many lower income families, children with special needs, and recent immigrants. The CELC has a research mission, and assessment data since its establishment in 2014 revealed that children from lower income families were showing some early achievement gaps. Therefore, agencies were seeking more tools to support children's social development and academic achievement.

Research on the KC demonstrated that it promotes children's self-regulation, prosocial skills, and academic achievement (Flook et al., 2015). However, little other research has systematically evaluated mindfulness training with preschoolers. Mindfulness training has also been shown to reduce teachers' stress and promote positive parenting. Consequently, parents have the opportunity to attend Mindful Parenting classes, one of which is offered in the Family Literacy classroom.

Methods: Mindfulness experts from CFHM provided 26 hours of training in the KC to classroom teachers and local mindfulness coaches who now provide ongoing support to teachers. Classroom teachers (n = 32) were randomly assigned to the enrichment group (8 classrooms) trained in summer 2018 and currently teaching the 12-week KC, or control group (8 classrooms) who will receive training next year.

Preschool children, ages 3-5 (n = 253, 74.5% low income; 44% White) were individually assessed on six tasks, including measures of social skills (e.g., sharing), cognitive self-regulation (e.g., NIH toolbox cognitive flexibility measures), and mindfulness prior to implementation of the KC; post-testing will occur this spring.

Classroom teachers complete assessments of children's executive function and social competence (pre- and post-curriculum). Teachers also complete self-questionnaires on mindfulness and stress, and weekly adherence surveys regarding the KC. Parents complete questionnaires on their child(ren)'s empathy skills, and surveys on the Parenting classes, their mindfulness skills, and well-being.

Results: Evaluations of the teacher training revealed great enthusiasm about the curriculum and the training ("best training ever attended," "wonderful opportunity to practice together"). Analysis of year-end teacher surveys will explore the role of mindfulness training in supporting teachers' well-being and reducing stress. We expect that children who participate in the KC will show significant improvement in social-emotional competence and cognitive self-regulation compared to the control-group. We also anticipate that the Curriculum will be especially beneficial for children from lower SES families who tend to start their preschool education with lower skills in these areas. Mindful Parenting classes are expected to improve parenting practices and enhance parental well-being.

Conclusions: Many of the children and families who are receiving mindfulness training through the Kindness Project experience a variety of stressors in their everyday life (e.g., financial, employment, language barriers). In addition, preschool teachers face multiple stressors including comparatively low wages. This project attempts to provide children, their families, and classroom teachers with additional skills to handle these challenges. After implementing and assessing the Curriculum for two years, it will be shared with other community preschool and 4K programs, especially those serving families in poverty.