

Creating a Culture of Kindness: How Might Schools Promote Children's Prosocial Acts?

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Abstract

Children's prosocial behaviour is related to their peer status. Peer acceptance is associated with wellbeing and achievement in school, yet evidence suggests that many children are not aware of this and may attribute peer status to more dominant or materialistic orientations. Therefore, it is important that schools not only promote children's prosociality, but draw their attention to its value. Given that social and emotional learning (SEL) programs appear to facilitate more positive pupil outcomes than anti-bullying initiatives, positive psychology approaches which focus on building social and emotional skills can be considered useful. Encouraging children to perform kind acts for one another has recently gained research attention as a positive psychology intervention particularly beneficial for social relationships. Self-determination theory (SDT) suggests that enacting kindness may temper individuals' psychological needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness. Currently however, there is little evidence-based guidance for schools on how to go about promoting children's kindness. In this essay, relevant research is synthesised with the aim of bridging this gap. It is argued that adults can support children's intrinsic motivation to enact kindness, in two key ways. One is by providing information about what kindness is and how it can be used. The other is by fostering experiences of the emotional motivations of gratitude and empathy. Methods to achieve this are described with consideration to the role of self-determination needs. Ideas for future research and the contribution of the educational psychologist are proposed.

Children's social relationships are crucial for their wellbeing and academic success in school, and are considered a core competency by social and emotional learning (SEL) programs (Goswami, 2012; Gray, Galton, McLaughlin, Clarke & Symonds, 2011; Oberle, Domitrovich, Mayers & Weissberg, 2016). Peer acceptance contributes to children's affect, enjoyment, and achievement in school and is associated with the development of social competence (Banerjee, Watling & Caputi, 2011; Ladd, Kochenderfer & Coleman, 1997; Lecce, Caputi,

Pagnin & Banerjee, 2017; Wentzel, Baker & Russell, 2009). Classes with more evenly distributed peer status have been found to have lower malaise for children of all statuses, suggesting there are effects of peer acceptance on class-level wellbeing (Ostberg, 2003). Similarly, children's sense of school belonging is related to their academic motivation and self-regulation and is predictive of wellbeing factors such as life satisfaction and positive affect over time (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Jose, Ryan & Pryor, 2012; Osterman, 2000; Van Ryzin, Gravelly & Roseth, 2009). Qualitative work has even found that children conceptualise their wellbeing in terms of social relationships (Thomas, Graham, Powell & Fitzgerald, 2016). Given that the teacher's role is widely considered to include promoting pupils' social and emotional wellbeing, the question of how to foster their social relationships is of importance to schools (Banerjee, McLaughlin, Cotney, Roberts & Peereboom, 2016; Barry, Clarke, & Dowling, 2017; Durlak & Weissberg, 2011; Elbertson, Brackett & Weissberg, 2009).

One way to approach this is by attempting to reduce negative interactions through whole-school anti-bullying initiatives, which have generally shown weak effects on student outcomes (Smith, Ananiadou & Cowie, 2003; Smith, Schneider, Smith & Ananiadou, 2004). Systemic SEL interventions focusing on developing positive social and emotional skills have had more promising consequences for wellbeing when they are delivered well (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011; Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017). Banerjee et al. (2016) acknowledge that positive and negative wellbeing are separate dimensions, in that the absence of negative experiences like victimisation does not equate to the presence of positive experiences such as happiness. This orientation towards promoting positive outcomes originates in positive psychology, a branch of study aimed at building personal and community level values like social skills and altruism (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Positive psychology approaches can be employed at the whole class or school level to promote the wellbeing of all children (Binfet, 2015).

Interestingly, positive psychology interventions have rarely attempted to promote social relationship outcomes directly (O'Connell, O'Shea & Gallagher, 2016). However, the construct of kindness has recently emerged in the literature as a potential method of doing exactly that (Binfet & Passmore, 2019). Kindness is a form of prosocial behaviour (Binfet, 2015), defined as "behaviour performed by one individual to alleviate another's need or improve their welfare" (Cronin, 2012, p.1085). Yet kindness is more nuanced because it requires the individual to act on the basis of an affective response as opposed to self-interest, obligation, duty or principle (Baldwin & Baldwin, 1970). Kindness is closely related to compassion, generosity and altruism, all reflecting an "orientation of the self toward the other", and can be measured as a behaviour and a trait (Petersen and Seligman, 2004, p. 326). Other positive psychology constructs such as happiness are believed to have three determinants; a genetic setpoint, circumstantial factors and activities which serve to increase them (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon & Schkade, 2005). Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) suggest that the 'activities' strand is best suited to intervention to increase happiness. Applying this logic, this essay will treat kindness as containing a behavioural component that can be increased by certain practices.

In terms of the potential effects of kindness on children's peer relations, their prosocial behaviour more generally is associated with peer acceptance, usually identified using sociometry, which measures how many peers select them as a preferred friend (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002). Children and adolescents who display more prosocial behaviour are rated as more popular by their peers (e.g. Pakaslahti, Karjalainen & Keltikangas-Jarvinen, 2002; Slaughter, Dennis & Pritchard, 2002; Warden & Mackinnon, 2003). Comparable effects appear to be true for kindness. For example, nine to 11 year-olds who were instructed to perform three kind acts weekly for four weeks experienced greater gains in peer acceptance relative to an active control group (Layous, Nelson, Oberle, Schonert-Reichl & Lyubomirsky, 2012). Peer acceptance gains remained significant when controlling for positive affect increases, suggesting children's kindness may have specifically influenced their peer status.

It seems that not all children are aware of the potential benefits of kindness. While prosocial children are sociometrically popular, the children who are *perceived* by peers as popular are more dominant and aggressive (Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998; Slaughter et al., 2002). Additionally, some children misconceive that achieving material and appearance ideals will aid their popularity, though internalisation of these ideas negatively predicts wellbeing (Easterbrook, Wright, Dittmar & Banerjee, 2014). This highlights the value in making the links between kindness and relationships explicit for children. Indeed, qualitative evaluation of an existing school kindness program, the *Kind Campus Program*, identified that making kindness salient strongly impacted school outcomes (Kaplan, de Blois, Dominguez & Walsh, 2016).

Self-determination theory (SDT) offers a theoretical perspective for understanding why kindness seems to benefit wellbeing (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Nelson et al., 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT states that behaviour is motivated by the innate psychological needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness, which are described as "essential for facilitating optimal functioning,...constructive social development and personal well-being" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p.68). Kind acts may promote relatedness because they are other-focused and provide opportunities for social interaction (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Accordingly, Nelson, Layous, Cole and Lyubomirsky (2016) found that adults who performed other-focused kindness reported significantly greater improvements in psychological flourishing, mediated by increased positive emotions, relative to those who performed self-focused kindness. Kindness may foster feelings of competence, because witnessing the results of prosocial acts can increase children's confidence in their ability to help others (Freeman & Swick, 2003; Masterson & Kersey, 2013). Because kind acts are thought to be motivated by other-focused emotions (Petersen & Seligman, 2004), individuals can be considered autonomous when they are intrinsically motivated to enact kindness (Nelson et al., 2015).

So, acts of kindness appear to encourage social connection and psychological need satisfaction, which may have positive implications for personal wellbeing. Binfet (2015) points out that kindness is advantageous to schools because it is cost effective and benefits all. Currently though, kindness research is relatively new and there is a lack of evidence regarding *how* to increase children's kindness to enhance their wellbeing (Cotney and Banerjee, 2017). Although a number of school-based kindness programs exist, Kaplan et al. (2016) recognise

they are “promising, but under evaluated” (p. 161). There are also a number of factors affecting the efficacy of said interventions, including gender (e.g. Lonigro, Laghi, Baiocco & Baumgartner, 2014), culture (e.g. Nelson et al., 2015), baseline wellbeing (e.g. Kerr, O’Donovan & Pepping, 2015) and dosage (e.g. Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). The present scarcity of evidence-based advice for schools on how to promote kindness means that the purpose of this essay is to ‘zoom out’ and consider the underlying factors affecting children’s proclivity to be kind. This is intended to generate some overarching constructs schools could seek to support, which can be applied in conjunction with knowledge about implementation variables. Given that the definition of kindness necessitates that it is performed on the basis of an individual’s internal state (Baldwin & Baldwin, 1970), perspectives from theories of intrinsic motivation, including SDT, will be key.

To this end, it will be argued that adults in schools can promote children’s motivation for kindness in two ways. One is by providing information. Adults can elicit and extend children’s definitions of kindness to enhance their sophistication. This may help them perform more complex and effortful kind acts, bolstering experiences of competence and flow. Social reinforcement including scaffolding and praise can be employed to give children examples of when kindness might be required. This informational style can be also understood as providing a sense of competence. ‘Counting kindness’ interventions are proposed as a way of further developing a sense of competence by helping children recognise the impact of their kindness. Another way is by fostering children’s emotions, namely gratitude and empathy. It will be proposed that gratitude activities such as journaling and loving-kindness meditation may help develop pupils’ awareness of others’ kind acts towards them, and how this makes them feel. This could aid the empathy process when children imagine how others might feel in response to their acts of kindness. It will be argued that empathy is a major motivator of children’s prosocial behaviour which can be further developed by using cognitive-behavioural approaches to exemplify associations between the skills of cognitive and affective empathy. Implications for educational psychologists (EPs) and directions for future research will be discussed.

If we want children to be kinder, we need to understand what kindness means to them (Binfet & Passmore, 2019). Developmental stage is relevant here, as children’s conceptualisations of kindness seem to become more sophisticated with age. For instance, children of five to eight years have depicted kindness as physical and emotional helping, social inclusion, and acts to maintain friendships, which happen in familiar, dyadic relationships (Binfet, 2015; Binfet & Gaertner, 2015). In contrast, 11 to 15-year-olds in focus groups have identified 10 types of kindness. Their descriptions reflected more complex themes including own emotion as motivation for kindness, and the benefits of planned, proactive kind acts (Cotney & Banerjee, 2017). Therefore, it appears that children begin perceiving kindness as acts primarily to repair friendships, moving towards more varied and nuanced understandings as they develop (Hoffman, 2008).

For adults, higher reported effort when performing kind acts has been associated with greater wellbeing gains (Layous, Nelson, Kurtz & Lyubomirsky, 2017). Flow theory posits that

individuals can experience intense intrinsic enjoyment when they skilfully complete tasks which are high in perceived challenge (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) which might explain enhanced wellbeing following effortful kindness. Therefore, if children can be supported to understand and enact kindness within a notional 'kindness zone of proximal development', they may experience greater feelings of competence (Binfet & Passmore, 2019; Vygotsky, 1978). It is important to acknowledge that qualitative research on definitions of kindness cannot generalise to all children (Cotney & Banerjee, 2017). The studies differ in cultural context and methodology. Cultures may understand kindness differently (Layous, Lee, Choi & Lyubomirsky, 2013), and method of elicitation may affect the sophistication of responses. Hence, schools may choose to gather views specific to their students.

One method schools might employ to encourage more complex kind behaviours, is reinforcement, though it is important to note that certain kinds of reinforcement can undermine children's motivation to perform tasks for intrinsic benefit, termed the 'overjustification' effect (Lepper, Greene & Nisbett, 1973). For instance, Warneken and Tomasello (2008) found that 20-month-olds who received tangible rewards for helping during a training phase were subsequently less likely to help, relative to those who were initially exposed to praise or no reinforcement. The overjustification effect likely reflects children's need for autonomy in their helping behaviour (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Weinstein and Ryan (2010) demonstrated the importance of autonomy in enacting kindness, finding that everyday helping was only associated with greater wellbeing for adults who reported helping for autonomous reasons. They also found autonomous helping was associated with greater receiver wellbeing and giver-receiver relatedness in experimental settings. Similarly, Nelson et al. (2015) found that experimentally prompted acts of kindness had weak effects on actor wellbeing, unless an element of autonomy was provided. Therefore, if schools are to prompt children to conduct kind acts to improve their wellbeing, the importance of autonomy must be acknowledged. Fortunately, children's autonomy and competence can be supported by adults using a 'high informational style' (Lepper et al. 1973; Ryan & Deci, 2017). This can involve providing knowledge about the kinds of behaviour that are kind and elicit praise (Binfet & Enns, 2018). Consistent with this, young children who are afforded knowledge in the form of scaffolding, praise and encouragement of prosocial behaviours show increased helping (Bower & Casas, 2016; Dahl, 2015; Dahl et al., 2017; Hammond & Carpendale, 2014; Spivak & Farran, 2012).

A sense of choice is also important for autonomy. Nelson et al. (2015) instructed American and South Korean undergraduates to perform and record five kind acts, one day per week, for five weeks. Autonomy was manipulated by the presence or absence of messages believed to be from a previous participant in the study, which gave a rationale for performing kind acts, acknowledged participants' perspectives, and provided a sense of choice by saying, for example, that where they study is their choice. Irrespective of culture, autonomy-supported kindness positively predicted reported psychological need satisfaction, which predicted wellbeing. Therefore, teachers or peer mentors could support children to recognise their sense of choice over why and how they enact kindness. Although not empirically validated, Binfet's (2015) framework for intentional acts of kindness provides a structure for doing this.

It outlines steps children can follow to help them plan the recipient, nature, timing and execution of kind acts. Schools could make use of this to give children a sense of control over prompted kind acts.

Another way teachers might support children's understanding of kindness is suggested by Kaplan et al. (2016), who recommend schools have language and frameworks in place for recognising kindness and its effects. 'Counting kindness' (CK) may be one way of achieving this. CK requires participants to record kind acts they perform (Otake, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui & Fredrickson, 2006). Otake et al. found that adults who recorded their kindness for a week were significantly happier post-intervention relative to controls, and themselves at baseline. Larger gains in subjective happiness were associated with performing more kind acts. Therefore, paying attention to their own kind acts may benefit children's wellbeing. The authors state that further exploration of the mechanism by which CK affects wellbeing is needed. One possibility however, is that reflecting on acts of kindness bolsters feelings of competence when children consider their successful acts.

Methodological limitations mean further research is required before we accept this conclusion too readily. The control group was inactive, a common problem in positive psychology research because numerous positive activities can improve wellbeing, compared with doing nothing (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2013; O'Connell et al., 2016). Therefore, we cannot determine whether CK is more effective than other activities. Second, only females took part, and there is evidence suggesting gender differences in some socioemotional skills (Hoffman, 2008; Lonigro et al., 2014). Therefore, we cannot assume these effects in males. We might also expect that because the participants were adults, the findings may not generalise to children. However, CK appears to have an interesting link with gratitude (Otake et al., 2016), which *has* been explored in children, resulting in greater wellbeing, school belonging and prosocial behaviour (Dickens, 2017; Diebel, Woodcock, Cooper & Brignell, 2016; Flook, Goldberg, Pinger & Davidson, 2015). Consequently, consideration will now be given to two the emotion-based motivations that schools could foster to promote children's kindness, one being gratitude.

Gratitude is an emotion and is a receiver's response to a giver's moral actions, which motivates both parties' future prosociality (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001). Like kindness, gratitude can be trait-like *and* momentary, and can be cultivated by intentional activities including journaling, letter writing and meditation (Emmons & Stern, 2013). Elevation is very similar, defined as a positive emotional state resulting after witnessing the benefit of someone else's good deed (Schnall, Roper & Fessler, 2010). This may explain wellbeing gains when CK participants experience observe their own kind acts. Broaden-and-build theory provides an explanation for why these emotions might trigger prosocial behaviour (Fredrickson, 2001). Fredrickson suggests that positive emotions "broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires, which in turn serves to build their enduring personal resources" (Fredrickson, 2001, p.218). In the context of kindness, those in a positive emotional state may be more able to perform actions intended to benefit others (Layous et al., 2017).

Accordingly, Layous et al. (2017) found that a gratitude trigger predicted elevation, which predicted greater effort for kind acts, which predicted higher wellbeing post-intervention. Layous and colleagues (2013) also found that writing gratitude letters before undertaking acts of kindness predicted greater wellbeing gains compared to starting with kindness. Therefore, gratitude activities which encourage reflection on the prosocial behaviour of others may have unique benefits on prosocial effort and wellbeing (Schnall et al., 2010). Loving kindness meditation (LKM) also requires individuals to reflect on their grateful feelings toward themselves and others, and has been found to increase positive emotions including gratitude (Bankard, 2015; Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek & Finkel, 2008). Flook et al. (2015) provided preliminary evidence for the contribution of LKM to children's prosocial behaviour, observing gains in prosociality following a mindfulness-based kindness intervention which included reflecting on feelings including gratitude. Perhaps then, schools could employ gratitude practices such as letter writing and LKM to help children reflect on the benefits of prosocial behaviour for themselves.

Helping children recognise how they feel when experiencing kindness may facilitate their understanding of how others might feel in this situation. This is, in effect, empathy, defined as "an affective response that stems from the apprehension or comprehension of another's emotional state or condition, and which is identical to or quite similar to what the other person is feeling or expected to feel" (Spinrad and Gal, 2018, p.40). Given the evidence for strong associations between peer acceptance and prosocial behaviour (e.g. Sahdra, Ciarrochi, Parker, Marshall & Heaven, 2015), an enhanced understanding of the feelings of others is likely to foster a sense of relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Furthermore, both gratitude and empathy can be seen as reflecting a mature form of intrinsic motivation for acting in other-focused ways, which is central to the spontaneous practice of kindness (Hoffman, 2008; Petersen & Seligman, 2004).

Substantial evidence suggests that empathy motivates children's prosocial behaviour (Sahdra et al., 2015; Schonert-Reichl, Smith, Zaidman-Zait & Hertzman, 2012) and is associated with positive social and emotional outcomes (Malti, Chaparro, Zuffiano & Colasante, 2016). Empathy has frequently been recognised as comprising a cognitive and an affective component (Davidov, Vaish, Knafo-Noam & Hastings, 2016). Cognitive empathy refers to the understanding of another's emotional state, and affective empathy to emotional arousal in response another's emotional state (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990; Feshbach, 1975; Hoffman, 1988). Questionnaire measures of cognitive and affective empathy have found them to be two distinct but related skills in children (Dadds et al., 2008) and adults (Reniers, Corcoran, Drake, Shryane & Vollm, 2011).

Reniers et al. (2011) note that cognitive empathy shares skills with theory of mind (ToM), though it involves a stronger focus on emotion processing than ToM, which refers to the use of others' mental states for explaining and predicting their behaviour (Baron-Cohen, Leslie & Frith, 1985). ToM contributes to children's prosocial behaviour and peer acceptance (Caputi, Lecce, Pagnin & Banerjee, 2012; Eggum et al., 2011) but is not necessarily sufficient to promote prosocial behaviour, because the child also needs an appropriate emotional reaction to the

other's mental state (Lonigro et al., 2014; Masterson & Kersey, 2013; Muñoz, Qualter & Padgett, 2011; Smith et al., 2014). Numerous studies identify the role of affective empathy in prosocial behaviour. Lonigro et al. (2014) found that in five to 10-year-olds with the same ToM abilities, children who showed more prosocial behaviours also had higher levels of self-reported affective and total empathy relative to children who displayed less prosociality, suggesting perspective taking (PT) alone did not determine behaviour. Similarly, Laghi, Lonigro, Pallini and Baiocco (2018) found that PT and empathic concern were equally predictive of 14 to 17-year-olds' 'prosocial' scores on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. Dadds et al. (2008) found that children's parent-rated cognitive and affective empathy were both associated with more prosocial behaviour, but only affective empathy was related to using more thinking time in an empathy related dilemma.

While cognitive empathy is an effortful process, affective empathy has an element of automaticity, where individuals unconsciously mirror the mood of another, or experience an emotion in relation to another's situation (Reniers et al., 2011). Even young babies display negative emotions in response to another's distress (Hoffman, 2008). Although this aspect of empathy appears to be innate, its interpretation may be amenable to development. Indeed, reflecting on personal emotional activation with an other-focused orientation is thought to precede altruistic behaviour (De Waal, 2008). For instance, Miller, Nuselovici and Hastings (2016) found that children's reported subjective empathy mediated the relation between their physiological responses to others' sadness, and future prosocial behaviour. The authors suggest that young children who are aware of their physiological empathy responses may be more able to build on these to act prosocially. Therefore, in seeking to promote kindness, schools may consider methods of encouraging children to make links between their cognitive understanding of others' emotions and their own physiological responses.

A perspective that aligns with this idea is the cognitive behavioural approach, where individuals are taught to recognise and understand the links between their thoughts, emotions, behaviours and physiological symptoms (Scott, 2009). Davidov et al. (2016) suggest that empathy can be triggered either when an affective state is then understood in relation to another's perspective, or when PT leads to an affective response. Feshbach (1975) also acknowledges that which arises first is unimportant. The hot cross bun model used in cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) offers a flexible framework for understanding these links, where relations between the four elements can exist in any direction (James, 2015). Future research could examine the impact of cognitive behavioural techniques on promoting children's empathy, something that does not appear to have been empirically tested yet.

There is a role for the EP in supporting schools to engage with these practices effectively. As Banerjee et al. (2016) note, whole-school approaches to wellbeing can have significant positive outcomes, but they must be carefully planned with consideration of the workload pressures and priority conflicts that teachers experience. Therefore, EPs could use their knowledge of systemic working (Buck, 2015) to help provide teachers with the resources and support they need to feel competent in integrating kindness practices into the school system (Oberle et al. 2016). Furthermore, Oberle and colleagues note that SEL programs can be even

more effective when they permeate wider ecological systems such as families and communities (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). EPs are well placed to facilitate this due to the systemic positions in which they work with multiple schools and families within communities (Theron & Donald, 2013). Additionally, in times of high teacher turnover in the UK (Allen, Burgess & Mayo, 2018), there may be a role for the EP in promoting teacher wellbeing via intentional acts of kindness within staff teams.

In conclusion, there are a number of ways in which schools can help children to access the information and emotions that are likely to foster their intrinsic motivation for enacting kindness. Providing children with information about the 'what, when, why and how' of kindness through approaches such as reinforcement, scaffolding and CK appears to be particularly suited to tempering competence needs. Providing children with a rationale for being kind and giving them choice and control over how they do this could help maintain autonomy, allowing them to experience wellbeing gains from kind acts. This is particularly important if they have been instructed to conduct these in the first place. Supporting children to experience the emotional motivations of gratitude and empathy that underpin kindness can help to foster their sense of relatedness. Encouraging stronger links between cognitive and affective empathy through CBT approaches is a novel but interesting intervention that warrants further exploration. This is the case for many of the strategies discussed here, which originate from ideas grounded in evidence, but require empirical validation if we are to suggest that schools dedicate time and resources to their implementation. There is a role for the EP in both generating practice-based evidence, and in supporting schools to deploy kindness approaches effectively.

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