

The Kindness Project:

Centering Mental Health and Social Well-Being at the Heart of Early-Childhood Education

Community Partner Presenters

Miriam Boleyn-Fitzgerald

The Kindness Project Co-Director & Mindfulness Coach

Jan Marnocha

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The Kindness Project Co-Director &
Community Early Learning Center Coordinator

Academic Partner

Dr. Sarah Short

Dorothy King Chair in Educational Psychology, UW-Madison
Core Faculty Member for the Center for Healthy Minds





The Kindness Project: Brief Overview of Our Proposed Expansion

- **Goal of the initiative**
- **SDoH addressed**
- **Involvement of impacted community**
- **Number of individuals reached**
- **Plans for sustainability**

The Goal of the Initiative:

The Kindness Project addresses the root causes of two complex and interrelated community problems through our systems-change efforts:

(1) the childcare crisis, which continues to expand and worsen across Wisconsin

(2) the growing mental health care crisis that surpasses our healthcare system's capacity to meet urgent needs

Both of these critical problems negatively affect every single citizen of Wisconsin to some degree, but they disproportionately impact many of our families who are historically overburdened and underserved due to experiences of trauma, poverty, discrimination, and/or other unhealthy life stressors. This harmful process is cyclical and pervasive, as these two statewide problems are upstream drivers that keep families and communities from achieving optimal health.



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Our Proposal Advances this Goal by:

Creating a **statewide system** that connects early-childhood programs, educators, and families through shared training, resources, and support. Examples include:

- **Centralized annual “train the local trainers” model**
- **Quarterly statewide follow-up sessions for local cohorts**
- **Building an online platform to provide ready access to training and support materials**
- **Supplements to the Curriculum developed, updated, and refined based on teacher and parent input**

SDoH Addressed:

Early-Childhood Development and Education (under the Education Access and Quality domain)

- Equitable access to quality early learning = better lifelong health & well-being (Healthy People 2030)
- Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) builds emotional resilience, healthy relationships & long-term success
- Our local research showed strongest gains among children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds
- Quality mindfulness-based interventions prevent and heal trauma and improve health outcomes into adulthood



Statewide Health Challenge Addressed:

The Mental Health Care Crisis

The health challenge motivating us to grow and scale our project beyond our local work is the acute mental health care crisis—due primarily to increasing levels of stress, anxiety, depression, self-harm, suicidal ideation, and suicide deaths among children and adults.



The Kindness Project provides:

- **Calming, trauma-informed SEL tools**
- **Emotionally and physically safe classrooms**
- **Stronger sense of belonging, care, and connection**





Involvement of Impacted Community:

Who Is at the Center of Our Work?

Children, families, and early-childhood professionals – those most impacted by the early-childhood care crisis and those who are building/nurturing our future society.

How Do We Involve Our Community?

Community-engaged research, teacher and parent feedback – parent and teacher advisory committees and working groups, iterative feedback and refinement on training and support, co-creation of content, and policy voice.

Numbers of Individuals Reached:

Current Work

250+ program directors, teachers, and early-childhood professionals trained in immersive summer programs across **eight school districts** and **five counties**

1,500+ children have received the Kindness Curriculum in classrooms

Ongoing Support and Professional Development

Professional development sessions:

- Mindfulness practices**
- Kindness Curriculum booster sessions**
- New staff workshops**

175 teachers and staff receive ongoing support during the school year

Future Expansion Impact

Planned expansion could reach **thousands more children, families, and teachers** across Wisconsin

Development of **online platform** to support school districts, early-childhood professionals, and families **anywhere in the state or world**

Current school partnerships include:

Appleton Area School District (AASD) 4K
AASD Birth-Five Outreach
AASD Title I/Parents as Teachers
Appleton YMCA Child Care
Bridges Child Enrichment Center

Even Start Family Literacy
Fox West YMCA Child Care
FVTC Early-Childhood Ed Program
Kaukauna Tanner Early Learning Center
Menasha Joint School District 3/4K

University Children's Center (UWO-FV)
UWO Head Start CELC
UWO Head Start Menasha
UWO Head Start Seymour
UWO Head Start Shawano
UWO HS Appleton East



Plans for Sustainability:

Transforming Systems for Lasting Change

- Building on demonstrated local success and existing regional and state partnerships to create a **statewide information sharing, training, and support model**, connecting Wisconsin's early-childhood community across distances and systems
- Building an **online platform** to share our training and support materials with EC professionals and parents all over Wisconsin, including supplements to the Kindness Curriculum that we are developing through community-engaged research
- With our academic partner Dr. Sarah Short, **growing the knowledge base about SEL and mental health supports in EC education**, thus shifting the cultural understanding and dialogue and facilitating local, state, and national funding for this work going forward

How Proposed Costs Support Primary Activities

Multi-year budget support through WPP would allow us to fund:

- **Mindfulness training/coaching** to guide development, implementation, and evaluation of program expansion and strengthen fidelity and scalability of SEL integration across systems
- **Community-engaged research** in cooperation with our academic partner, ensuring that content is evidence-based, developmentally appropriate, and culturally responsive
- **Project management** of regional/statewide activities and timelines
- **Training and support materials/travel expenses** to support building and maintaining online platform for broad access; promote consistency and sustainability statewide; and support site visits, statewide trainings, and relationships among partners and school districts

Together, these investments will build lasting systems change by embedding SEL and mental health supports into the professional standards, training, support, schedules, and culture of early-childhood education across Wisconsin.



Addressing Reviewer Feedback:

First, our gratitude to our reviewers for seeing the upstream, preventative nature of our work, as well as its potential for broad and lasting impact across Wisconsin!

Summary of feedback themes for additions/clarifications:

- **What is the exact intervention we have implemented in the Fox Valley?**
- **How do we involve families, teachers, and other stakeholders?**
- **What are our plans for long-term sustainability?**
- **What concrete outcome measures do we already use, and what new outcome measures do we plan to investigate/implement?**



Reviewer Feedback: The Intervention

One reviewer asked:

"I understand [the project is] meant to address EC education crisis and mental health, but what exactly is the intervention? Training for classroom educators? What is the SEL?"



Reviewer Feedback: The Intervention

Teacher training/PD and coaching support:

- Immersive training in the mindfulness-based Kindness Curriculum (developed by UW's Center for Healthy Minds)
- Year-round support, including quarterly "booster" sessions, classroom visits, and one-on-one coaching support
- Regular solicited feedback on preferred support options

Leadership training and coaching support:

- Training, support, and networking sessions for program directors
- Year-round support, including wellness support for staff training days and one-on-one coaching support

Family training and support:

- Parent lessons on emotional self-care and matching children's practices
- "Kindness Kits" with materials for family practice at home



Reviewer Feedback: The Intervention

Evidence for The Kindness Project

- 2017 – Present: **The Kindness Project** began as a local research project looking at a “train the teachers” model that provided SEL and emotional regulation/self-care skills and support for EC teachers and students alike
- The classrooms involved in the research served 3-5-year-olds from diverse backgrounds (our original study population was 65.3% lower socio-economic status, 57.1% non-white)
- After engaging in the Kindness Curriculum, children showed greater improvements in social-emotional skills (e.g., empathy and sharing) and academic skills (Haines, Immel, et al., 2023) as compared to classrooms not receiving the curriculum
- Teachers receiving training and coaching support through **The Kindness Project** reported less stress, improved well-being, and kinder work environments

Reviewer Feedback: The Intervention

Effects of chronic stress...



- Weakened immune system
- Heart disease
- High blood pressure
- High blood sugar
- Digestive issues
- Nerve problems
- Anxiety, depression, headaches

Reviewer Feedback: The Intervention

Health Benefits of Mindfulness

Research shows that regular mindfulness practice:

**lowers
stress
hormones**

**boosts
immunity**

**reduces
anxiety**

**increases
ability to
focus**

**improves
emotion
regulation
skills**



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Reviewer Feedback: The Intervention

Mindfulness Heals Childhood Trauma

“In general populations and trauma-exposed adults, mindfulness interventions have demonstrated reduced depression and anxiety, reduced trauma-related symptoms, enhanced coping and mood, and improved quality of life. Studies in children and youth also demonstrate that mindfulness interventions improve mental, behavioral, and physical outcomes. Taken together, this research suggests that high-quality, structured mindfulness instruction may mitigate the negative effects of stress and trauma related to adverse childhood exposures, improving short- and long-term outcomes, and potentially reducing poor health outcomes in adulthood.”



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Ortiz, R., & Sibinga, E. M. (2017). The role of mindfulness in reducing the adverse effects of childhood stress and trauma. *Children*, 4(3), 16.

Reviewer Feedback: The Intervention

Foundational Mindfulness Practices for KC



Bell Practice

Mindful listening: paying attention on the inside and outside.



Belly Buddies

Mindful breathing: finding a quiet place on the inside and noticing.



Mind Jars

Paying attention to what is going on in our thoughts and how we might slow things down.



Mindful Movement

Taking care of our bodies and minds with gentle, healthy movement.



Listening Walk

Mindful walking, listening, and paying attention to sound and finding a quiet place inside.

Reviewer Feedback: The Intervention

Farah Asghari

Group Program Leader
World Relief Fox Valley



Dagnelis Benjamin Giro

Parent/Student
Even Start Family Literacy Program





Reviewer Feedback: Teacher and Family Involvement

All reviewers expressed the wish to hear more about community involvement and input, with one reviewer elaborating that they would like to see:

“more direct input from parents and early educators who are most affected by this work. Their voice in shaping or adapting the initiative could help ground it even further in lived experience.”



Reviewer Feedback: Teacher and Family Involvement

We actively seek written feedback from teachers, district leaders, program directors, parents and caregivers, and other interested stakeholders at every training/support opportunity and learn from their feedback to refine and expand our offerings for EC professionals and families. This feedback/input process includes:

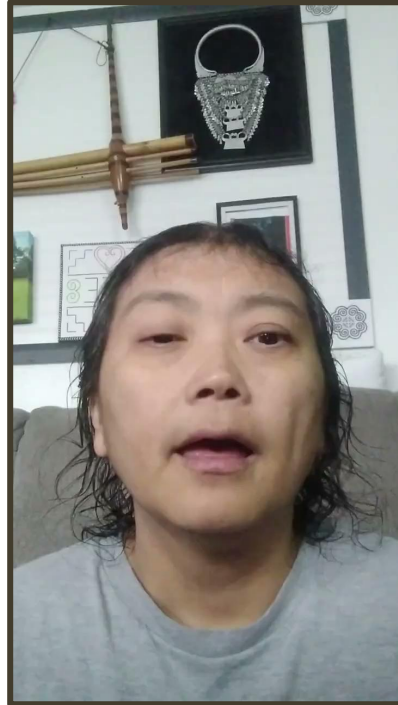
- **Quarterly meetings of our parent and teacher advisory committee**
- **Feedback loops:** Regular input from teachers, parents, and children served
- **Co-creation:** Working groups of teachers and parents develop SEL tools for
 - Younger learners (toddlers and infants)
 - Whole families and caregivers
 - Diverse cultural and learning needs
- **Policy voice:** Parents, teachers, and program directors join roundtable discussions with legislators and state administrators on embedding SEL and mental health in **district and state policies and practices**

Reviewer Feedback: Teacher and Family Involvement

Lee Vue Lee

Infant Teacher

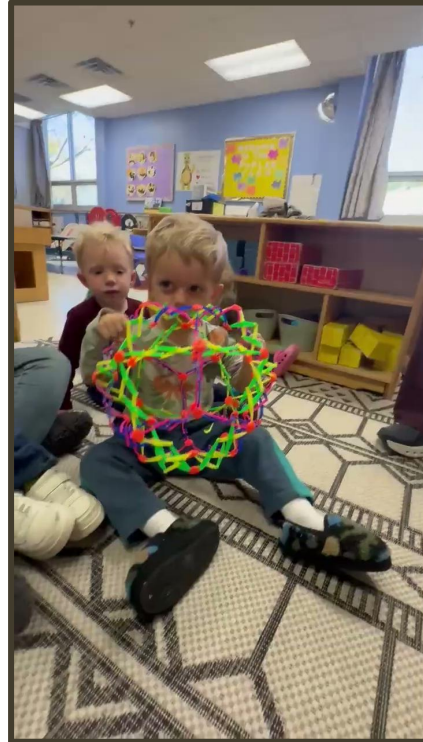
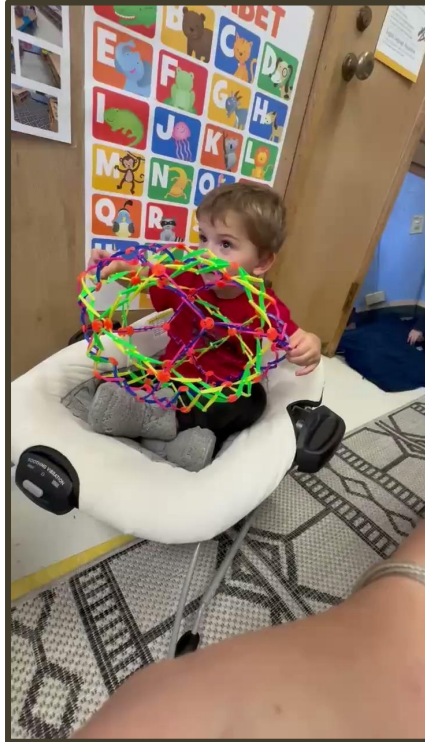
Working Group Member



Reviewer Feedback: Teacher and Family Involvement

Toddler Classroom

Toddlers using the Breathing Ball to self-regulate



Miriam Boleyn-Fitzgerald

Teaching toddler lesson on self-compassion



Bell Practice

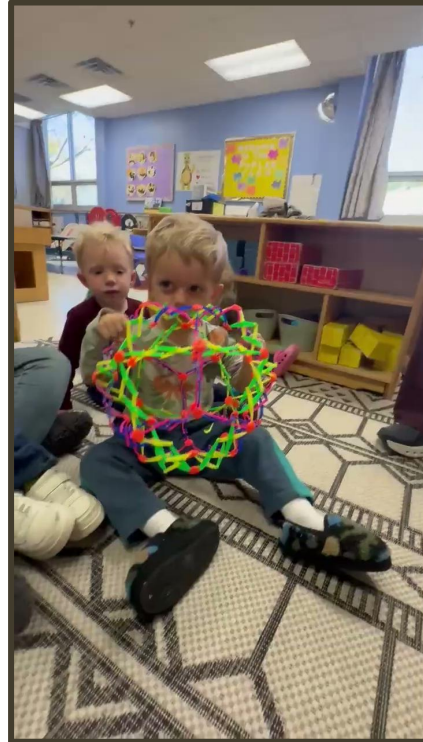
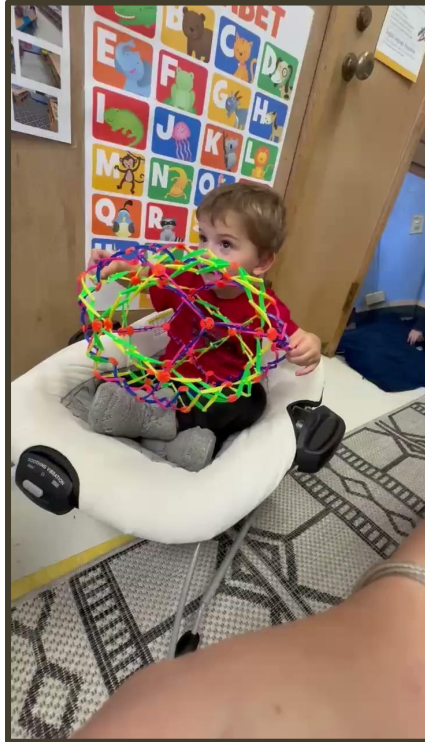
Head Start class using the bell practice



Reviewer Feedback: Teacher and Family Involvement

Toddler Classroom

Toddlers using the Breathing Ball to self-regulate



Miriam Boleyn-Fitzgerald

Teaching toddler lesson on self-compassion



Bell Practice

Head Start class using the bell practice





Reviewer Feedback: Institutional and Financial Sustainability

One reviewer noted:

"The main area for growth is solidifying institutional buy-in and mapping out sustainability in clearer terms. With more definition around long-term funding or policy adoption, this could serve as a replicable model beyond Wisconsin."

The question was asked:

"Are there discussions already happening with DPI or major district partners to ensure continuation?"



Reviewer Feedback: Institutional and Financial Sustainability

District and regional partnerships (existing/developing):

- Appleton Area School District (**existing**)
- Menasha Joint School District (**existing**)
- University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh Head Start Programs (**existing**)
- Fox Valley Technical College Early-Childhood Education Program (**existing**)
- Childcare Resource and Referral (**existing**)
- Administrators from six additional districts across five counties (**developing**)

State partnerships (existing/developing)

- Center for Healthy Minds, University of Wisconsin-Madison (**existing**)
- Healthy Minds Innovations (**existing**)
- PBS Wisconsin (**existing**)
- State senators and assembly members (**existing**)
- Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (**existing**)
- Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (**developing**)

Reviewer Feedback: Institutional and Financial Sustainability

Anne Marie Werley-Gonzalez

Coordinator of Title I and II, Staff Development,
Educator Effectiveness, Even Start Family Literacy
Appleton Area School District



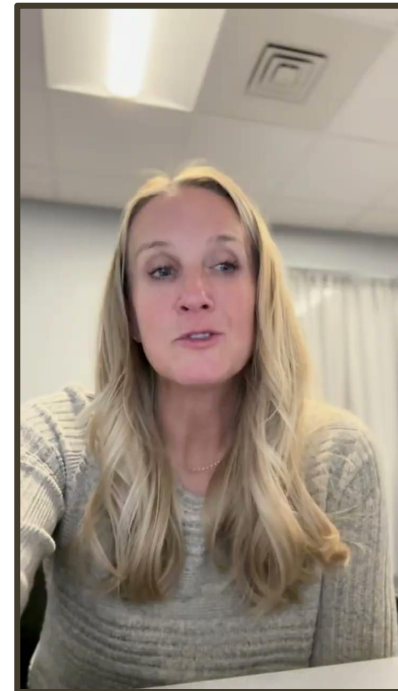
Mark McQuade

Assistant Superintendent–
Assessment, Curriculum, and Instruction
Appleton Area School District



Sarah Holtz

Early Learning Coordinator
Menasha Joint School District





Reviewer Feedback: Institutional and Financial Sustainability

In addition to the strong community and state partnerships highlighted above, the Kindness Project has been asked by **ThedaCare Community Health** to **lead a regional (NE Wisconsin) SEL task force** that will investigate how best to embed evidence-based SEL in community practices, priorities, and regulations, because research shows that:

- Quality, evidence-based SEL in early childhood lays the groundwork for future mental health and overall wellbeing, and
- Upstream, prevention-based initiatives address mental health at its foundation—in early-childhood (EC) classrooms and family systems—before challenges escalate into crises.



Reviewer Feedback: Concrete Outcome Measures

One reviewer noted that:

“Concrete outcome measurements may be helpful to assess progress, although [the project] seems iterative with qualitative feedback. ”



Reviewer Feedback: Concrete Outcome Measures

Teachers and Early-Childhood Professionals

- Validated mindfulness questionnaire and stress surveys (start/end of school year)
- Kindness Curriculum Classroom Impact form each spring
- Feedback from summer training and booster sessions to tailor ongoing support
- Established annual teacher support survey
- Participation in advisory committee meetings and working groups

Parents and Caregivers

- Kindness Curriculum Impact form to track SEL skills in real life
- Feedback from Mindfulness for Parents sessions to guide future planning
- Participation in advisory committee meetings and working groups

Continuous Improvement

- Using collected data to evaluate, reflect, and enhance all programs

Reviewer Feedback: Concrete Outcome Measures

Perceived Stress Scale form

CAMS-R form

	Rarely/Not at all	Sometimes	Often	Almost always
1. It is easy for me to concentrate on what I am doing.	☐	☐	☐	☐
2. I am preoccupied by the future.	☐	☐	☐	☐
3. I can tolerate emotional pain.	☐	☐	☐	☐
4. I can accept things I cannot change.	☐	☐	☐	☐
5. I can usually describe how I feel at the moment in considerable detail.	☐	☐	☐	☐
6. I am easily distracted by the past.	☐	☐	☐	☐
7. I am preoccupied by the past.	☐	☐	☐	☐
8. It's easy for me to keep track of my thoughts and feelings.	☐	☐	☐	☐
9. I try to notice my thoughts without judging them.	☐	☐	☐	☐
10. I am able to accept the thoughts and feelings I have.	☐	☐	☐	☐
11. I am able to focus on the present moment.	☐	☐	☐	☐
12. I am able to pay close attention to one thing for a long period of time.	☐	☐	☐	☐

Perceived Stress Scale

The questions in this scale ask you about your feelings and thoughts during the last month. In each case, you will be asked to indicate by circling how often you felt or thought a certain way.

Name _____ Date _____

Age _____ Gender (Circle): ☐ M ☐ F ☐ Other _____

0 = Never 1 = Almost Never 2 = Sometimes 3 = Fairly Often 4 = Vary Often

- In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly? 0 1 2 3 4
- In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life? 0 1 2 3 4
- In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and "stressed"? 0 1 2 3 4
- In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems? 0 1 2 3 4
- In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way? 0 1 2 3 4
- In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do? 0 1 2 3 4
- In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life? 0 1 2 3 4
- In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things? 0 1 2 3 4
- In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that were outside of your control? 0 1 2 3 4
- In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them? 0 1 2 3 4

Please feel free to use the Perceived Stress Scale for your research. The PSS Manual is in the process of development, please let us know if you are interested in contributing.

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References
The PSS Scale is reprinted with permission of the American Sociological Association, from Cohen, S., Kamarck, T., and Mermelstein, R. (1983). A global measure of perceived stress. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 24, 385-396.

Even Start Parent Class feedback form

Evaluation of Kindness/Mindfulness Lessons (taught by Miriam)

Names of children in Even Start classes: _____

1. How helpful were the kindness classes?

If they were helpful, what was helpful about them? Please describe in a few words:

Not helpful 0 1 2 3 4 Very helpful

2. Would you like to learn more about self-care and mindfulness?

If yes, what ideas and topics would you like to learn more about? Please describe in a few words:

Yes No

3. How often do you do kindness/mindfulness activities at home?

If you do kindness/mindfulness activities at home, what works best for you and your family? Please describe in a few words:

Never 0 1 2 3 4 Often



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Reviewer Feedback: Concrete Outcome Measures

Pre- and post-measure training/support session form

Kindness Project Booster Session - Reflection
(Check in/Check out)

Program: _____ Role: _____ Date: _____

Please take a moment to check in before we begin our time together. Using a scale of 1-5, 1 being stressed/unregulated and 5 being peaceful/self-regulated, please observe how you are doing today.

As I BEGIN this offering I feel...

1 2 3 4 5

As I END this offering I feel...

1 2 3 4 5

1. How helpful was today's session? 0 1 2 3 4
If it was helpful, what was helpful about it? Please describe in a few words:

2. Would you like to learn more about self-care and mindfulness? Yes No
If yes, what ideas/topics would you like to learn more about? Please describe in a few words:

3. Please rate the effectiveness of the session instruction. 0 1 2 3 4
Feel free to include written comments:

4. Take a moment to reflect on today's session.
What do you feel is important to remember; to bring into your life, personally/professionally?

Post-measure for leadership training form

Leadership Training Feedback

Please take a moment to answer the following questions regarding our training. Your answers will be very important to our future planning and outreach. Thank you very much!

Image title

 **the kindness project**

How helpful was today's session in teaching you about The Kindness Project and what we do? *

Not helpful 1 2 3 4 5 Very helpful

Please describe in a sentence why you rated it this way. *

Long answer text

Take a moment to reflect on today's session. What is something that stood out to you about the Kindness Project? *

Long answer text

How do you see your program implementing the Kindness Curriculum or any of the elements you learned about today? *

Long answer text

Please feel free to share any additional comments or questions below. *

Kindness Curriculum parent feedback form



Date: _____ Parent's Name: _____ Child's Name: _____

Gender of child: _____ Is your child... (Circle One): A Toddler In Preschool In 4K

We value your feedback and any examples you can share about how your child was impacted by The Kindness Curriculum in their classrooms. Thank you for taking the time to complete. Please return to your child's teacher.

1. How often does your child talk about things they learned in the Kindness Curriculum (e.g., kindness to others, the earth)?
Circle One: Never Rarely Sometimes Often Very Often
If your child talks about the Kindness Curriculum, can you share any examples of what they have talked about?

2. Since beginning the Kindness Curriculum, have you seen your child use mindfulness/kindness activities at home (e.g., "mind jar")?
Circle One: Never Rarely Sometimes Often Very Often
If your child uses mindfulness/kindness activities at home, can you share any examples of what you have seen them do?

3. Since beginning the Kindness Curriculum, how often do you see your child display kindness to others or kindness to you (e.g., hold doors for others, pick up trash from the floor)?
Circle One: Never Rarely Sometimes Often Very Often
If you have seen your child display kindness to others or kindness to you, please tell us about it:

4. Have you noticed any changes in your child's behavior since they have participated in the Kindness Curriculum (e.g., calms down faster, sits still longer)?
Circle One: Not at all Slightly Moderately Considerably A great deal
If yes, please tell us about things you have noticed:



Reviewer Feedback: Concrete Outcome Measures

Community-engaged research has taught us that stakeholders want:

- Simplified lessons for younger learners (currently under development)
- Expanded support materials (currently available)
- Additional supplements for families and diverse learning needs
- Connections between EC SEL skills and early-elementary grades

What we want to measure looking forward, based on what we have learned from eight years of teacher and parent feedback:

- How the benefits (academic, prosocial-emotional) we see in early childhood track into later years, including health outcomes for childhood trauma
- How increased teacher well-being/satisfaction tracks to teacher retention
- How children's improved SEL skills map to family dynamics and relational measures, especially in light of new data that our children and teens are feeling less connected, less sense of belonging



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Reviewer Feedback: Concrete Outcome Measures

Dr. Sarah Short

Dorothy King Chair in Educational Psychology, UW-Madison
Core Faculty Member for the Center for Healthy Minds

Video clip of Sarah discussing new longitudinal measures



What would a multi-year Community Impact Grant from WPP mean to the future of our work?

WPP funds would substantially expand our intervention's impact by:

- Extending our reach with **regional and statewide initiatives**
- Driving **systems change** centered on mental health, emotional resilience, and strong relationships
- Mitigating the impact of **federal funding cuts** on schools and state partners
- Enabling **innovative, integrated learning** across the state
- Building **institutional stability** for sustained quality in early-childhood education
- Positioning our work for **long-term, meaningful impact**
- Creating **future funding opportunities** by building a **greater evidence base**



Thank you for your kind attention!



Sophia
Schultz

Miriam
Boleyn-
Fitzgerald

Jan
Marnocha

Dr. Sarah
Short

Marta
Statz



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Our whole team together!

The 2024 national Interactivity Conference, hosted by the Association of Children's Museums (ACM) in partnership with the Madison Children's Museum, took place in Madison, Wisconsin in May 2024. **The Kindness Project team** and **Dr. Sarah Short** were invited to present to staff from all over the U.S. at UW's Center for Healthy Minds using practices from the Kindness Curriculum.

