*Article*

# Kinder Than We Might Think: How Adolescents Are Kind

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## Abstract

Educators and parents alike have high expectations that adolescents behave prosocially and, within the context of schools, this is evident in curriculum grounded in social and emotional learning and in kindness-themed school-wide initiatives. Despite this emphasis on kindness, relatively little is empirically known about how adolescents enact kindness. To understand just how adolescents demonstrate kindness, a study of 191 ninth graders was conducted in which students were asked to plan and complete five kind acts. In addition to planning and doing acts of kindness, participants were asked to rate their face-to-face and online kindness, report the number of kind acts they completed, identify the recipients of their acts, and assess the quality of their kind acts. At post-test, participants' self-ratings of both face-to-face and online kindness were significantly higher than their pre-test ratings. Only one third of participants completed all of their kind acts, most participants chose familiar others as the recipients of their kindness, and the bulk of participants rated their acts of kindness as medium quality on a low–medium–high scale. The kind acts done by participants reflected the themes of *helping with chores, being respectful, complimenting/encouraging others*, and *giving objects or money*. Implications for educators and parents are discussed.

The fields of psychology and education have historically focused on the deficits of young people (i.e., "what's wrong and needs fixing?"). As Damon (2004) described, "The job of youth professionals has been seen to be identifying the problem early

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enough to defray and then patch up the damage" (p. 14). Such a view situated adolescents in a particularly negative light and elicited school-based support that was reparative, versus resilience-building, in nature. This viewpoint of the adolescent served to perpetuate negative stereotypes of adolescents as selfish and mired in conflict (Romer, Reyna, & Satterthwaite, 2017). In contrast to this "problem-centered vision of youth" (Damon, 2004, p. 14), movements such as the Positive Youth Development Approach (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2007; Damon, 2004), Social and Emotional Learning (SEL; casel.org), Positive Psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), and its derivative field, Positive Education (Galloway & Reynolds, 2015; Norrish, Williams, O'Connor, & Robinson, 2013), reorient our focus to the strengths, competencies, and potential that adolescents hold to positively shape the world around them.

One dimension of adolescent development that showcases such strengths and attributes is the study of adolescents' prosocial behavior. Building on the definition of prosocial behavior proffered by Eisenberg and colleagues (2006), Nantel-Vivier, Pihl, Cote, and Tremblay (2014) offer the following: "Prosocial behaviours, including helping, sharing, comforting and cooperating, have been defined as behaviours benefiting others and/or promoting positive social relationships" (p. 1135). Gender differences in prosocial behavior have been identified with girls demonstrating more prosocial behavior in childhood and adolescence than boys (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998; Fabes, Carlo, Kupanoff, & Laible, 1999). In fact, Carlo and Randall (2002) found gender differences across all four types of prosocial behaviors (i.e., altruistic, compliant, emotional, and public). Age-related differences have also been investigated and, as children mature into adolescents, researchers have not found a corresponding increase in prosocial behavior (Davis & Franzoi, 1991; Nantel-Vivier et al., 2009). In summarizing their longitudinal study of Canadian and Italian children, Nantel-Vivier and colleagues (2009) wrote, "The majority of children could therefore be described as exhibiting stable or declining levels of prosocial behaviours over time" (p. 595). Not surprisingly, children's prosociality has been found to be inversely related to aggression with children who demonstrate high rates of prosocial behavior characterized by low levels of aggression (Nantel-Vivier et al., 2014).

Although developmental changes over time in prosocial behavior and differences in gender have been studied, what is less understood is how, when asked to demonstrate prosocial behavior, adolescents manifest prosocial acts (Carlo, Hausmann, Christiansen, & Randall, 2003). Understanding how adolescents enact kindness affords educators, parents, and researchers insights into how prosocial behavior is actualized by adolescents. This stream of research challenges the prevailing negative stereotypes of adolescents and can serve to inform the adult agents responsible for fostering adolescent development on how to best structure opportunities for adolescents to be kind.

## Kindness Research

Although much of the research on kindness has focused on assessing the effects of being kind on participants' well-being (e.g., Curry et al., 2018; Kerr, O'Donovan, &

Pepping, 2014; Layous, Nelson, Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Lyubomirsky, 2012; Mongrain, Barnes, Barnhart, & Zalan, 2018; Otake, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui, & Fredrickson, 2006; Pressman, Kraft, & Cross, 2015), there is emerging research exploring how, when asked to be kind, participants enact kindness. What follows next is an overview of research that has explored how children and adolescents demonstrate kindness.

## Themes of Participants' Kind Acts

A review of the extant educational and psychological literature revealed four key studies reporting themes of kindness in school-age participants. Eisenberg and colleagues (1999), in a longitudinal study of prosocial behavior in which 32 participants were studied from age 4 to 20, reported observations of young children behaving prosocially—sharing, helping, and offering comfort. Participants were not explicitly instructed to be kind and the identified prosocial behaviors occurred naturally within a preschool context. No specific examples of kindness, however, were identified. In a second study, by Layous and colleagues (2012), in which 9- to 11-year-olds were asked to perform three acts of kindness to assess the effects on well-being and popularity, the authors reported the following examples of kindness: "Examples of kind acts included 'gave my mom a hug when she was stressed by her job', 'gave someone some of my lunch', and 'vacuumed the floor'" (p. 2).

In recent work by Cotney and Banerjee (2019), adolescents (11- to 15-year-olds) participated in focus group discussions to explore both their beliefs around being kind and examples of kind acts they had done or received. Ten distinct themes capturing adolescents' examples of kind acts were identified and included the following: showing emotional support (e.g., being thoughtful), proactive support (e.g., congratulating others), social inclusion (e.g., inviting others), positive sociality (e.g., being polite), complimenting others, helping others, expressing forgiveness, being helpful, showing generosity, and being formally kind (e.g., doing a premeditated act of kindness such as fund-raising for a charity).

The fourth body of work examining how participants demonstrate kindness is found in a series of studies (a pilot followed by two larger investigations) by Binfet and his students at the University of British Columbia provides the strongest foundation for the current investigation as this research generated specific examples of kindness enacted by students aged 5 to 14 (see Binfet & Gaertner, 2015; Binfet, 2016; Binfet & Passmore, 2019). The pilot study saw 112 early elementary students draw something kind they had done at school recently. Drawings were subsequently coded, and the frequencies of each prevalent theme were calculated. Young students demonstrated kindness most frequently by (a) helping physically (e.g., "I'm helping him throw a ball outside" and "My friend was stung by a bee and I got help from an adult"), (b) including others (e.g., "Do you want to be on my team?" and "She had no one to play with so I asked her if she wanted to play with me"), and (c) maintaining friendships (e.g., "We ate lunch together on Friendship Fridays" and "A friend wants to play with me and I say 'yes'"). These findings were replicated in a larger study of 652

kindergarten to third-grade students who were asked to illustrate how they show kindness at school (Binfet, 2016). Extending the investigation further, 1,753 students in Grades 4 through 8 were asked to provide examples of kind acts they had done within their school context (Binfet & Passmore, 2019). When compared with the kind acts done by young students, the findings of this study revealed nuanced differences in the kind acts done by older students. The prevalent themes found within older students' kind acts included helping others, showing respect, and encouraging or advocating for others. Examining more closely how students showed kindness through helping revealed that students demonstrated kindness by physically helping others (e.g., "I helped a person when they were hurt falling from the playground"), helping others academically (e.g., "help others who struggle to complete other schoolwork"), and helping emotionally ("asking my friends if they are okay when they are sad").

Collectively, the body of research described above has explored how students have demonstrated kindness using an approach relying on participants' post hoc recollection—that is, asking students to recall kind acts they performed (e.g., "Describe something kind you have done recently"). The present investigation advances both the methodology used to investigate participants' kind acts and our understanding of how students demonstrate kindness by asking participants to a priori plan and then execute acts of kindness. This study further advances our understanding of adolescent kindness by incorporating a reflective component requiring participants to reflect upon and evaluate the kindness they performed.

## Method

The primary aim of this study was to investigate adolescents' kind acts and to explore the question: "When asked to be kind, how are adolescents kind?" A secondary aim of this study was to explore adolescents' views of themselves as kind agents and their perceptions of their kind acts. It was hypothesized that adolescents' kind acts would be in accord with the themes found in previous kindness research and include the global themes of helping, sharing, and cooperating and that having adolescents complete a series of kind acts would significantly boost their self-ratings of kindness. School district and university research ethics approval was granted for these studies.

### Procedure

*Participant recruitment.*  A middle school comprised of students in grades seven through nine within a midsize Western Canadian city school district was randomly selected from middle schools within the district to participate in the study. The school was situated in an established area of the city and served middle class families. To introduce the study to school personnel, a presentation was made at a faculty meeting by the author. All ninth-grade teachers ($N = 14$) signed informed consent forms agreeing to participate in the study and were asked to send parental permission forms home with students. Prior to the commencement of the study, students were asked to provide informed assent, resulting in 78% of ninth-grade students receiving both parental

permission and providing assent to participate. This exploratory study was composed of two visits, each conducted during one 45-min class period: Visit 1—the first visit had students plan and describe five acts of kindness to be done over the course of the following week; and Visit 2—a follow-up visit in which participants were asked to identify how many kind acts they completed and rate the quality of their kindness. For each visit, participants met in clusters of three classes in the school's library with sessions led by the author and three trained research assistants. Directions were read aloud to participants.

## Participants

Participants were 191 ninth-grade students (*M* age = 14.6, *SD* = 0.47, 52% female). The majority of students were Caucasian (75%), of mixed race ethnicity (11%) and Aboriginal (5%). Most students (89%) reported speaking English at home.

## Measures

*Demographic information.* Participants were asked to provide demographic information, including age, gender, ethnicity, and language spoken at home.

*Kindness planning sheets.* Following a script, the research team guided participants in the completion of their *Kindness Planning Sheet*. The first section of this sheet asked participants to rate the extent to which they see themselves as kind in their online and face-to-face interactions. Using a 5-point Likert-type scale ("not at all kind" to "very kind") participants were asked the following questions: (a) "How kind are you generally in your face-to-face interactions?"; and (b) "How kind are you generally when online?"

The second component of this worksheet required participants to plan and describe five kind acts to be completed over the following week. Participants were required to indicate who the recipient of each kind act was (e.g., friend, classmate, neighbor) and when they would complete each act over the course of the following week. Participants were asked to put each kind act in their daily planner to encourage the completion of all five acts.

*Kindness reflection sheets.* One week later, participants were visited a second time during which the researchers followed a script to guide participants in the completion of their *Kindness Reflection Sheets*. This included having participants (a) rate the extent to which they saw themselves as kind in their online and face-to-face interactions, (b) report how many of their kind acts they completed, and (c) rate the quality of the kind acts they did using a 3-point Likert-type scale (i.e., low, medium, and high). Participants were asked the following: "Not all kind acts are the same. Some take more time, effort, or materials. Rate the quality of the kind acts you have done."

## Results

### Completion of Kind Acts

Participants were asked to plan, and then do, five kind acts over the course of 1 week (see Supplemental Appendix). Twenty-nine percent of participants completed all five kind acts, whereas 47% completed four acts, 18% completed three acts, 5% completed two acts, and 2% did but one of the five acts of kindness. In total, 943 acts of kindness were done by participants.

### Themes Within Kind Acts

*Analytic methodology.* Qualitative content analysis was used to make meaning of the participants' descriptions of their kind acts and involved a ". . . systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). Conventional content analysis was used to capture the prevalent themes found within participant-generated data. As little empirical work identifying how adolescents enact kindness has been done, this approach offers an advantage over *Direct Content Analysis*, a process that compares participants' responses with previously identified thematic categories found in published research.

Identifying the themes within each of the kind acts done by the participants in this study was done in two stages: First, 20% of the participants' *Kindness Planning* and corresponding *Reflection Sheets* were selected for analysis and were independently reviewed by both the principal investigator and a trained graduate research assistant to identify the global or general themes found within participants' completed kind acts. Next, these global themes were merged across raters and resulted in 36 themes. Using a collaborative winnowing process established by Wolcott (1990), the themes were collapsed to reduce redundancy and resulted in 10 thematic categories (see Table 1). This winnowed list was then used by a graduate research assistant to code all of the kind acts completed by participants.

To examine interrater reliability, a second graduate research assistant coded 20% of the participants' completed kind acts using the 10-item coding matrix described above. These ratings were then compared with the ratings assigned by the first research assistant who coded responses. Between the two independent raters, interrater agreement was high (i.e., 95%) and discrepancies in ratings were reconciled through discussion as is standard when coding participant-generated responses (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

The most prevalent themes found within participants' kind acts included *Helping* (31.7%), *Giving* (21.4%), and *Being Respectful* (16.6%). The category of *Helping* was composed of helping generally (e.g., "Sometimes I'm early to class and I ask my teacher if she needs help"), helping physically (e.g., "A student tripped in gym so I helped him up"), helping emotionally (e.g., "A girl in my class started crying so I led her to the bathroom"), and helping with chores (e.g., "I hate unloading the dishwasher but I'll do it when my mom needs cheering up"). The category of *Giving* was

**Table 1.** Prevalent Themes of Kindness, Examples, and Frequency.

| Themes | Examples | Frequency % (*n*) |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Helping in general | Unspecified helping with no explanation | 2% (18) |
| 1.1 Helping physical | Helping someone to the office who is injured, opening the door for someone on crutches, picking up something that fell on the floor for someone, helping where there is a physical need | 4.8% (45) |
| 1.2 Helping emotional | Supporting someone who is sad, giving someone advice for their problems, calling one's grandparent who is lonely, defending/standing up for someone, helping where there is an emotional need | 1% (9) |
| 1.3 Helping instructional | Helping someone with homework, teaching someone a song on the guitar, helping someone with their basketball skills, helping through teaching in general, helping someone concentrate/stay on-task | 7.3% (69) |
| 1.4 Helping with chores | Doing household chores, doing dishes, setting the table, going grocery shopping, carrying in groceries, making dinner for family, giving dog a bath | 17% (158) |
| 2.1 Giving objects or money | Donating to a charity, buying a friend food, giving someone one's lunch, giving a gift, sharing | 12% (112) |
| 2.2 Giving time | Volunteering one's time, babysitting for one's neighbor, spending time with a friend, fund-raising for a charity, helping local animal shelter/agency, shoveling snow for a neighbor | 9.5% (90) |
| 3. Being friendly | Saying good morning, inviting someone to a movie, smiling at people, having a positive attitude | 12.5% (118) |
| 4. Being respectful | Cooperating, listening, being polite, getting along with one's siblings, not calling names, not teasing, keeping the peace, not be so loud, not being greedy | 16.6% (157) |
| 5. Taking initiative | Doing something for someone without being asked to, offering to help | 1% (12) |
| 6. Encouraging, complimenting, or advocating | Giving a compliment, encouraging a friend | 14.4% (136) |
| 7. Self-directed kindness | Recipient is the student himself or herself, exercising, eating healthy, doing something kind for oneself, work harder at school | 0.05% (4) |
| 8. Protecting the environment | Picking up garbage off the street, planting a tree, cleaning up the school grounds | 1% (9) |
| 9. Unspecified/ generic kindness | Unspecified kindness with no explanation, being kind, being nice | 0.3% (3) |
| 10. Other/ miscellaneous | Themes not fitting into any other category | 0.3% (3) |
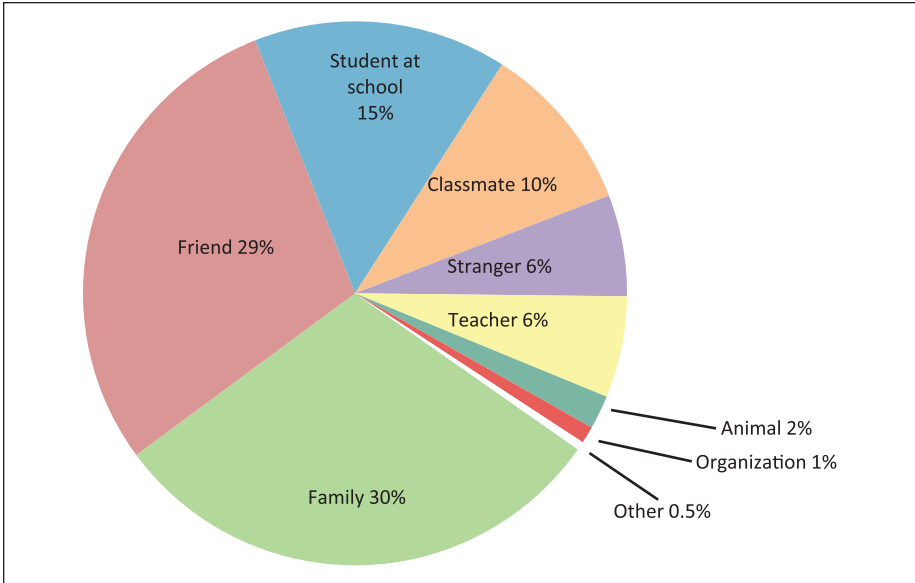
**Figure 1.** Recipients of kindness.

composed of subcategories that included giving objects or money (e.g., "A kid didn't have enough change for the vending machine so I just gave him a quarter") and giving of one's time (e.g., "They needed babysitters for the parent night so I said I'd do it"). No subcategories were identified for the *Being Respectful* category (e.g., "I know saying thank you is important so I say it").

## Gender Differences in Kind Acts

To examine whether boys and girls differed in the themes of the kind acts they planned and completed, a series of analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted. These analyses revealed one significant difference between gender on *being respectful*, with boys reporting significantly more acts of being respectful than did girls, $F(2, 188) = 6.36$, $p = .002$.

## Quality of Kind Acts

As the preparation to organize, and the execution of, kind acts can vary with some kind acts requiring more effort, time, or materials, participants were asked to rate the quality of their kind acts using a Likert-type rating scale ($1 = low$, $2 = medium$, and $3 = high$). On average, participants' self-ratings of the quality of their kind acts were characterized as *medium* ($M$ rating $= 1.93$).

### Recipients of Kindness

For each of their kind acts, participants were asked to identify the recipient. Across participants and across all acts, 80% of participants enacted kindness to familiar individuals known to them (vs. strangers; see Figure 1). Furthermore, only 8% of participants completed their acts of kindness anonymously. Across participants and across all acts of kindness, the most frequent recipients were family member (28%), and friend (28%) and student (15%) in my school.

### Self-Ratings of Kindness

Recall that participants were asked before and after the study to rate both their face-to-face and online kindness using a Likert-type rating scale (1 = *not at all kind*, 5 = *very kind*). A paired-sample *t* test revealed significant increases from pre-test (*M* = 4.10, *SD* = 0.65) to post-test (*M* = 4.30, *SD* = 0.66) in self-reports of face-to-face kindness (*t* = 4.25, *p* = .000). A second paired-sample *t* test revealed significant increases from pre-test (*M* = 4.10, *SD* = 0.84) to post-test (*M* = 4.24, *SD* = 0.80) in self-reports of online kindness (*t* = 2.85, *p* = .005).

## Discussion

A number of key findings emerge from this research that inform both general educators and administrators as well as school psychologists and counselors.

### Relevance to the Practice of School Psychology

First, participant responsiveness or engagement varied across participants. But one third of participants completed all of their five assigned acts of kindness. Perhaps like many school-situated tasks or assignments, students required more direct supervision from their teacher, needed additional convincing that the activity was worthwhile, or the number of kind acts assigned proved too many to do within the space of 1 week. Despite the variability in completion rates across participants, it must not be lost on readers that this applied research resulted in students completing 943 acts of kindness, the bulk of which took place within the school context. This holds positive ramifications for school climate, student-to-student rapport, and student behavior.

Second, there appears to be continuity in the themes prevalent within adolescents' kind acts (e.g., helping, giving, and being respectful) and the themes identified in previous research on kindness in both adolescents and younger participants (Binfet, 2016; Binfet & Passmore, 2019; Cotney & Banerjee, 2019). A curious finding emerging here is the differentiation in how adolescents help others with nuanced ways of helping identified that included helping generally, physically, emotionally, and with household chores. As educators strive to model kindness for students or provide examples of kindness, showcasing examples of such nuanced kind acts might make being kind more accessible to adolescents reticent to show kindness to

others. In addition, the findings here can inform parents and educators, the key reinforcing agents, around how to foster adolescents' prosocial behavior, recognizing the variability in the kind acts done by adolescents.

A third finding revealed that adolescents tend to enact kindness to "known others," individuals with whom they have existing relationships (e.g., family and friends). This has implications for socially disengaged students as they may not be on the receiving end of their classmates' kindness, thus contributing further to their sense of social isolation. This holds ramifications for educators spearheading kindness initiatives in schools who should guide or encourage students to enact kindness to both familiar and unfamiliar others. Further research is needed to ascertain the role kindness plays in fortifying existing, versus establishing new, relationships.

Last, findings arising from this study paint a favorable view of adolescents as kind agents within schools and overall, participants saw themselves as kind, both in their face-to-face and online interactions. This has implications for school-based initiatives seeking to encourage kindness among the study body who may very well respond, "But I'm already kind." Although a brief intervention was used here, the findings suggest that participating in a short kindness activity may boost students' perceptions of themselves as kind.

## Strengths and Limitations

Despite best intentions, the study presented here is not without limitations. Applied research of this nature is complex to conduct. A first limitation is found in the possibility that crossover or spillover effects (Bakker & Demerouti, 2013) may have influenced students' completion rates and the nature of the kind acts they performed. That is, as students did their kind acts, fellow students were likely the recipients of their peers' acts of kindness. This, in turn, could influence the nature of the kind acts done by serving as an example and/or encouraging students to be kind and to complete their kindness assignment. A second limitation is found in the phrasing used to have participants rate the quality of their kind acts as participants may have varied interpretations of how to determine quality (e.g., Is it effort? Is it time invested? Is it amount of materials used?). A third limitation lies in the number of kind acts to be completed within the time frame of 1 week. Prior research (e.g., Layous et al., 2012) asked adolescents to complete three kind acts in 1 week and perhaps the number here was unreasonable vis-à-vis the workload of students. Research exploring the interplay between the quality of kind acts and the number of kind acts done by participants is warranted. Might fewer high-quality acts result in a higher completion rate and have a greater impact on participants?

Certainly, a strength of this study lies in the strong ecological validity of the kindness assignment. Having students plan, complete, and reflect upon five acts of kindness is in strong alignment with curricular objectives found in language arts and humanities for ninth grade students. A second strength of this study is found in the methodology which asked adolescents themselves to reflect upon dimensions of kindness that have received little empirical attention as this is an oft-overlooked component of applied research. Notably, asking participants how kind they are, to whom are

they kind, and thoughts on the quality of their kind acts expands our understanding of kindness and the role it plays in the lives of adolescents.

## Conclusion

Despite these limitations, the findings of this study contribute to our understanding of kindness in adolescence and help answer the questions posed at the outset of this article—How, when asked to be kind, are adolescents kind? Although there are common themes in the acts of kindness done by adolescents, so too is there variability in how adolescents express kindness. The research presented here helps challenge prevailing stereotypes of adolescents as mired in conflict and especially self-focused. The kind acts done by the adolescents in this study and their self-ratings and perspectives on themselves and their kindness encourage parents and educators to consider that adolescents are perhaps kinder than we might think.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

### Funding

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### Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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