

# Children's Conceptualizations of Kindness at School

John-Tyler Binfet and Amy Gaertner

**John-Tyler Binfet** is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Education and director of the B.A.R.K. (Building Retention through K9s) program at the University of British Columbia Okanagan. His research focuses on the social and emotional well-being of students, with an emphasis on conceptualizations of kindness within school contexts. Email: johntyler.binfet@ubc.ca

**Amy Gaertner** is a primary teacher in School District No. 23 (Central Okanagan). Her graduate work at UBC Okanagan (M.Ed., 2014) focused on understanding how young students understand kindness at school. Her work has been presented at the Early Years Conference (2014) and the annual meeting of the Association for Moral Education (2015).

This study investigated perceptions of kindness in 112 young children (57 girls, 55 boys, ages 5–8) in three schools. To assess perceptions of kindness, students were asked to draw what kindness looked like to them and to draw an example of something kind done recently at school. Findings indicated students perceived kindness within the context of dyadic relationships, the recipients of kindness were familiar to them, and kind acts were typically situated outdoors; helping physically, maintaining friendships, including others, and helping emotionally were prevalent themes within drawings. Boys drew acts of kindness as helping physically more frequently than did girls, whose drawings indicated kindness as maintaining family relationships. Findings are discussed within the context of positive education and the promotion of prosocial behaviour.

**Keywords:** curriculum; hermeneutics; play (spiel); teacher education; transcultural

## The Art of Kindness

Being kind or acting kindly toward others is a trait held in high regard by parents and teachers alike as the educational landscape shifts from a singular focus on academics to the inclusion of instruction in social and emotional competencies (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Educators increasingly recognize that students lack the requisite intra- and interpersonal skills needed for social and academic success (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000; Spivak & Farran, 2012). Certainly, there is much discussion around how to promote social and emotional competencies among students, including prosocial behaviour, yet remarkably little is known about students' perceptions of what constitutes prosocial behaviour, especially kindness. In effect, kindness is a psychological construct garnering much lay attention yet little empirical attention because the focus in schools has been on the prevention of bullying (Pryce & Fredrickson, 2013; Smith, Schneider, Smith, & Ananiadou, 2004). In spite of this lack of attention, kindness remains an important and valued trait in Western society. This importance is reflected in how kindness is ranked vis-à-vis other character strengths, with

kindness consistently identified as one of the top-ranking character strengths valued by participants across studies, outranking traits such as honesty, gratitude, and hope (Karris & Craighead, 2012; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). Despite the importance of cultivating kindness, there is a dearth of work examining how students understand kindness. This study sought to determine how young students conceptualize kindness and to identify examples of kindness done at school.

The paucity of work investigating kindness is in stark contrast to findings at the opposite end of the behavioural spectrum—bullying. Despite all the attention paid to reducing bullying, meta-analytic findings by Smith and colleagues (Smith, Schneider, Smith, & Ananiadou, 2004) and as argued by others (e.g., Pryce & Fredrickson, 2013), whole-school anti-bullying programs have not resulted in significant reductions of self-reports of bullying and victimization. As the tide shifts from bullying to the promotion of prosocial behaviours in schools, researchers have posited that “a lack of caring and sharing the values and feelings of others was most related to direct and indirect bullying” (Munoz, Qualter, & Padgett, 2011, p. 192). This view is in alignment with researchers who argue that empathy plays a key role in children's interactions, lays the foundation for both prosocial behaviour and social relationships, and contributes to reduced aggression (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Hymel, Schonert-Reichl, Bonanno, Vaillancourt, & Henderson, 2010; Schonert-Reichl, 1993). In their review of findings examining the relation between bullying and empathy, Hymel and colleagues (2010) concluded: “Taken together, studies to date generally support the notion that children who bully, especially boys, report lower levels of both cognitive and affective empathy” (p. 105). Certainly, the promotion of prosocial behaviour such as kindness in schools through programs aimed at fostering empathy and perspective taking in students is often an attempt to reduce the frequency of bullying-related behaviours. The understanding here is that children who display high levels of kind behaviour are likely to engage in less aggressive behaviour, leading to reduced interpersonal conflict. Thus, in a time of rampant anti-bullying programs and campaigns, the promotion

of kindness may be considered one means of countering bullying in school. Extending the bullying-kindness comparison further, an examination of the number of publications addressing kindness and those addressing bullying as well as an examination of how bullying is defined holds potential to inform our understanding of kindness.

### Bullying as a Pathway to Understanding Kindness

A search of the most widely used databases in education (i.e., ERIC, Education Source, and International ERIC), in psychology (i.e., PsycInfo and Web of Science), and in searching general academic topics (i.e., Academic Search Complete and Google Scholar) for peer-reviewed publications containing either the word kindness or the word bullying in the title reveals a marked discrepancy in the number of articles published (see Table 1). When findings are examined collectively across databases for the last 10 years (i.e., 2004–2014) a clear pattern is evident, with one kindness article published for every 28 articles published on bullying.

**Table 1**

**Number of Kindness and Bullying Articles Published, By Database (2004–2014)**

Database	Kindness	Bullying	Ratio
Education			
ERIC	14	821	1:58
International ERIC	1	94	1:47
Education Source	53	1,503	1:28
Psychology			
PsycInfo	64	2,011	1:31
Web of Science	218	2,522	1:11
General			
Google Scholar	1,120*	13,200*	1:11*
Academic Search Complete	172	1,966	1:11
Mean			1:28

In contrast to kindness, much is known about bullying, as it is a well-researched human behaviour (Berger, 2007). The definition of bullying contains multiple characteristics or qualifiers, including the following: (1) bullying is a form of peer aggression; (2) the negative actions comprising bullying are intentional; and (3) there is a power imbalance between bullies and victims (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanan, 2014; Olweus, 1993; Thomas, Connor, & Scott, 2014). Further, these intentionally aggressive or negative actions are repeatedly carried out over time (Olweus, 2013). Bullying may take several forms, including physical, verbal, relational, or electronic (i.e., cyber bullying; Hymel et al., 2010). Might our understanding of the definition of bullying hold potential to inform a definition of kindness?

The study of kindness is theoretically grounded in social and emotional learning (SEL; Schonert-Reichl & Weissberg, 2014; Zins et al., 2004), positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and positive education (Seligman, Earnst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). The field of social and emotional learning provides a theoretical framework for the current investigation because kindness is situated within several, if not all, of the cognitive, affective, and behavioural competencies comprising SEL (i.e., relationship skills, social awareness, self-management, self-awareness, and responsible decision making; Collaborative for Academic and Social and Emotional Learning, 2015). Positive psychology and positive education in particular also theoretically support the current study as teachers increasingly shift from viewing children from a model based on “What’s wrong and needs fixing?” to “What are the strengths and positive attributes of the learners I teach?”

Kindness may be viewed within the context of the larger overarching term *prosocial behaviour*, and although few definitions of kindness have been published to date, there has been ample research examining prosocial behaviour in children (Eisenberg, 1986; Eisenberg, Guthrie, Murphy, Shepard, Cumberland, & Carlo, 1999; Layous et al., 2012; Malti & Krettenauer, 2013; Nantel-Vivier et al., 2009; Solomon et al., 1988). Eisenberg and colleagues (1999) defined prosocial behaviour as “voluntary behavior intended to benefit another” (p. 1360). As an illustration of this definition, these authors provided examples of prosocial behaviour within the contexts of preschool

and elementary school. At preschool, prosocial behaviour takes the form of sharing, helping, and offering comfort. At the elementary level, donating and helping were identified as examples of prosocial behaviour.

Although kindness has not yet been well researched as a distinct construct, the underlying dimensions impacting kindness have been identified. Campos and Algoe (2009) present kindness as “an emotion-based motivation that promotes prosocial behaviour without the expectation of a reciprocal benefit” (p. 551). These authors view kindness as promoting prosocial behaviour and as fostering social relationships and social networks. Although Campos and Algoe (2009) see kindness within the context of prosocial behaviour and as the catalyst for social interactions, Lamborn, Fischer, and Pipp (1994) see kindness as a value influenced by individual perspective-taking abilities. These authors view kindness as developmental in nature, with young children emphasizing the concrete dimensions of actions from an egocentric viewpoint. As children mature, their understanding of kindness becomes increasingly differentiated, with increased awareness of the intentions underlying actions.

### Defining Kindness

Despite previous calls to increase our understanding of kindness, little empirical work has been undertaken since Comunian (1998) remarked that “a review of theoretical and empirical literature suggests there has not been much research on kindness as a cognitive development construct” (pp. 1351–1352). One plausible reason accounting for both the absence of a clear definition of kindness and the variability in how kindness has previously been defined likely lies in the varied terms used to refer to kindness, which include prosocial behaviour, compassion, altruism, caring, and helping. Peterson and Seligman (2004) argue that these terms, along with generosity and nurturance, share a common orientation of the “self toward the other” (p. 326).

Although terms such as prosocial behaviour, altruism, and compassion are well-referenced in educational and psychological literature, the concept of kindness as a distinct construct appears relatively infrequently. Curiously, few authors offer definitions of kindness and few studies have empirically investigated kindness from students’ perspectives. Even publications with the term *kindness* in their title frequently fail to operationally define kindness (e.g., Andersen et al., 2008; Batson et al., 1978; Isen & Levin, 1972; Schachter, 2011; Zeece, 2009).

Seminal research by Baldwin and Baldwin (1970) defined kindness as a “motivation that is sometimes inferred from the fact that one person benefits another” (p. 30). Long (1997) asserted that “kindness is a behavior driven by the feeling of compassion” and that when we “act on this feeling of compassion in a helpful and caring way, this behavior becomes an act of kindness” (p. 243). According to Long, kindness manifests in the form of an action driven by an underlying feeling. This underlying feeling, or empathic response, is closely related to kindness and is often a strong motive in eliciting kindness. Eisenberg and Fabes (1998) defined empathy as an emotional reaction in response to another’s emotional state and posited that an individual’s empathic reaction lays the foundation for subsequent prosocial behaviour, including kindness. Smith (1986) described compassion, caring, and helping as comprising “kindness skills” that children learn during childhood (p. 49).

Despite the varied terms used to refer to kindness, definitions of kindness have nevertheless been proffered. Peterson and Seligman (2004) defined kindness as describing “the pervasive tendency to be nice to other people—to be compassionate and concerned about their welfare, to do favors for them, to perform good deeds, and to take care of them” (p. 296). Building on her definition of prosocial behaviour, Eisenberg (1986) specified kindness as “voluntary, intentional behaviors that benefit another and are not motivated by external factors such as rewards or punishments” (p. 63). Peterson and Seligman (2004) see kindness as “doing favors and good deeds for others” (p. 29), while Cataldo (1984) defined it as “an assertion of self that is positive in feeling and intention” (p. 17). Layous et al. (2012) define a kind act as “an activity that promotes positive relationships” (p. 1). Otake and colleagues (2006) interpret kindness as “enacting kind behavior toward other people” (p. 362). More recently, context-specific definitions of kindness have emerged with terms such as *cyber civility* and *cyber kindness* appearing in the literature (Cassidy, Brown, & Jackson, 2011; 2012). The above definitions of kindness are adult interpretations and fail to consider the understandings and perspectives of the child. How do children conceptualize kindness?

### Accessing Conceptualizations of Kindness

There has been a call to involve children in research and to elicit children’s understandings and perspectives as a means to better understand topics of interest to researchers (Christensen & James, 2000; Einarsdottir, Dockett, & Perry, 2009). Using drawing to access children’s perceptions of lived experiences is gaining popularity across varied research disciplines (Einarsdottir et al., 2009; Freeman & Mathison, 2009; Mathison, 2014). Drawing is a familiar activity for children, helping to create a comfortable research context in which to collect data. The drawing context is also nonconfrontational in that children can focus on drawing, rather than making eye

contact or directly interacting with the researcher (Einarsdottir et al., 2009). In these respects, the drawing method allows researchers to gather information from young children using a nonthreatening and developmentally appropriate approach (Weber, Duncan, Dyehouse, Strobel, & Diefes-Dux, 2011).

The use of drawings has proven to be an effective means of eliciting young students' conceptualizations of various social and psychological constructs (Mitchell, 2011). Although the drawings themselves are important because they pictorially illustrate and emphasize various dimensions of concepts being studied from the child's perspective, the interpretation of children's drawings by adults must be undertaken with caution because adult perspectives and interpretations can be markedly different from those of children (Bosacki, Harwood, & Sumaway, 2012; Yurtal & Artut, 2010). It has been argued that children's interpretations of their drawings are necessary (Stanczak, 2007) and that assurances to capture these interpretations must be incorporated into data collection methodology.

The term *drawing-telling* refers to the combined task of drawing while engaging in conversation (Einarsdottir et al., 2009; Wright, 2007). This combined task is often one that is naturally undertaken by children as they discuss their picture in words while simultaneously drawing. Mitchell (2011) posits that allowing participants to add captions to their drawings "expands the visual data" (p. 124). Drawing helps children "capture meanings beyond words, but words can help situate the expressive meaning of the drawing within a specific framework and context" (Freeman & Mathison, 2009, p. 127). Thus, drawing and telling are intertwined in the meaning-making process. Einarsdottir et al. (2009) reaffirm that "drawings and the accompanying narrative are not separate entities—both are integral parts of the meaning-making process" (p. 219). According to Freeman and Mathison (2009), "drawing as a mode of sense making and representation offers different possibilities than talk alone does" (p. 113). Drawing provides a different way to listen to a child's perspectives, rather than relying solely on verbal language. However, the drawing method is strengthened when it is used in conjunction with a verbal explanation or interview.

Current research using drawings to capture students' perspectives and understandings of social and psychological constructs appears to favour a focus on negative constructs such as teasing (Bosacki et al., 2012), violence in school (Yurtal & Artut, 2010), and bullying (Andreou & Bonoti, 2009). There is both a lack of empirical investigation of positive constructs such as kindness, certainly from students' perspectives, and an absence of research using drawing as a means of accessing students' views of kindness. Analyses of students' drawings provide researchers with rich insight into children's views and perceptions of social and educational phenomena.

Bosacki et al. (2012) highlight the difference between coding for pictorial depictions (e.g., objects found within drawings) versus coding for subject matter content, which can be affiliated with emotion or affect (e.g., teasing, bullying, sharing). The distinction between these two elements of a child's drawing requires thoughtful consideration in the coding process. A child's drawing is not just merely concrete objects or people in isolation, but can contain subtle, or even overt, messages about perceptions illustrated through the interaction of the objects, people, or objects and people together.

There is currently a lack of research investigating how school-age children understand kindness. The aims of the present study were twofold: (1) to identify how early-grade students conceptualize kindness; and (2) to identify examples of students being kind at school. In doing so, this study holds potential to inform parents and educators interested in promoting kindness within school contexts.

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants were 112 kindergarten through second grade students recruited from seven classrooms in three elementary schools (mean class size was 18, range = 17–24) in a small, middle-class, western Canadian city. Twenty-eight percent of the participants were in kindergarten ( $n = 31$ ), 30% were in first grade ( $n = 34$ ), and 42% were in second grade ( $n = 47$ ). Fifty-one percent of the sample was girls ( $n = 57$ ,  $M = 5$  years, 9 months,  $SD = .91$ ; boys,  $n = 55$ ,  $M = 6$  years, 2 months,  $SD = .79$ ). All of the students were English speaking and the majority was of Euro-Canadian descent (85%).

### *Measures*

#### *Demographic information.*

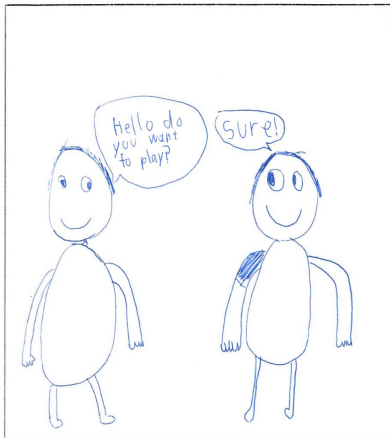
Because many of the students had emergent reading and writing skills, students were asked aloud by a researcher to provide demographic information regarding their grade, family composition (e.g., "Who lives in your house with you?"), and ethnicity / family background. Participants' age, gender, and ethnicity were recorded by a researcher and then verified by school records provided by the classroom teacher.



*Kindness drawings.*

To assess students' conceptualizations of kindness, a scale was developed that asked students to illustrate what kindness looked like to them and to give an example of something kind they had done at school recently. The development of this scale mirrored work done by other researchers who used drawings to examine constructs such as teasing (Bosacki et al., 2012), school violence (Yurtal & Artut, 2010), and bullying (Andreou & Bonoti, 2009). This process included providing a scale to participants that consisted of two empty squares within which participants were asked to draw in response to prompts. For Drawing No. 1, the prompt was "Draw a picture of what kindness looks like. What does kindness look like to you?" and for Drawing No. 2, the prompt was "Draw a picture of something you have done kind at school recently. What have you done to show kindness at school?" Participants were given five minutes for each drawing (see Figures 1 to 6).

**Step #1:** In the box below, draw a picture of what kindness looks like. What does kindness look like to you?



WHO? Kids at school  
 WHAT? one student asks another to play.

**Figure 1: Drawing no. 1, grade 2 boy, theme including.**

**Step #1:** In the box below, draw a picture of what kindness looks like. What does kindness look like to you?



WHO? Annaliese (friend in class), self  
 WHAT? We're telling each other that we're good friends, and we walk together.

**Figure 2: Drawing no. 1, grade 2 girl, theme friendship.**

**Step #2:** In the box below, draw a picture of something you have done kind at school recently. What have you done to show kindness at school?



WHO? my friend in kindergarten, self  
 WHAT? I'm helping him up b/c he fell off a slide.

**Figure 3: Drawing no. 2, grade 2 boy, theme physical helping.**

**Step #2:** In the box below, draw a picture of something you have done kind at school recently. What have you done to show kindness at school?



WHO? this girl (don't know who), self  
 WHAT? girl was crying and I asked what was wrong - she said she had no one to play with, so I played w her.

**Figure 4: Drawing no. 2, grade 2 girl, theme emotional helping.**



Figure 5: Drawing no. 2, kindergarten girl, theme *other*.



Figure 6: Drawing no. 2, kindergarten girl, theme *showing respect*.

### Procedure

Once both teacher and parental permission (92% across classrooms) was obtained, students were surveyed by two trained researchers (i.e., the first author and a graduate student) in small groups of 5 outside of their classroom (typically in a nearby empty classroom or hallway and without their classroom teacher present) and asked to complete their two drawings. After each drawing was completed, students were asked by one of the researchers “Who is in your drawing?” and “What is happening in this drawing?” This information was documented in situ and verbatim underneath each drawing.

### Coding.

The participants’ drawings were analyzed for both pictorial depictions and subject matter or thematic content (Bosacki, Harwood, & Sumaway, 2012). Pictorial depictions involved identifying specific dimensions found within each drawing, including: (1) the number of individuals depicted; (2) identification of the depicted individuals (e.g., friend, teacher, parent); and (3) the context or location of the drawing. The subject matter content of each drawing was analyzed using content analysis to identify the prevalent theme contained within each drawing.

Qualitative conventional content analysis was used to understand and make sense of participants’ drawings and involved a “systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). Conventional content analysis is best suited to capturing prevalent themes found within participant-generated data. Given the dearth of empirical work on children’s perceptions of kindness, this approach offers advantages over other content analysis approaches (e.g., directed content analysis where predetermined thematic categories derived from prior research are used).

Identifying the prevalent themes to code drawings was done in two stages. First, each drawing (N = 224) was reviewed independently by both the principal investigator and his graduate research assistant, who identified a general or global initial theme (e.g., sharing, family, helping). These themes were pooled across raters and resulted in a total of 33 general categories. The second step involved a collaborative winnowing approach to reduce redundancy (Wolcott, 1990), in which general categories were collapsed into prevalent themes (e.g., “asking to play” and “inviting to play” were merged). This process resulted in a total of 11 themes. Examples of each theme were identified and listed next to the theme to assist with coding (e.g., theme = including; examples = inviting to play, asking to play, including in play activity; see Table 2). All drawings were independently coded by both raters to identify a primary or dominant theme. Across drawings, inter-rater agreement was 80%.

**Table 2**  
**Prevalent Themes and Coding Descriptions**

Theme	Description
FAMILY	Spending time with family members, activities with family (e.g., walking, playing)
FRIENDSHIP	Maintaining a friendship, wanting to keep a friend or a friendship
CARING	Showing affection (e.g., giving a hug)
HELPING, PHYSICAL	Helping someone who is physically hurt (e.g., offering a hand to someone who has fallen or tripped)
HELPING, EMOTIONAL	Helping someone who is sad, has hurt feelings, saying "sorry"
GIVING	Giving an object, giving back a toy
SHOWING RESPECT	Taking turns, listening, putting hand up in class, saying "thank you"
SHARING	Sharing an object such as a toy or book
INCLUDING	Inviting/asking/including someone in play, including in a game
OTHER	Miscellaneous themes not fitting in categories above
NO THEME EVIDENT	The drawing and corresponding in-situ description contained no evident theme

## Results

### *Drawing No. 1: Depictions of Kindness Done at School* *Pictorial content.*

When asked to draw what kindness looked like to them, the majority of participants (74%) illustrated kindness involving two individuals, most commonly "self with friend" (28%) followed by "self with classmate" (27%), and situated their interpretations of kindness outside (49%). Chi-square analysis revealed a significant difference in the number of individuals portrayed in drawings ( $\chi^2(2) = 80.96$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; see Table 3), with drawings containing two individuals more common than drawings containing one individual or three individuals.

Chi-square analyses of "who" was in drawings (i.e., self with friend, self with classmate, self with parent, self with sibling, alone) revealed significant differences in the individuals participants included in their depictions of kindness:  $\chi^2(4) = 16.78$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . Post-hoc chi-square analyses found borderline significance between "self with friend" and "self with classmate" as well as "self with sibling." "Self with friend" was significantly different from "self with parents" as well as "self alone." No other significant differences were found when comparing the other categories (for all comparisons  $p > .05$ ).

Chi-square analyses found a significant difference in where (e.g., outside, in school, in classroom) participants situated their depictions of kindness with the location "outside" the most prevalent context for illustrations of kindness,  $\chi^2(2) = 27.80$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Post-hoc chi-square analyses revealed a significant number of drawings had "outside" locations than "other" locations (i.e., miscellaneous settings such as a grocery store or a shopping mall) or illustrations of kindness situated within the context of "family/home."

### *Thematic content and in-situ descriptions.*

In an effort to discern how young participants define kindness, participants were asked to draw what kindness looked like to them. After drawings were completed, participants were asked to describe their drawings and these descriptions were written verbatim. When drawings were analyzed for their thematic content, participants depicted kindness as predominantly reflecting themes of (1) "helping physically" (46%), as reflected by comments such as "My friend fell down and I helped her get up," (#021) and "My friend is hurt and I gave him a Band-Aid" (#028); (2) "giving" (25%), as reflected by comments such as "We're not fighting and I asked 'Do you want a

flower?” (#039) or “I made a card for my Dad at school” (042); (3) acts that maintained friendship (25%), as reflected by comments such as “We’re playing and I’m saying ‘Thank you for playing with me!’” (#083) and “I’m passing my friend the ball so he can play 4-Square” (#087); and (4) helping emotionally” (24%), as reflected by comments such as “Dylan’s feeling sad. I’m asking ‘Are you okay?’” (#063) and “I’m sorry for saying I’m going to play with someone else. Do you want to read a book together?” (#096)

*Analysis by gender.*

Chi-square analyses were conducted between drawings by boys and girls across the primary themes found within participants’ illustrations of kindness (see Table 3). The analysis revealed that girls drew significantly more themes pertaining to “family” than did boys ( $\chi^2(1) = 8.33, p < 0.01$ ), whereas boys drew more themes pertaining to “helping physically” than did girls:  $\chi^2(1) = 6.76, p < 0.01$ . No other significant differences between drawings by boys and girls were found across the other themes.

*Drawing No. 2: Examples of Kindness*

*Pictorial content.*

When asked to draw an example of a kind act they had done at school, the majority of participants (71%) illustrated kindness as occurring between two individuals, predominantly between “self with friend” (37%) followed by “self with classmate (27%), and occurring most frequently outside (47%), followed by the general school context (15%) and in the classroom (13%). Chi-square analyses revealed a significant difference in the number of individuals in drawings:  $\chi^2(2) = 80.96, p < 0.001$ . Post-hoc chi-square analyses found that a significant number of the drawings had two individuals rather than either one or three.

Chi-square analyses of “who” was depicted in participants’ drawings of their examples of kind acts (i.e., “self with friend”, “self with classmate”, “self with teacher”, and “alone”) revealed significant differences:  $\chi^2(3) = 37.65, p < 0.001$ . In their examples of kind acts done at school, participants predominantly illustrated acts involving themselves and a friend over acts done in conjunction with their teacher or done alone. Significant differences were also found between acts of kindness done with a classmate and those done with a teacher or done alone.

As for the location (i.e., “outside,” “school context,” “classroom,” or “other”) of kind acts performed, chi-square analyses revealed a significant difference in the context in which participants situated their examples of kind acts:  $\chi^2(1) = 41.43, p < 0.001$ . Participants predominantly illustrated their examples of kindness at school as happening outside—at the school playground or in the field adjoining their school.

*Thematic content and in-situ descriptions.*

When asked to draw an example of something kind they had done at school, participants’ drawings reflected the following themes: (1) “helping physically” others, as reflected by comments such as “I’m helping him throw a ball outside” (#084) and “My friend got stung by a bee and I got help from an adult” (#061); (2) kind acts that “included” others (27%), as reflected by comments such as “Do you want to be on my team?” (#054) and “She had no one to play with so I asked her if she wanted to play with me” (#067); and (3) acts that “maintain friendship” (26%), as reflected by comments such as “We eat lunch together on Friendship Fridays and I said ‘Thank you for sitting with me’” (#018) and “A friend wants to play with me and I say ‘yes’” (#024).

*Analysis by gender.*

Chi-square analyses were conducted between drawings by boys and girls across the primary themes for Drawing No. 2. The analysis revealed that boys drew significantly more examples of kindness containing the theme of “helping physically” ( $\chi^2(1) = 6.26, p < 0.01$ ) than did girls. No other significant differences between drawings by boys and girls were identified across any other themes.



**Table 3**  
**Percentage of Primary Themes and Chi-Square for Drawing 1 and Drawing 2 for Girls and Boys**

Drawing	Total (N = 112)		Girls (n = 57)		Boys (n = 55)	
			No. 1		No. 2	
	Girls % (n)	Boys % (n)	$\chi^2$ (1)	Girls % (n)	Boys % (n)	$\chi^2$ (1)
Family	19 (11)	2 (1)	8.33, p < .01	22 (13)	0 (0)	10.29 p = 0.001
Friendship	16 (9)	9 (5)	1.14, p < .28	11 (6)	15 (8)	0.29 p = 0.59
Giving	14 (8)	11 (6)	.28, p = .59	7 (4)	2 (1)	1.80, p = .18
Helping (emotional)	12 (7)	12 (7)	.00, p = 1.00	11 (6)	9 (5)	.09, p = .76
Helping (physical)	11 (6)	35 (19)	6.76, p < .01	13 (7)	36 (20)	6.26, p = .01
Including	9 (5)	12 (7)	.33, p = .56	9 (5)	18 (10)	1.67, p = .20
Caring	7 (4)	0 (0)	1.80 p = 0.18	7 (4)	0 (0)	1.80 p = 0.18
Showing respect	5 (3)	10 (6)	1.00, p = .32	3 (2)	5 (3)	.20, p = .65
Sharing	3 (2)	5 (3)	.20, p = .65	13 (7)	11 (6)	.08, p = .78
Other	2 (1)	2 (1)	.00, p = 1.00	2 (1)	2 (1)	.00, p = 1.00
No theme	2 (1)	2 (1)	.00, p = 1.00	2 (1)	2 (1)	.00, p = 1.00

### Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to our understanding of how kindness is conceptualized by young students. Analyses of students' drawings of *what kindness looks like* and *draw a picture of something kind you have done at school recently* identified a number of salient features of kindness not previously reported in educational or psychological literature.

The findings of this study suggest that the definition of kindness might have more in common with the definition of bullying than has been previously recognized. Just as bullies tend to know their victims, so too it appears do the initiators of kindness, who tend to perform kind acts to known others within the school context. Further, as bullying often occurs within a bully-victim dyad, kindness, as depicted by participants in this study, also occurs most frequently within dyadic relationships. Just as bullying is intentional in nature, so too is kindness. Through the eyes of young students, kindness appears to be an intentional act aimed at providing physical help to others, acts that include others, acts that maintain friendships, and acts that provide emotional assistance to others. Whereas the intent of bullying is to cause harm (physical or psychological), the intent of kindness is often understood to be an act that provides assistance (either physical or emotional)—thus, the opposite of bullying. Just as acts of bullying have been defined as overt (physical acts intended to harm another) or relational (acts whose purpose is to disintegrate social relationships), the findings of this study suggest that kindness may be similarly categorized as overt kindness (e.g., physically helping someone who has fallen) or relational kindness (e.g., inviting or including another in a play activity, gestures to strengthen or maintain relationships). This distinction is in alignment with Noddings's (2012) description of "relational caring" in which caring responses provide "the building blocks for the construction of a continuing caring relation" (p. 53).

The findings of this study also revealed that boys and girls depict kindness in both similar and disparate ways. Across drawings and to the same extent, boys and girls illustrated kindness as reflecting acts of emotional helping and sharing. Discrepancies emerged, however, across drawings in how kindness was perceived by boys and girls for the themes of "family" and "physical helping." Girls' drawings contained themes of family (e.g., acts reflecting time spent with family or maintaining family relations) whereas boys' drawings emphasized kindness as physically helping someone else (e.g., helping someone up who had fallen or was injured).

Certainly a salient finding arising from this study is that young elementary students understand and enact kindness through small gestures and many of these gestures are likely undetected by school agents whose intention is often to reinforce prosocial behaviour such

as kindness. An implication arising from this finding is that students may engage in more acts of kindness than many adults believe, and when adults ask or encourage students to “be kind,” students may believe they are already being kind at school. Moreover, students’ acts of kindness may not be encouraged because their acts go undetected by school agents seeking to reinforce kindness. In-situ descriptions of participants’ acts of kindness illustrate how kindness is enacted in school through small gestures or actions (see below).

### **Drawing No. 2: Examples of Kindness Done at School**

“I’m telling the sub how we do things so she knows.” (#089)

“I’m returning books so others can use them.” (#095)

“I showed kindness to my teacher by writing and following directions.” (#029)

“I wear a smile for others.” (#041)

When examining the prevalent themes of kindness found in participants’ drawings, it could be that young students demonstrate acts of kindness that are inspired by or thematically linked to units or lessons taught in class (e.g., themes of friendship, helping, sharing, family) or that are found within the school’s mission statement (e.g., themes of respect for one another and community). In contrast, and not captured in the prevalent themes within drawings, young students could also be unorthodox or creative in how they conceptualized kindness (see below).

### **Drawing No. 1: Depictions of Kindness**

“I’m saying good night to my baby brother and in my head I’m saying I love him.” (#022)

“The sun shows kindness by lighting up the earth.” (#023)

“We’re riding bikes to get exercise to take care of us.” (#024)

“Marco doesn’t hit me. He doesn’t punch me. He plays with me.” (040)

Researchers and theorists have argued that one purpose of formal education is to promote well-being or flourishing in students (e.g., Alexander, 2013; Noddings, 2003). An emerging area of positive psychology interventions is to assess the effects that kindness interventions have on well-being, and a future study might examine the impact of different acts of kindness (e.g., helping vs. including) on students’ subjective well-being. Additionally, further investigation is warranted to clarify the link between both curricular content taught in classrooms and the mission statements of schools and students’ acts of kindness. To what extent might students’ acts of kindness reflect and be influenced by these two dimensions of their education?

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Despite best intentions, this study was not without limitations. Certainly, for very young participants (e.g., kindergarten students), leaving their classroom to work with strangers from the university proved, at times, an intimidating task. Due to time restrictions (i.e., one 45-minute period per class), students were restricted in their time to complete drawings (i.e., five minutes per drawing). Further, the fine motor skills of 5- to 8-year-olds is emergent or developing and oftentimes resulted in “stick figure” drawings that failed to provide rich illustrative depictions. For future studies employing this methodology, a pre-study class visit and the scheduling of additional drawing time would enhance participants’ abilities to comfortably and comprehensively illustrate their perceptions of kindness. Last, as the prompt for Drawing No. 1 asked students to “*Draw a picture of what kindness looks like. What does kindness look like to you?*” it may have skewed how participants illustrated kindness, emphasizing the physical manifestations of kindness that participants could capture in a drawing. Further prompts to investigate how young students conceptualize kindness might use more neutral language, such as “*Draw kindness*” or “*Draw what kindness is to you.*”

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to better understand young students’ understanding of kindness and, in doing so, contribute to the scant educational and psychological research devoted to defining kindness. The study’s findings contribute to the growing body of empirical work using drawing as a vehicle through which to capture young participants’ understandings and perceptions of psychological constructs. Certainly, one strength of the approach undertaken here was to incorporate a drawing-telling methodology that clarified illustrations in situ that would otherwise have been difficult to interpret without supplementary descriptions.

The findings of this study stand to inform both parents and educators of the complexities of kindness in children as they promote prosocial behaviour within the school context. Being kind is more than simply “doing good” and, from young students’ perspectives, there are many different ways to be kind. Capturing the perspective of young students on kindness allows for a definition of kindness to emerge. Kindness, from the perspective of young children, is an act of emotional or physical support that helps build or maintain

relationships with others. It is hoped that this research will contribute to countering the imbalance of empirical work done on the topic of bullying versus kindness and play a role in continuing the shift toward strength- or asset-driven school-based interventions characteristic of the positive education movement.

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