

## Chapter 4

# It's Nice to Be Nice: The Building Blocks for Promoting Kindness and Gratitude

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### ABSTRACT

*Kindness and gratitude are important when teaching children about positive interpersonal relationships. Every day in the United States bullying occurs because of negative influences children contend with in their lives. Parents, teachers, and peers can promote healthy interactions within groups of children through positive reciprocity of emotions and behaviors. This chapter explains how kindness is described as the motivational act of doing a positive behavior for another person; gratitude is described as the highly needed emotion for social and emotional functioning in humans that drive the kind behaviors. Children who practice kindness based on gratitude have better overall happiness outcomes and healthier interpersonal relationships.*

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on acts of kindness and feelings of gratitude in children. Two social problems are described in this chapter, which include bullying between peers and interpersonal distance between peers. These problems result from a lack of understanding related to the feelings of kindness and gratitude in children. This chapter describes how kindness is the solution to the bullying problem. Kindness is explained in four sections each of which gives the definition of kindness, explains why kindness is important, explains how children understand kindness, and describes ways in which to cultivate kindness in children. The next problem is interpersonal distance between peers and the solution involves expressing gratitude between and within children. Gratitude is explained in four sections each of which provides the definition of gratitude, explains why gratitude is important, explains how children understand gratitude, and describes ways in which to cultivate gratitude in children. The final section of this chapter describes the relationship between kindness and gratitude and explains how self-regulation in children can be learned to create healthier and happier children. The objective of this chapter is to help adults teach children how to understand and cultivate kindness and gratitude to reach the end goal of happiness.

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## **BACKGROUND**

Recent studies have found that children who engage in kind activities will develop a sense of gratitude and stronger interpersonal relationships. Psychology tends to study negative human behaviors and emotions more than positive human behaviors and emotions, so knowledge about kindness and gratitude is lacking (Watkins, Woodward, Stone & Kolts, 2003). Previous studies focused on individuals receiving and re-paying gestures of kindness, while more recent studies focus more on the interpersonal connections that kindness creates and how the emotional feelings of gratitude can positively benefit individuals on the whole (Algoe, 2008). Past research on gratitude focused on the acts of kindness that were offered based on the appraisal of the recipient in the giver's eyes. Researchers in more recent studies tend to look at the individual's acts of kindness and how feelings of gratitude can amount to genuine interconnectedness and community building (Algoe, 2008).

## **MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER**

### **Promoting Kindness**

#### **What Is Kindness?**

Kindness can be described as the feeling of acting in a friendly or nice way to another. This is also the motivational act of conducting a behavior or acting in a way that is based on the relational circumstances one child has with another individual. For instance, a child can act in a kind way by helping someone with a problem or holding a door open for an elderly citizen. According to studies on kindness in relation to children, there are five reasons for a child to be kind or do a kind act, based on motivational circumstances or internal feelings of kindness and generosity (Baldwin & Baldwin, 1970).

The first act of kindness involves a child doing something solely for the benefit of the other person. This may include a child noticing another child on the playground without any toys, so the child brings his or her own toys over so the other child can play with them. The original (giving) child does not attain any reward and was not obligated to share; this is considered an intrinsically motivated act of kindness. The second act of kindness may come when a child is lacking other choices, or does not have any other choices but to be kind; in this case, there is no motivation or benefit to the original child. An example of this could be when a child shares his or her favorite blanket with a sibling only because they are sharing a bed and there are no other blankets for the sibling to use. A third reason for a kind act is when a child is asked to do something by an adult or authority figure; for example, a child may share his or her toys with a friend because the parents of the child told him or her to do so. In this case, there are no other options because the child does not have the autonomy to make another choice. The fourth act of kindness arises when a child gleans a benefit or reward after completing the act; in this instance, the act is extrinsic, so the child will reap some external benefit after the act is completed. An example of this, is a child swapping toys with another child during play time, just so the original child can play with the other child's toys that he or she has his or her eyes on. This act does look to be kind on the outside, because the other child is given the opportunity to play with the original child's toys, as well. The fifth and final act of kindness occurs when a children complete an action because they believe it is expected

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