How Acts of Kindness Facilitate Prosocial Behaviors in an Early Childhood Montessori Classroom

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How Acts of Kindness Facilitate Prosocial Behaviors in an Early Childhood Montessori Classroom

An Action Research Report
By April L. Malley
How Acts of Kindness Facilitate Prosocial Behaviors in an Early Childhood Montessori Classroom

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In fulfillment of final requirements for the MAED degree

St. Catherine University

St. Paul, Minnesota
Abstract

This action research project examined how the implementation of Kindness Guidelines affected prosocial behavior among Early Childhood students. The setting was a private Montessori school, with 18 children ages two to five-years-old. Guidelines were developed using child-generated ideas on how to be kind to themselves, others, and the environment, along with teacher-made materials that illustrated acts of kindness and emotional awareness. Implementation of the intervention lasted six weeks with 20 days of data collected during two 15-20 minute observations per day. Positive and negative behaviors were recorded using tally sheets and an observation journal. Use of teacher-made materials was tracked using a materials log, and children expressed their ideas about kindness through drawings. Data analysis showed that positive behaviors increased and indicated the changes were related to the intervention. Ideas for further research include increasing emotional awareness in children and how the practice of observation affects children’s behavior.

Keywords: kindness education, prosocial skills, Early Childhood, Montessori
The beginning of each school year is always exciting. As a Montessori teacher I enjoy reuniting with returning students and welcoming new children. Montessori children wear slippers in the classroom, so together we find each child’s name in their cubby and practice changing their shoes. We practice daily routines such as washing our hands, serving a snack, using walking feet, and speaking with quiet voices. The children work on floor mats that define their work-space. I work with the children to learn how to walk around these mats, not step on them or jump over them. We practice greeting each other with eye contact, a hand shake, and a warm, “Good morning!” The foundation of our community is created during those first few weeks of school.

No community is perfect, however, and I quickly notice the inevitable squabbles that occur among children: “He’s touching my work!” “She stepped on my mat!” “You’re doing it wrong.” “That picture is not pretty.” “I’m not your friend anymore!” I also see children express their displeasure through non-verbal displays such as frowning or making a mad face, giving a thumbs-down sign, refusing eye contact, or not respecting body space. Disputes like these are very common at the beginning of the year as children are getting used to each other and learning new social skills.

In previous years, I tried discussing kindness with children, encouraging them to be “kindness detectives” and share stories about acts of kindness they observed during the day. The children could identify what acts were kind or unkind, but they didn’t often choose to practice those behaviors without a teacher coaching them. At the
beginning of this school year I wondered, would presenting the concept of kindness through child-led activities make the practice of kindness more meaningful for the children? If they were a part of the process of creating kindness guidelines for our classroom, would they be more likely to treat their friends with kindness?

I work at a small, private Montessori school. While the school is located in an urban setting, the green space around it creates an oasis from the surrounding city. My classroom is one of two Early Childhood classrooms in the school, with children between the ages of 2.5 and 5. I had 18-19 students enrolled in my classroom during my study. The open floor plan of my classroom allows me to see the whole room from almost anywhere, facilitating my observations of the children. As I observed the children during the early months of the school year, I thought about kindness education every time a child displayed an undesired behavior. Grace and Courtesy and peace education are foundational Montessori practices and a part of my daily interaction with the children—what if my everyday interventions affected the need for my Action Research intervention?

I decided to design my intervention to provide support for the skills children already learned (based on the knowledge the children would supply) as well as new skills (information provided by me as the teacher). My research led me to studies that examined prosocial skills: traits and behaviors that benefit others such as empathy, generosity, and kindness (Pech, 2013). Within this range of behaviors, I chose to focus
on acts of kindness in my classroom. I made the abstract concept of kindness more concrete by focusing on three modes of expression: kindness to oneself, kindness to others, and kindness to our environment (specifically our classroom/school and nature). By working together to create “classroom guidelines” to express these modes of kindness, my intention was to bring together our collective knowledge in a way that demonstrated the importance of our interaction with each other.

Before we could identify acts of kindness, however, I thought it would be best to begin with a discussion about identifying our emotions. By naming emotions, children could practice identifying what they are feeling and perhaps resolve conflicts with more intention. To continue my efforts to make the subject of kindness more concrete for the children, I planned to create two booklets: one to illustrate emotions and the other to outline the kindness guidelines we discussed as a classroom. I also provided drawing materials so the children could express the modes of kindness through art.

For my study, I asked the question: Will the implementation of classroom Kindness Guidelines (in the form of child-generated ideas on how to be kind to self, others, and the environment) along with the use of teacher-made materials that illustrate acts of kindness and emotional awareness for children facilitate prosocial behavior in Early Childhood children in a Montessori multi-age Primary classroom?
Literature Review

When asked what skills are important for school-age children to learn in school, one might first think of reading, writing, and math skills. As standardized testing and emphasis on academic skills increase, researchers are beginning to observe its effects on a child’s social-emotional education. According to Pech (2013), the modeling of prosocial skills for children is decreasing in the classroom, and a curriculum for developing character traits such as empathy, altruism, generosity, and kindness is largely absent. This literature review will examine current research on the subject of kindness, its importance, how to implement it in classrooms, and the benefits to children who practice spontaneous acts of kindness.

Decreased empathy in the classroom

Kindness is a character trait that is expressed along with other traits such as empathy, generosity, and compassion. Kohler-Evans and Barnes (2015) stated that compassion is not only an essential human characteristic but that its presence is missing in today’s world. They cited that violent imagery on T.V., news stories, and other media have been shown to have a profound effect on children and their ability to demonstrate empathy, going so far as to say that compassion is curbed when children view violent images. Masterson and Kersey (2013) shared this view, writing that looking at negative imagery leads to increased negative behavior such as bullying. They stated that bullying behavior increases by 10% for every hour children see violent
media imagery and that this leads to “desensitization and decreased empathy” (p. 214). As a result, Binfet (2015) observed that school programs tend to emphasize prevention of negative behaviors (bullying and other unkind behaviors) “rather than promoting prosocial behaviors such as kindness” (p. 50).

Pech (2013) also observed a decrease in the social skills of children and the challenge for teachers who must navigate their social-emotional needs before they can successfully teach academics. Pech stated that the goals of teachers in the early 20th century were based on nurturing social-emotional behaviors along with intellectual development. This holistic approach was replaced with a primary focus on academic preparation and standardized testing: “The teacher’s role shifted from nurturer to instructor, from supporter of social development to guide for academic learning” (Pech, 2013, p. 219). This increase in standardized education decreased the emphasis on values and the development of “social maturity” which included traits such as fairness, dependability, courtesy, and kindness (Pech, 2013, p.218).

**Kindness, altruism, and empathy**

Kindness is often used in relationship with descriptions of the character trait of altruism. Altruism/kindness and empathy are among the words researchers use to describe prosocial characteristics. Robinson and Curry (2006) described prosocial behavior as “behavior intended to benefit another” (p. 68). These behaviors often include comforting others, cooperation, ability to share, and demonstration of empathy.
Robinson and Curry stated their belief that altruism is the “purest form of caring” and is required as a foundation for all other prosocial behaviors (2006, p. 68). Hyson and Taylor (2011) elaborated on this definition of prosocial behaviors by emphasizing an important aspect of acts of kindness: they must be voluntary. “If children are forced to ‘be nice and share’ or told to ‘say you’re sorry,’ then their behavior is not voluntary and cannot be considered prosocial” (Hyson & Taylor, 2006, p. 74).

Masterson and Kersey (2013) described altruism as being the “action of empathy” which one gains through experience (p. 213). They stated that a culture of kindness could nurture elements of caring. Kohler-Evans and Barnes (2015) contended that the prosocial skill of compassion is a result of the combination of empathy and altruism. Binfet (2015) included a complimentary definition of kindness in Table I of his article: “‘…kindness is a behavior driven by the feeling of compassion’ and that when we ‘act on this feeling of compassion in a helpful and caring way, this behavior becomes an act of kindness’” (p. 51).

**Importance of the teacher-student relationship**

Teachers are an increasingly important presence in the lives of children as they spend much of each day with them and create environments that facilitate growth and learning. In their article, “A Pedagogy of Belonging,” Beck and Malley (1998) emphasized the importance of the relationship between the teacher and student when fostering an environment of belonging and community. Before children can feel they
are a part of the greater school community, they must begin by developing a close relationship with their teacher. Robinson and Curry (2006) wrote about the importance of teachers when considering how to increase caring among children: “Teachers can be great role models for caring and altruistic behavior; they can demonstrate caring, empathy, and compassion toward others in their day-to-day interactions with students” (p. 70). Nissen and Hawkins (2010) described three key ways in which teachers build positive relationships with students:

1. Teachers are relationship builders. As teachers observe children, they learn how each child responds emotionally and socially and can establish a nurturing environment where relationships are nourished.

2. Teachers are coaches and role models. Children benefit from the guidance teachers provide for problem solving, conflict resolution, and emotional regulation.

3. Teachers create healthy environments. By providing choices, independence, and demonstrating respect, teachers create environments where students can succeed. (Figure 1, p. 257)

Hyson and Taylor (2011) noted that influences such as genetics on empathy and prosocial tendencies in children are not as strong as the influence of their environment “especially when it comes to children’s actual behaviors, not just their general feelings of empathy” (p. 76). They also cited strong teacher-student relationships, teachers
acting as role models, and healthy environments as important influences. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) stated that the creation of supportive student-teacher relationships is not only an important part of a healthy school environment, but it is the “‘keystone’ to effective classroom management” (p. 500) leading to positive outcomes in both academic and social-emotional areas in children.

**Implementing kindness in the classroom**

Educators and researchers have implemented various peace education techniques to facilitate prosocial development in children. Stomfay-Stitz and Wheeler (2006) focused on programs that used peaceful language in the classroom. During the implementation of “I Care Rules,” young children learned to listen to each other and use respectful language such as “May I help you?”, “Yes, play with us,” and “I’m sorry, excuse me” (Stomfay-Stitz & Wheeler, 2006, p. 292F). Peaceful language reminders were displayed on a poster at the Peace Table for children who wanted to resolve their conflicts independently. Stomfay-Stitz and Wheeler also described the use of a “Feelings Book” which helped children develop a peaceful vocabulary that could be used to describe their emotions. The teacher and students created a book with pictures illustrating emotions. This book was then used to resolve conflicts.

In their article, Wheeler and Stomfay-Stitz (2005) wrote about the implementation of a Kindness Jar at a school in Maryland where children observed acts of kindness and described the act to a teacher, who wrote the student’s words on a slip
of paper. These slips of paper were placed in a big jar for the students to see. While children began by reporting their own acts of kindness, they eventually reported acts done by others. The practice of using the Kindness Jar helped to create a culture of kindness in the classroom.

Masterson and Kersey (2013) and Wheeler and Stomfay-Stitz (2005) described how literature is also a means for educating children about peace and kindness. They observed that children learn from those who are different from themselves. Reading about diverse communities can be “a good way to promote empathic understanding and raise cultural sensitivity” (Masterson & Kersey, 2013, p. 214). These stories can encourage conversations about empathy, kindness, feelings, and how to make a difference through actions. When reading to children, teachers can ask questions about stories such as “How do you think Cinderella felt when she was spoken to in a mean way?” (Wheeler & Stomfay-Stitz, 2005, p. 292-I). These discussions encourage children to look at situations from another’s perspective and practice the use of kind language.

Masterson and Kersey (2013) also described how a teacher’s facilitation of role-playing and problem solving can encourage the development of empathy in children. When presented with a problem, and asked to come up with a solution, children take ownership of the issue and the outcome. Follow-up questions such as “When you faced that problem last time, what worked well for you?” (Masterson & Kersey, 2013, p. 214)
helped children to think through their choices and develop stronger problem-solving skills for the future.

**How does practicing kindness benefit children?**

Teaching prosocial skills such as kindness to children is important, especially in the preschool years. Research shows that children who demonstrate prosocial tendencies when they are younger, develop stronger prosocial skills years later (Hyson & Taylor 2011). Hyson and Taylor stated that “children who were observed to spontaneously share toys more often than their classmates showed more prosocial skill 19 years later” (2011, p. 75).

Pech (2013) also wrote about the benefits of early social-emotional development and teaching prosocial skills such as kindness. Pech cited research that found that children who develop healthy relationships with teachers and classmates are more likely to excel, not only socially, but academically as well (2013). Binfet (2015) explored social and emotional learning (SEL) in children and found that children with higher SEL perform better in school than children lower in SEL. Binfet cited research that found “an 11% gain in academic achievement for students who received an SEL intervention when compared to their counterparts who had not participated in SEL programs” (2015, p. 50).

Jennings and Greenberg (2009) stated that when teachers create a sense of community in the classroom, students’ prosocial behaviors increase and behavior
problems decrease by as much as 31% during the school year. As students increase their prosocial skills, they are more able to regulate their emotions and negotiate social situations (Nissen & Hawkins, 2010). Children become more sensitive to others, more cooperative, and engage in closer friendships (Masterson & Kersey, 2013).

Conclusion

Kindness education is growing in importance in schools today. Children are increasingly exposed to violent images through various media leading to decreased empathy. Children’s time at school is becoming more focused on standardized education than on social-emotional development. Prosocial behaviors such as empathy, altruism, generosity, and kindness can be facilitated by teachers through the development of strong student-teacher relationships, acting as a role-model to students, and creating a healthy classroom environment. Research shows that when children practice kindness at a young age, they are more likely to demonstrate prosocial skills well into young adulthood. Through a variety of methods, teachers can implement kindness activities that suit the needs of their students and set them on a course to succeed academically and create positive relationships that will enrich them socially and emotionally for years to come.

Methodology

I began my research when school resumed after a holiday break. Before the implementation of my intervention, I practiced using my data collection tools.
(described below) to assess how they worked and to collect some baseline data. I talked to the children about the practice of observation and emphasized how a person who is observing is not available to talk because observations are a silent activity. We discussed how we can identify an observer by their clipboard and how they are sitting in a chair facing the classroom. I reassured them that other teachers would be available to help them while I was observing and that I would be available when my observation was finished.

I chose to begin my intervention with a circle about identifying emotions. As I observed children’s interactions earlier in the year, I noticed that some arguments came from children who were tired, hungry, or sad about something that happened at home. The children did not tend to identify what they were feeling, but rather took their negativity out on a nearby friend. My intent was to begin by identifying common feelings and whether or not we were feeling them. I printed emotions cards that I obtained from a Teachers Pay Teachers website and created a booklet (see Appendix A) for the children to use. During circle, I displayed each picture and asked the children to tell me what emotion the child in the picture felt. Emotions depicted in the booklet included happy, excited, scared, sad, surprised, worried, and angry. The children enjoyed this activity and we completed the circle by singing songs familiar to the children, such as “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes,” singing the lyrics using voices and facial expressions that depicted different emotions. I had prepared a space for my
intervention materials in a quiet corner of the classroom. I showed the children where the emotions booklet would be so they could look at it as desired.

At this point I began my observations and the use of my data collecting tools. I developed a Materials Log (see Appendix B) to track when the children used the teacher-made materials. For example, after introducing the Emotions Booklet, I documented each time I saw a child use that material with a brief note on how it was being used (in play, discussion, alone, etc). I used a Tally Sheet (see Appendix C) during my observations to mark the number of times I saw particular (positive and undesired) behaviors such as “smile,” “frown,” “gentle tone of voice,” or “name calling,” with spaces titled “other” where I could write-in behaviors I had not previously specified. I also kept a notebook with me so I could write out descriptions of the behaviors I marked on the tally sheets, reflect on the Action Research process, and outline questions for future research. My intent was to observe every day for 15-20 minutes—once in the morning and again in the afternoon. I missed some observations due to school closures, events, a busy classroom, and illness, but overall was successful in finding time to observe.

After the implementation of the Emotions Booklet, I spent the next three days talking to the children about kindness. I broke kindness down into three categories: kindness to self, kindness to others, and kindness to the environment (school and nature). Each day we discussed one method of practicing kindness. I asked the
children to tell me what they thought about the subject ("How do you think you could be kind to yourself/others/the environment?") and made a list of their responses (see Appendix D). I told the children I would be making a booklet from their answers. Many of the responses were phrased in a negative way such as, “Don’t hit your friend”. In these cases, I led the children to come up with a positive phrasing such as, “We use gentle touch with others.” This gave the children a positive action to take, as well as making it possible for me to create a booklet for them that would emphasize positive behavior.

The next day, I introduced drawing materials to the children. I showed them a special basket with paper and pencils (see Appendix E) that was placed on the same shelf with the Emotions Booklet. I told them this drawing activity was only for drawing acts of kindness. They could draw any act of kindness they wanted and give it to me so I could make a book from it. As the children brought their pictures to me, I asked them to tell me about their pictures and we determined if it was an act of kindness to self, others, or the environment. I collected these pictures to determine which acts of kindness children expressed most/least through their art.

After the weekend, we gathered at circle to review what we learned about kindness the previous week. I asked the children to share what they remembered from their list of kindness to self, others, and the environment. I told them I made a booklet based on their words and that this booklet was like an agreement we were making
about how we want to interact in our classroom. I called this booklet our “Classroom Guidelines” (see Appendix F) and it was placed on the shelf with the other teacher-made materials. Due to the age range in a multi-age Primary classroom, many of my students were not yet reading. For this reason, I chose six expressions of kindness from each category and found a picture to represent that action. I arranged these pictures on the pages of the booklet and we looked at the pictures at circle, naming the acts of kindness together. For the children who could read, I added a poem about kindness on the back of the booklet.

After introducing all of the elements of my intervention, I continued my observations and tracking. I occasionally reviewed acts of kindness to self, others, and the environment with the children at circle time. References to “kindness” and “acts of kindness” were used during conflict resolution between teachers and students. We sang songs and recited poems related to kindness daily (see Appendix G).

**Analysis of Data**

I began recording data during the second week of January, allowing the children one week to get back into their school routine. My observations focused on the children’s social interactions, particularly the words they used and their body language. I used my tally sheets to record the “positive” and “undesired” (negative) verbal and non-verbal behaviors I witnessed during my observation times. My data was collected over 20 days with the 18 children enrolled in my classroom.
After tallying the total number of recorded behaviors, I found that 64% were positive. This indicates that children were practicing positive interactions and acts of kindness more often than expressing themselves through negative behaviors. Data from my tally sheets show a decrease in negative behavior and an increase in positive behavior (see figure 1). These changes occurred during the implementation of the Emotions Booklet and the discussions about kindness to self, others and the environment. Journal data indicated that the increase in positive behavior on day 3 was due in part (2 of the 6 recorded behaviors) to children using the Emotions Booklet, discussing their emotions, and asking others how they were feeling. The increase in positive behavior on days 16 and 19 were primarily due to children offering to help another child and using a gentle tone of voice.

Figure 1. Positive and Negative Behaviors Over Time (n=18).
After examining the total recorded behaviors, I was interested to see how verbal behaviors compared to non-verbal behaviors. Of all recorded verbal behaviors, 78% were positive. Examples of positive verbal behaviors included naming one’s feelings, inviting another child to work together, using a gentle tone of voice, and offering to help a friend. Positive verbal behaviors increased and were more common than negative verbal behaviors (see Figure 2). Our classroom discussion about kindness towards others included examples of kind words and encouragement. The children related positively to verbal actions. They also enjoyed practicing positive social verbalization once they knew the right words and tone of voice.

![Figure 2. Verbal Behaviors Over Time (n=18).](image)

When comparing negative non-verbal and positive non-verbal behaviors, I found that of all recorded non-verbal behaviors, 55% were negative. My observation was that while children worked harder to express themselves positively using the kind
words they learned, they were more likely to silently frown, make mad faces, and make angry non-verbal gestures when they were upset. Non-verbal behaviors can be less obvious when one isn’t looking for them. Children can flash a frown at their friend when the teacher isn’t looking, whereas a negative verbal behavior will more often catch a teacher’s ear.

I also found it challenging to record positive and negative non-verbal behaviors. In my journal reflections I observed that while it can be simple to identify a smile or a frown, non-verbal interaction can be quite subtle. Are all smiles meaningful and therefore positive? Are all crossed arms indicative of a negative reaction?

![Non-Verbal Behavior Over Time](image)

*Figure 3. Non-Verbal Behavior Over Time (n=18).*

While negative non-verbal behaviors were only slightly higher than positive non-verbal behaviors (see Figure 3), this provides interesting information. From the tally sheet data, I concluded that the children benefitted from the kindness intervention.
The data suggests that the children practiced positive behaviors more often than negative behaviors, but these tended to be verbal interactions. Non-verbal interactions such as frowning at a friend, using physical aggression (pushing, hitting), or invading personal space did not improve.

One theory I have for this result is that verbal interactions were emphasized in my intervention. We practiced naming kind words, sang songs about kindness, and recited kindness poems. The spoken word can be more direct and obvious to others and may be more frequently modeled for children.

Another theory is simply that Early Childhood children often do not have the emotional development to compose a kind or constructive verbal response in the midst of feeling upset. Observational data described negative non-verbal behaviors happened most often when a child was angry at another child. Even with kindness coaching, children may still resort to the tried-and-true squinty-eyed frown to express themselves.

Another data collection tool I used was a Materials Log. I introduced three teacher-made materials to the class: an Emotions Book, a book of Classroom Guidelines, and drawing materials. Each time I observed a child using any of these materials, I recorded it on the Materials Log. My intent was to see how frequently each material was used and the quality of its use (see Figure 4).
The Classroom Guidelines Book was used the least. The log data indicated that children were most interested in the book after it was first introduced. My observations were that the older children tended to pick up the book more frequently and they spent more time reading the poem on the back. Observational data stated, for example, “First friend continued [to look at book] after second friend left. Child read poem on the back to herself. First child read poem aloud to another child. Put it nicely away.” The children were receptive to the idea of creating classroom guidelines together, but appeared less interested in the book illustrating them, especially in the case of the younger children.

The Emotions Book was much more interesting to the children. It was used by children of all ages and elicited the most conversations. Observational data included descriptions of children who simply sat and looked at the pictures, as well as children

![Use of Teacher-Made Materials](image-url)
who asked each other how they were feeling, using the book as reference. Several times an older child would carry the book around the room, asking friends how they were feeling. Another time, two girls sat together and made up stories for the children in the pictures describing why they were feeling each emotion. My observation was that this booklet provided children a vehicle for examining their own feelings and naming them.

The drawing tools were the most frequently used material. While I noticed that one child used the material more than other children, my materials log was designed to record the number of times a material was used, not the individuals using them. I will take this into account if I repeat this research in the future. This does not diminish the fact that the children loved to draw their ideas of kindness. They enjoyed using the special basket of drawing materials and only used them to draw acts of kindness.

![Children's Kindness Drawings](image)

*Figure 5. Children’s Kindness Drawings.*
The children loved to draw pictures of kindness to others and kindness to the environment. These two subjects were the most commonly illustrated with 15 pictures of kindness to the environment and 13 pictures of kindness to others (see Figure 5). I asked the children to describe their pictures to me and wrote down what their picture was about. The pictures of kindness to the environment included “No stomping” (kindness to the classroom), watering plants, observing nature, and picking leaves up off the ground instead of pulling them off plants. Kindness to others was expressed through pictures of children playing together, a line of flags from different countries, family members under a rainbow, and one picture a boy told me was “one man giving another man his house.”

There were only two drawings about kindness to self. The children who made these drawings worked together and both pictures expressed the importance of drinking water. While the children enjoyed telling me about eating healthy foods and drinking water, there was less enthusiasm about the topic of kindness to self. Frequently, if asked about how to be kind to oneself, children would respond with an example of kindness to others. I was surprised by this response because young children tend to see the world from an “all about me” perspective. I expected to hear teachings from home about healthy food, the importance of fresh air and exercise, brushing teeth, and getting enough sleep. It is possible that children know about healthy behaviors,
but associate the concept of kindness with external behaviors, thus naming actions towards others. I would be interested in exploring this topic in future studies.

I also kept an observation notebook where I described the behaviors I marked on my tally sheet and reflected on the Action Research process. Upon review, this qualitative data indicated that there was a small group of children who provided most of the behavior data in the classroom. The children who worked quietly with focus and concentration were helping to facilitate a functional work environment, but this could not be reflected in the data tools as I created them.

My analysis of the data leads me to the conclusion that the intervention was well received and prosocial behavior increased among the children, particularly positive verbal interactions as the tally sheets illustrated. The teacher-made materials gave the children concrete ways to interact with abstract concepts. Observational data showed that children enjoyed identifying examples of kindness to self, others, and the environment, and that the design of the intervention facilitated their understanding of expressions of kindness.

**Action Plan**

The increase of positive behavior among my students indicates they were receptive to kindness education. Observational data showed that the children enjoyed exploring and naming their emotions and the emotions of their friends. They excitedly shared ideas for how to express kindness during discussions and through artwork.
They also pointed out when characters in books were acting with kindness or not. After a discussion identifying “kind” and “unkind” acts, we agreed the children were all “kindness experts.” Instances of children offering help to another child increased and have continued to be common in my classroom.

While the data indicates the intervention led to an increase in positive behavior and a decrease in negative verbal behavior, there continued to be more negative non-verbal behavior than positive non-verbal behavior. Possible variables that could have affected the outcome of this study include the way data on non-verbal behavior was collected. The tally sheet worked well, but I discovered that verbal behaviors are more concrete than non-verbal behaviors during observations. I found it difficult to determine which non-verbal behaviors were significant to the study. Is that child’s smile the result of a positive interaction or a funny private thought? In future studies, I would consider other ways to identify and track non-verbal behaviors. It would also be interesting to conduct this study again earlier in the school year to see how much of the positive result may have been due to the children having a better understanding of social interaction expectations during the January-February time frame.

The positive response to this intervention encourages me to continue through the year. I am also planning to introduce many of the elements earlier next year. The introduction of the Emotions Booklet along with activities that identify emotions may benefit the children early in the school year as they are establishing routines, practicing
independence, and making new friends. Introducing Kindness Guidelines earlier in the year will be beneficial because it will facilitate positive social interactions and encourage the children to take pride in their surroundings. In the future, I will also take the time to explore a topic of kindness for a longer time if needed. For example, during my research I observed that the children seemed to have a harder time coming up with examples of kindness to self, but an easier time discussing kindness to others and the environment. I would have liked to stay with the subject of “kindness to self” and assess if the children needed more guidance in this area or simply weren’t as interested. Overall, I believe the implementation of kindness education earlier in the year will create an atmosphere of community that will facilitate a welcoming learning environment for the children.

I plan to continue my practice of observing the classroom on a regular basis. Observations were essential during my research, but I also discovered how they benefitted my classroom. Not only was I more in tune with my classroom and the needs of the children, it gave me the opportunity to reflect in a way I could not when I was constantly in the midst of the action. Observation gave me the opportunity to step back and see things from a different perspective. It also had the interesting side effect of modeling for the children the practice of observation. Almost daily, a small number of children independently took out a clipboard, paper, and pencil and sat down for their own observations. In future, I would be interested in inviting children who have a
hard time calming themselves to practice observation as a way to center their bodies and increase awareness. They may also increase focus if they observe with a specific purpose or question in mind.

Future action research projects might explore the use of “I Statements” and if they improve conflict resolution among young children. This research topic would be done in conjunction with the implementation of the Emotions Booklet and discussions of emotional awareness. After children practice naming their emotions, they would learn how to convey that information in a conflict situation: “I feel (mad, sad, scared, etc) when you (name act) and I want you to (name desired resolution).” I would also be interested in researching how the practice of observation affects the work habits and normalization process of young children.

The results of this action research are encouraging as they show that acts of kindness are important to young children. I learned that children need to hear about kindness through positive examples of what we can or should do, instead of emphasizing what we shouldn’t do. This study shows that children are curious about their feelings and the feelings of others. They enjoyed discussing their emotions and asking others how they feel. This study also showed that participation in the creation of classroom guidelines facilitated the children’s understanding of how acts of kindness apply to themselves and their learning environment. When children help to develop a classroom culture based on kindness, they will independently reach out to others to
offer help or encouragement. Through the experience of a peaceful community, the children can become Montessori’s “bright new hope for mankind” (1995, p. 15).
References


*Childhood Education, 82*(2), 68-73.


*Childhood Education, 82*(5), 2-292F, 292M.

Appendix A

Emotions Booklet (excerpt)
Pictures downloaded from Teachers Pay Teachers
(www.teacherspayteachers.com/Store/Montessori-Nature)
## Appendix B

### Materials Log

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date/Time</th>
<th>Material used</th>
<th>Used alone or with others?</th>
<th>Observed behaviors during use of materials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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## Appendix C

**Tally Sheet**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Behavior</th>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>Time:</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Verbal</th>
<th>Non Verbal</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verbal support or praise</td>
<td>Smile</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gentle tone of voice</td>
<td>Gentle touch</td>
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<tr>
<td>Name feelings</td>
<td>Eye contact/Engaged</td>
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<tr>
<td>Offer to help</td>
<td>Thumbs up</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Inviting other to work/play</td>
<td>Respect body space</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiate/Resolve conflict</td>
<td>Other:</td>
<td>Other:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Undesired Behavior Tally Sheet</td>
<td>Date:</td>
<td>Time:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Verbal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Verbal criticism</td>
<td>Frown/ negative expression</td>
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<td>Harsh tone of voice</td>
<td>Physical aggression</td>
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<tr>
<td>Name calling</td>
<td>Lack of eye contact</td>
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<tr>
<td>Refuse to help</td>
<td>Thumbs down</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Refusal to work/play together</td>
<td>Invade body space</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Refuse to negotiate during conflict</td>
<td>Other:</td>
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<td>Other:</td>
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<td>Other:</td>
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Appendix D

Children’s responses during discussion circles

Kindness to Self

- “No hitting myself”
- Eat healthy foods
- “Eat healthy stuff like broccoli and drinking water”
- Gentle touch to self
- Exercise
- “Stay warm so you don’t get hypothermia”
- “If someone is playing with others, you can play by yourself”
- Brushing your teeth
- Taking a bath/shower
- “Ask to spend time with others”

Kindness to Others

- “Be nice”
- Not hitting, not kicking, no pushing
- Gentle touch
- Give body space
- Don’t interrupt
- Listening
- Offer to help
- “Help friends when they get hurt”
- Say “please” and “thank you”
- No spitting
- Give complements

Kindness to Classroom/Environment

Classroom:

- No shouting/quiet voices
- “Stay inside”
- “Keep the door closed when it is cold outside”
- “Don’t build towers too high”
- Gentle with materials
- Place work gently on the table
- No stomping. Quiet, gentle, walking feet

Environment:

- Gentle touch
- Don’t leave garbage on the floor. Put it in the garbage can
- Don’t pull up the plants. Observe them
- Only pick flowers when they are fully grown
- Plant a garden
- You can pick and eat ripe berries
- Keep bark chips on the ground
- Observe the plants
- Care for the plants
- Pick up trash
- “Replace the dirt when you dig a hole”
Appendix E

Drawing Materials

Kindness to Self:
Drinking water
Kindness to Others:
Children playing together (left)
Flags (right)

Kindness to the Environment:
Rainbow and tree (left)
“Watering the Plant” (right)
Appendix F

Kindness Guidelines Book
Below are the images from the front and back covers.
Images for the booklet were found using Google Images.

Kindness Guidelines

I Will be Kind

“I will be kind to my friends every day,
I will be kind in my own special way.
I will take turns and share my things, too.
I will be kind—’cause that’s what friends do.”

--Linda Warren
Images from pages 1-2: “Kindness to myself”
Images for pages 3-4: “Kindness to others”

- Giving my friends some space.
- Please, Thank You, Sorry
Images for pages 5-6: “Kindness to our environment”
Appendix G

Kindness Songs and Poem

I Will be Kind
I will be kind to my friends every day,
I will be kind in my own special way.
I will take turns and share my things, too.
I will be kind—’cause that’s what friends do.

--Linda Warren (www.preschoolexpress.com)

Good Manners
(Tune: “My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean”)

Good manners is thinking of others,
Good manners is doing what’s right.
Good manners is thinking of others,
Good manners always feel right.
Helping, caring,
Sharing with you today, today.
Kindness, honesty,
Sharing with you today.

--Original Author Unknown (found at www.preschooleducation.com)

If You Want to be a Friend
(Tune: “If You’re Happy And You Know It”)

If you want to be a friend, clap your hands.
If you want to be a friend, clap your hands.
A friend is someone who,
Is always kind to you.
If you want to be a friend, clap your hands.

--Adapted Traditional (found at www.preschoolexpress.com)