



# USING KINDNESS ACTIVITIES TO PROMOTE POSITIVE SOCIAL INTERACTIONS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

A CSCH Brief by Breanna McFarlane

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## How Kindness Connects to Emotional Well-being

Kindness is an act that is selfless in nature and intentionally aims to positively affect another person.<sup>1</sup> Two types of kindness are organized acts of kindness, which are gestures whose content and context are planned of time, and random acts of kindness, which are actions whose specific content and context are not known ahead of time.<sup>1</sup> Whether an act of kindness is organized or random in nature, it can build empathy within the giver and create a “we-centric” perspective in social environments.<sup>1</sup> Empathy and community are important to healthy emotional development during early adolescence as the trials of puberty and social reconfiguration can leave students susceptible to social isolation, emotional insecurity, and victimization.

Performing an act of kindness allows a student to share a positive experience with their peer, increasing their awareness of others’ emotions and experiences. A single act of kindness can grow into Consistent Acts of Kindness and Empathy (CAKE), a conscious decision to consistently carryout kind acts to others as a result of having an empathic stance towards everyone.<sup>1</sup> The presence of kindness, through a CAKE approach, is crucial to fostering a positive school climate in middle schools as it increases the connectedness and social support between students, improving their socio-emotional experiences in school.

## Using Kindness Activities to Promote Positive Social Interactions

With the social atmosphere of middle school being particularly influential on the students’ social and academic development,<sup>2</sup> it is important that students have a sense of belonging and social support as these two aspects can strengthen student engagement in social settings.

Studies have found that students who partake in kind acts are more likely to experience peer acceptance<sup>3</sup> and have empathetic feelings towards others. In turn, students who experience empathy are more likely to independently engage in random acts of kindness and pro-relational behaviors.<sup>4</sup> This circular relationship between acting kind and feeling empathetic highlights the long-term benefit of establishing a positive environment of kindness and belongingness as students become more inclined to engage in kind acts and spread kindness.

Therefore, students need to be provided with continuous opportunities to commit kind acts in order to develop internal motivation to do it independently, have an empathetic foundation for their future interactions, and create meaningful connections with one another.

Students who are encouraged to empathize with others tend to have vicarious emotional responses that reflect the positive or negative state of their peers.<sup>4</sup> In middle schools, students are 48% more likely to help, give, or be respectful towards those who they consider friendly faces.<sup>5</sup> Thus, it is important that teachers establish student peers and school faculty as warm and approachable acquaintances and friends to their student.

## Example Activities for Fostering Kindness and Empathy

Activity	Steps	Potential Benefits
Kindness Board	On a bulletin board, leave markers for students to write a kind act that they did for someone or was done for them.	Students will be able to reflect on how they feel when they engage in or are the recipient of a kind act.
Schoolwide Kindness Challenge	Each classroom works together as a team to complete kind acts in the school and throughout the community. Incentives can be provided for specific numbers of kind acts that are done.	Students will be able to see the impact that widespread kindness can have on their emotional wellbeing, friendships, school, and community.
Kindness Jar	Fill a jar with positive stick notes that students can take when they are feeling down or need of some encouragement.	Students will be able to use the kindness jar as an alternative resource for immediate social support.
Kind Acts Bucket List	On pre-design paper, students will write down 10 kind acts that they plan to do for others before the end of the school year.	Students will develop a long-term commitment of being intentionally kind and empathetic towards others.

<sup>1</sup> Passmore, J., & Oades, L. G. (2015). Positive psychology techniques - Random acts of kindness and consistent acts of kindness and empathy. *The Coaching Psychologist*, 11, 90–92. Retrieved from <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=psyh&AN=2016-09103-004&site=ehost-live>

<sup>2</sup> Kim, H. Y., Schwartz, K., Cappella, E., Seidman, E., & Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness (SREE). (2014). *Navigating Middle Grades: Role of School Context in Students' Social Adaptation and Experiences*. Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness. Retrieved from <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=ED562784&site=ehost-live>

<sup>3</sup> Layous, K., Nelson, S. K., Oberle, E., Schonert-Reichl, K. A., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2012). Kindness counts: prompting prosocial behavior in preadolescents boosts peer acceptance and well-being. *PLoS one*, 7, e51380. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0051380

<sup>4</sup> Andreychik, M. R., & Migliaccio, N. (2015). Empathizing With Others' Pain Versus Empathizing With Others' Joy: Examining the Separability of Positive and Negative Empathy and Their Relation to Different Types of Social Behaviors and Social Emotions. *Basic & Applied Social Psychology*, 37, 274–291. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01973533.2015.1071256>

<sup>5</sup> Binfet, J.-T., & Whitehead, J. (2019). The Effect of Engagement in a Kindness Intervention on Adolescents' Well-Being: A Randomized Controlled Trial. *International Journal of Emotional Education*, 11(2), 33–49. Retrieved from <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ1236238&site=ehost-live>