

Kindness Project Year 4: 2021-22 Short Report
Expanded Outreach Across the Community: Kindness Curriculum Impact on Children

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*For more detailed information, please see detailed Year 4 report: **Outreach Across the Community: Kindness Curriculum Impact on Young Children's Social, Emotional, & Behavioral Skills in Year Four 2021-2022***

Goals & Overview of the Kindness Project in Year 4

In Year 4, the Kindness Project focused on outreach and expansion. We provided training to staff at three new agencies, serving 22 *additional* preschool & 4K classrooms, as well as to teachers serving three toddler classes. Consequently a total of 42 classrooms from seven agencies implemented the Kindness Curriculum (KC) in the fourth year of the project:

- Appleton Even-Start Family Literacy
- Appleton Head Start East
- Bridges Child Enrichment Center
- Kaukauna's Tanner Early Learning Center
- Kimberly 4K
- University Children's Center
- UW-Oshkosh Head Start CELC

Our Main Objectives in Year 4:

1. Community outreach to bring mindfulness training to more agencies & teachers, especially those serving populations in need, so that our preschool and 4K children learn the Mindfulness-Based Kindness Curriculum to help develop their self-regulation, social-emotional, and cognitive skills.
2. Measure the impact of the Kindness Curriculum on the children's skills before & after the Curriculum. Given that we were serving a much larger number of children & classrooms (42 classrooms compared to 20 in the previous year), we focused on three primary outcomes: social competence, behavioral difficulties, & empathy skills.

Schools were still experiencing stressors from the pandemic in 2021-22. While most programs started the year in-person, many faced staffing challenges & temporary closures in which some moved to virtual or hybrid instruction. Teachers and leaders showed resilience in the face of difficulties. Despite experiencing high levels of stress, teachers adapted and continued to teach mindfulness to their students.

Participants, Measures, & Procedure

Participants. 42 classrooms received the Kindness Curriculum, which included 681 children:

- 45.4% female, 54.5% male
- 73.6% 4K, 20.1% preschool, 6.3% younger
- 51.2%% lower income, 48.6% higher income
- 34.7% non-white, 60.5% white

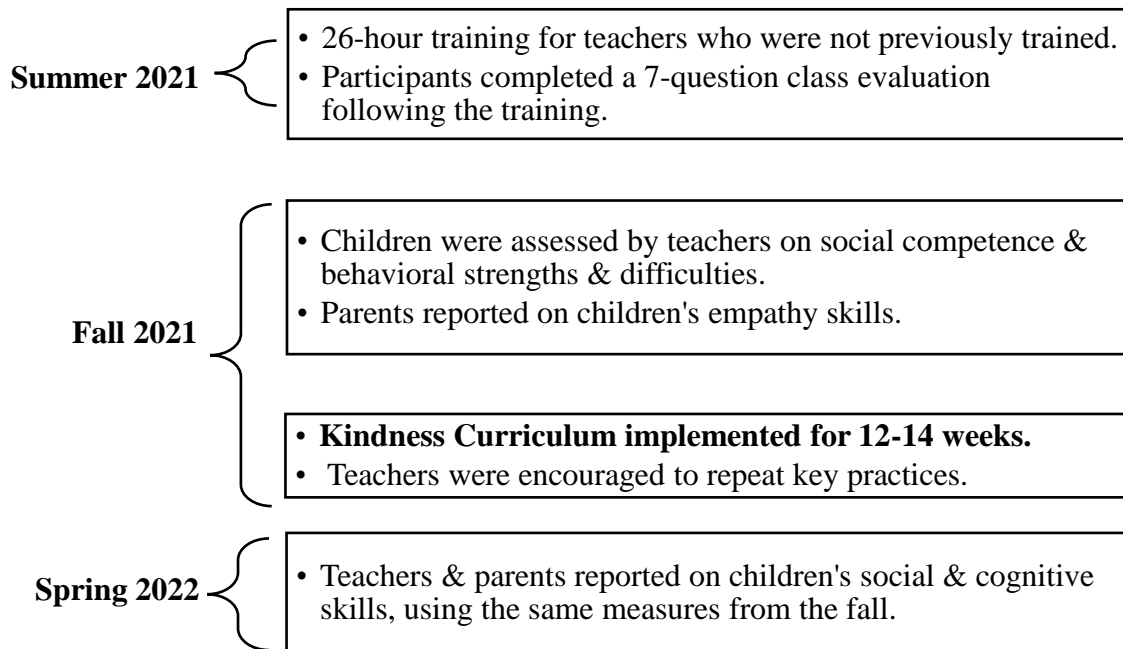
Measures: In this expansion year, given a much larger number of children & classrooms, only key social & behavioral outcomes were measured.

Teachers reported on:

- Children's social competence (i.e., prosocial behavior, emotion regulation, empathy skills)
- Children's behavioral strengths and difficulties (e.g., conduct problems, peer relationship problems)
- Classroom impact of the KC

Parents reported on:

- Children's empathy skills (i.e., affective empathy, cognitive empathy, empathic concern)
- Their impressions of impact of the KC on their children in the home environment

Design & Timeline**Main Findings**

In this expansion year, there were many more children involved in the project compared to the previous years. There were 22 new classrooms; however, one agency with more higher SES children struggled to report data on all of their classrooms due to lingering pandemic stressors. Consequently the resulting sample has many more lower SES than higher SES children. In 2021-2022, we also have many more 4K classrooms and children than preschool children .

Social-Emotional & Behavioral Outcomes

There were no significant differences between continuing and new children in social emotional and behavior skills in the fall. Both continuing and new children showed significant improvement in prosocial behavior, emotional regulation, and empathy skills. New children displayed bigger gains than continuing children over time in all three areas as well. Perhaps the novelty of the Kindness Curriculum had a stronger impact on the large sample of new children.

Lower SES children had lower skills in prosocial behavior and empathy in the fall, but caught up to the higher SES children following implementation of the Kindness Curriculum. Both lower and higher SES children significantly improved over time in prosocial behavior, emotion regulation, and

empathetic behavior time. Lower SES children significantly improved in parent-reported affective empathy and empathetic concern over time; higher SES children improved in these areas as well, and significantly in their overall empathy scores. However, the small sample of higher SES children (we only obtained parent-rated empathy data from 19 higher SES children), may account for the finding that their improvement on affective empathy and empathetic concern was not statistically significant.

Both younger and older children showed significant improvements in prosocial behavior, emotion regulation, and empathetic behavior. Older (4K) children showed stronger social emotional skills overall and showed bigger gains in emotion regulation and empathy skills over time than preschool children. Parents reported that younger children showed improvement in affective empathy and empathetic concern, while older children improved somewhat in affective empathy and empathetic concern. However, older children had significantly higher empathetic concern skills overall.

Behavioral Findings. New children (n = 291) showed significant decreases in conduct problems, hyperactivity, and peer problems, as well as significant improvement in prosocial behavior. Continuing children (n = 59) only displayed significant improvement in prosocial behavior and significant decreases in peer problems.

Both lower and higher SES children displayed significantly fewer hyperactive behaviors and peer problems, and better prosocial behavior over time. Only lower SES children displayed significantly fewer conduct problems over time. It was encouraging to see many behavioral improvements following the KC, especially for lower SES children,

Older children had significantly fewer behavioral problems (i.e., conduct, emotional, hyperactivity, & peer problems) and higher prosocial skills overall than younger children. Older children significantly improved in conduct, hyperactivity, and peer problems. Younger children showed improvement in prosocial skills and showed fewer peer problems and total behavioral difficulties over time.

Both boys and girls displayed significantly fewer peer and hyperactivity problems and better prosocial behavior over time. Girls had higher prosocial behavior and displayed fewer hyperactivity and conduct problems overall, but boys displayed significant decreases in conduct problems over time.

Classroom & Home Impact

Teachers unanimously endorsed the positive impact of the Kindness Curriculum on their classroom environment. They commented that children were able to remember the key concepts and practices that they learned from the KC lessons, and they used these techniques to manage their emotions and in their interactions with peers. Furthermore, many teachers indicated that personal mindfulness practices were helpful in alleviating their own stress and highlighted the importance of support from the mindfulness coaches during their challenging year.

Parents also shared their perspectives on the impact of the Kindness Curriculum on their children. They provided several examples of their children's acts of kindness, such as sharing more, helping out at home, and saying kind things to others. They noted that their children used the mindfulness practices at home, including the mindfulness jar to settle emotions and breathing exercises to calm down. Some parents also remarked that their children were able to sit still for longer periods of time and could more easily express their emotions. One parent, whose child had participated in the KC for two years, commented that they noticed that her child "wants to talk things out." Another parent noticed that her

child was not getting “so upset if something doesn't go her way and she calms herself down much quicker.”

Conclusions, Future Implications, & Next Steps

With pandemic stressors continuing in 2021-22, our agencies faced a number of challenges, including staff shortages and temporary closures. However, despite these hardships, teachers continued to implement the Kindness Curriculum in their classrooms, adapting lessons to different modes of instruction and demonstrating flexibility in meeting children’s needs as they returned to in-person learning. Agency leaders and teachers worked with the mindfulness coaches to implement supports to help them cope with the ongoing challenges.

Our child outcomes during this “recovery” year were very encouraging: we saw significant improvement in social-emotional skills and reduction in behavioral difficulties. Our results show that children, whether 4K or preschool, continuing or new to the program, higher income or lower income, boys or girls, positively benefitted from learning mindfulness-skills through the Kindness Curriculum.

Furthermore, the *percentage of children* that improved in some areas, particularly peer relationship problems and prosocial skills, showed significant recovery (i.e., increased percentage of children that improved) following the very difficult 2020-2021 pandemic year. At the same time, in some behavioral areas (e.g., only about 30% improved in emotional problems & conduct problems, though over 75% at least held steady) and cognitive empathy (i.e., less than 40% improved in their understanding what others are thinking & feeling), children may need additional support, such as mindfulness books and lessons on understanding others and responding with kindness, as they work on recovering from COVID stressors.

The bell practice (shown below) helps children to pay attention to the outside world. Children put one hand in the air when the bell sounds. When the children no longer hear the bell, they put their hand on their belly and feel three breaths. The bell practice is included in every lesson of the KC.

