

Impact of Mindfulness Training on Preschoolers Social-Emotional Skills: A Successful Train the Teachers Model

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This project brought mindfulness training to 16 preschool and 4K classrooms by training their teachers to implement the Kindness Curriculum (KC; Healthy Minds Innovation, 2017). This paper assesses the impact on children's social-emotional skills. Over 65% of the children were from lower-income families facing a variety of stressors; training focused not only on using the KC, but also provided support for teachers and parents with mindfulness coaching. Earlier work with the KC showed positive impacts on children's prosocial behavior, social competence, and emotional-regulation skills (Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, & Davidson, 2015). However, Flook et al. (2015), as well as others (e.g., Viglas & Perlman, 2018), used mindfulness experts to implement the mindfulness curriculum. This project extended previous research in important ways by testing whether classroom teachers could be trained to implement the KC, and including younger children (3-year-olds) and a large, more diverse sample.

Methods

Children ($n = 259$) in 16 classrooms were randomly-assigned to either the KC enrichment group (10 classes) or the control group (6 classes). Participants were ethnically diverse: Black (13.5%), Latinx (23.6%), Asian (11.6%), other non-white (8.5%), White (42.9%); mostly low-income (65.3%); gender balanced (female = 54%); and 36.3% were less than 4 years, 63.7% were 4-5 years old.

Teachers in the KC group received 26 hours of summer training focused on personal mindfulness practices and teaching the KC, about four months prior to implementing the KC, allowing them to practice their skills with support from mindfulness coaches. The KC involves 24 lessons, taught over 12 weeks.

At the beginning of the school year and again in spring, all children were assessed individually on a sharing task, executive function measures, teacher-rated social competence, parent-reported empathy skills, as well as developmental assessments (TS Gold; ASQ-SE).

Results & Discussion

Children showed significant gains after KC enrichment compared to the control group in many areas. For example, KC children were more likely to share stickers with a sick child ($F(1,221) = 3.88, p = .050$) and kept fewer stickers for themselves across all sharing trials ($F(1,220) = 5.58, p = .019$). KC children showed better prosocial skills ($F(1, 224) = 5.83, p = .017$) over time, with gains being particularly striking for the younger KC children compared to those in the Control group ($F(1, 222) = 6.29, p = .013$; see Figure 1). Similar patterns were found for both teacher-rated ($F(1, 222) = 12.34, p < .001$) and parent-reported empathy skills ($F(1, 163) = 4.96, p = .027$). KC children also showed much better executive function inhibition skills over time than the Control group, with results being particularly strong among the younger children ($F(1, 225) = 4.00, p = .047$; see Figure 2). On developmental assessments, KC children had better social-emotional and physical/health scores than children in the Control group. Overall, the quantitative results documented that the KC benefitted even 3-year olds' social, emotional, and executive function skills, and were consistent with teacher and parent reports of positive impacts in the classroom and at home. Furthermore, the fact that teachers successfully implemented the Kindness Curriculum in the classroom supports the "train-the-teachers" model, showing that mindfulness-based preschool programs can be offered that are both cost-effective and supportive of early educators.

Figure 1. Age comparisons of teacher-rated prosocial behavior.

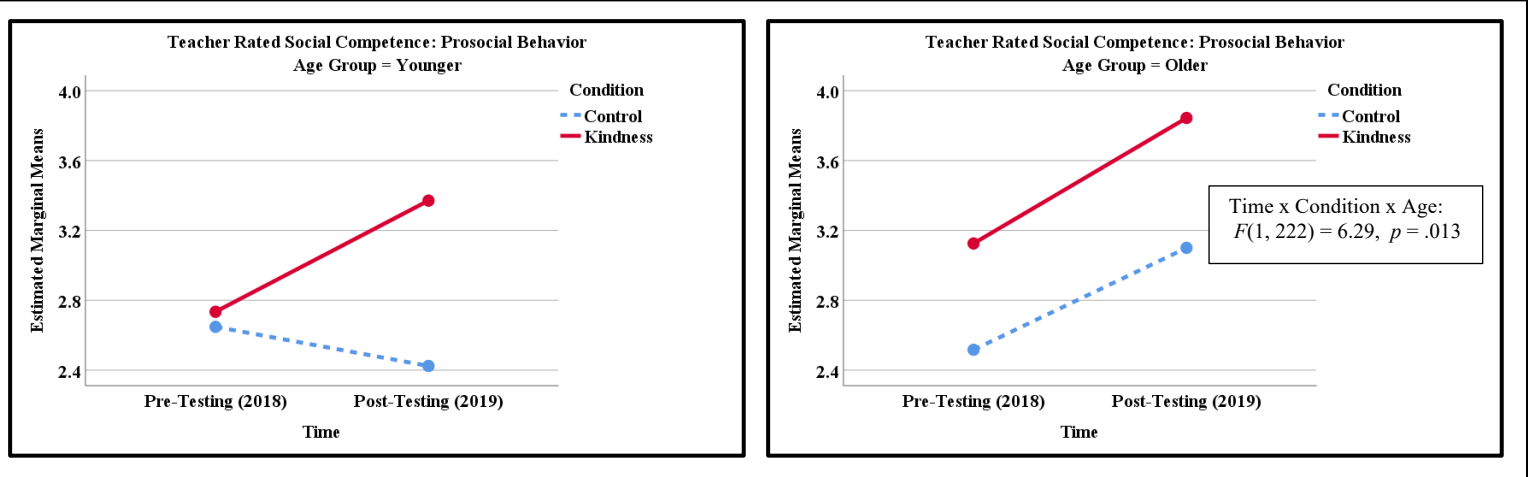


Figure 2. Preschool and 4K children’s scores over time on inhibition of impulsive responses. Note. Lower scores are better on the Behavior Rating Inventory of Executive Functioning-Preschool Version (BRIEF-P) scale.

