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DISCUSSION PAPER



Kindness: a perspective from developmental psychology

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces a developmental perspective on kindness. The central goal is to posit a new framework for the study of kindness and its development. From an ethical perspective, kindness can be considered a virtue. It reflects emotions, cognitions, and inner states that convey a particular gentleness and benevolence. These orientations can be directed towards others, such as expressing concern for a needy other, or directed towards the self, such as being gentle with oneself. Therefore, the proposed approach suggests a distinction between self- and other-orientedness and delineates the development of the affective, cognitive, and behavioural components of kindness across the first two decades of life. This developmental model of kindness lays the groundwork for a more complete understanding of the human capacity for prosociality across development. It provides new means for developing interventions that aim to nurture every child's kindness and help them reach their full potential. The model assumes that intervention efforts will be beneficial at nurturing kindness when they a) acknowledge that the balance between self- and other-oriented tendencies is beneficial to remain healthy and contribute to a greater good, b) are developmentally sensitive, and c) enhance multiple facets of kindness in the child and in the environment.

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Kindness is considered a virtue and an integral part of ethics. In philosophy, kindness has been characterized as a genuine, deep concern for others (Schopenhauer, 1840/2006). As such, it is derived from compassion. Compassion entails either co-feeling for others or for the self. Feeling for another means that an individual *understands*, and to some degree, *shares* the pain and suffering of another (i.e. empathic concern). Ultimately deep feelings of sadness for another may follow, reflecting

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an understanding of the shared, 'same' experience of human existential suffering. Compassion also refers to a warm understanding and appreciation of ourselves when we suffer or fail. For example, we may realize that we have not lived up to our ethical ideals and that our inconsiderate actions may have negative repercussions for others (such as the pain others might feel). Consequently, feelings of ethical guilt may arise. These feelings of empathy or sadness over wrongdoing, which I coin 'kind emotions', are based on our realization that frailty, failure, and suffering are part of the shared human experience. Kindness means treating both ourselves and others with gentleness. As such, kindness reflects an understanding of the preciousness of every human life and the beauty of imperfection, as well as entails feelings of respect for all others and their dignity. Respect, broadly conceptualized, refers to the treatment of all living entities with dignity and comprises feelings of esteem in response to the recognition of good, ethical qualities of another (Drummond, 2006; Li & Fischer, 2007; Malti, Peplak, & Zhang, 2020b).

Why should we be concerned with kindness and its development? One way of addressing this question is to explore the possible consequences of kindness. It is commonly assumed that doing good for others makes us feel good about ourselves. There is also evidence that kindness can contribute to inner peace and health (see Post & Neimark, 2007). This is because the ability to observe and be aware of one's own inner states and feelings, without being preoccupied by them, can make us more aware of the multifaceted nature of our thoughts, feelings, and desires, as well as the constant change of our perceptions. This awareness also gives rise to a sense of inner freedom because it can create a pro-active mindset and enable us to see things from multiple perspectives. These capacities, in turn, allow us to be more balanced and compassionate and create an integrative view of the self, acknowledging both limitations and strengths and nurturing personal growth in a natural manner. As an extension of the potential for individual growth, we can speculate about the changes that this may bring to empathic sensitivity and ethical awareness for all humans (Rifkin, 2009).

The concept of kindness is a part of human nature, and developmental psychology can inform a deepened understanding of it by elucidating its origins and pathways across the lifespan. The goals of this article are twofold: The first is to outline how developmental psychology can contribute to the study and promotion of kindness. For that purpose, a new developmental framework for the study of kindness is proposed. I first

briefly elaborate on how we can conceptualize kindness and present a new model that describes its core components. I also outline similarities and differences to existing theories of morality. The second goal is to describe selected empirical findings that relate to kindness in children and adolescents. This involves a brief review of the developmental processes involved in kindness with a focus on early childhood through adolescence, as well as a discussion of consequences of kindness in children and adolescents. Lastly, I summarize approaches aimed at cultivating the various components of kindness and provide some preliminary conclusions and implications for future directions.

What kindness is

Both Western and Eastern philosophical traditions have conceptualized kindness as a virtue (Aristotle, 1959; Confucius, 1885) and as a laudable value. In psychology, kindness has been considered a state of being that reflects emotions and inner states as they relate to others and ourselves. Kindness also reflects a particular sensitivity for others as well as for the self. In other words, kindness is a considerate stance towards life, which creates meaning and purpose. It involves a deep concern (i.e. compassion) for *both others and the self* and, as such, reflects an appreciation of the dignity of every human being.

This empathic stance requires an awareness of others' emotional states, one's own inner states, and the relationship between the self and others. It also involves a genuine understanding of the preciousness of each human life in its uniqueness, as well as its unitedness through the shared human experience. This duality, seemingly paradox, is also what constitutes its expression in us: The human psyche requires gentle care of the self and others. A caring attitude can be expressed through feelings, thoughts, and actions. As such, kindness is multifaceted and develops across the lifespan. Ultimately, it represents a positive approach to life that goes beyond self-protection or group promotion and towards a focus on the broader social good.

Being kind means helping the self and the other to grow and transform. Kindness does not have limits; it transcends boundaries, both physically and conceptually. When you experience what it means to be kind to another, you come to understand both the similarities between yourself and the other, as well as the uniqueness that you can appreciate. It is a feeling of the other as a part of yourself and thus genuinely related

to the self; one that at the same time acknowledges the other's individuality and autonomy (Mayeroff, 1971; Rogers, 1959). As such, it also reflects the capacity to be aware of the inherent duality of life in its preciousness and frailty, which leads to a genuine gentleness and respect for the dignity of every human being (see Malti et al., 2020b).

Kindness: a new developmental framework

The conceptualization of kindness shows that it is based in a particular kind of self-awareness, one which requires self-knowledge that goes beyond the perception of reactions, inner states, and regularity. Rather, it is a process characterized by uniqueness and singularity, which requires the adoption of an open mindset; one that moves deliberately away from past knowledge about general processes and what we know about humans to the specific and less expected (Jung, 1957). Thus, experiencing and developing kindness creates a synthesis of the basic human needs for both relatedness and agency, without denying the separateness and uniqueness of each individual (Fromm, 1955; Kağıtçıbaşı, 1996). Figure 1 shows the core pillars of kindness across development.

As can be seen, the kindness model distinguishes between three core components of kindness: 1) kind emotions, 2) kind cognitions, and 3) kind behaviours. Each of these components can be other-oriented or self-oriented. How can we conceptualize the three different aspects of kindness?

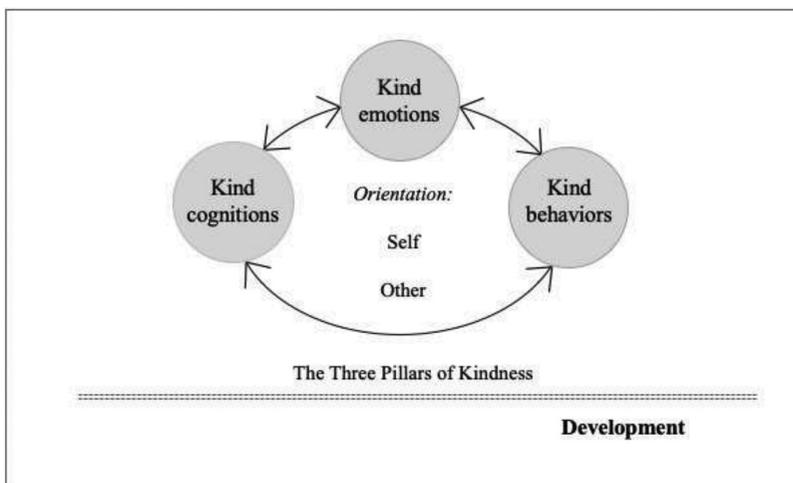


Figure 1. The core components of kindness.

Kind emotions refer to either other-oriented emotions of sympathy, empathy, and respect, or internally oriented feelings, such as ethical guilt over wrongdoing or pride after acting in line with one's ideals and ethical principles (Malti & Ongley, 2014). Both other-oriented and internally oriented emotions can nurture compassion and as such, facilitate prosocial behaviours.

Kind cognitions reflect an active process of understanding and integrating others' perspectives and views into one's own. They also entail a self-reflective component, which is essential for the self to grasp an understanding of the relativity of every standpoint and synthesize various perspectives, and ultimately broadens the mind's range and openness for new experiences. Kind emotions also require mindfulness because they tend to be complex and inherently require an ability to observe and be aware of own's own emotional states and thoughts as they relate to interactions with others. An open-mindedness and self-other knowledge thus facilitates true kindness because it helps us realize the element within each emotional experience that we share with other fellow humans (Malti, 2016; see Gavazzi et al., 2011; Woolrych et al., 2020).

Kind actions most often refer to other-oriented behaviours. This can include simple acts of prosociality (such as helping, cooperating, or comforting another) or more complex (and often more costly) prosocial behaviours (such as sharing or including discriminated people). In addition, self-oriented kind actions can include behaviours that help the self, such as self-caring behaviours. In a study exploring themes of kindness in school using young children's drawings, Binfet (2016) found that the drawings reflected, among other, physically helping others and showing respect. Similarly, two recent studies with adolescents showed that many adolescents enact kindness through kind actions, such as supporting others emotionally, helping with chores, or including others (Binfet, 2020; Cotney & Banerjee, 2019).

The components of kindness (i.e. emotions, cognitions, and behaviours) express and/or lead to the experience of compassion and benevolence, the ultimate expression of kindness. Thus, kind emotions and kind cognitions can both lead to an expression of kindness at the behavioural level, either directly or indirectly through compassion. The more each of these three components are integrated into every-day life activities, the more transformative power they will have, both for the self and for others. For instance, the more our inner states reflect a kind stance, the more likely we will be to act in accordance with them.

Related theorizing on the development of prosocial behaviour in children has similarly identified cognitive and affective motivational factors that underlie the emergence and pathways of overt prosocial behaviours, as well as its subdimensions, such as helping, sharing, and comforting (Eisenberg, 1992, 2000). While the theorizing on kindness and prosocial behaviour overlap, one distinct feature is that kindness is broader conceptualized and entails both self- and other-oriented emotions, cognitions, and behaviours. It is also important that kindness is considered a virtue reflected in gentleness and respect, and thus reflects various affective, cognitive, and behavioural components.

Here I propose a new developmental approach to kindness that aligns with an assumption of the ethics of care, i.e. or normative ethical accounts in which norms of ethics are considered a virtue. I conceptualize kindness as a virtue that evolves in interpersonal relationships. This framework also overlaps with existing psychological theories of care-based morality in that there is a focus on the other-oriented dimension of human nature. It differs, however, in its focus on a system of ethics. In contrast, existing Western theories of prosocial morality focus on principles of right and wrong. Specifically, the new developmental framework is based on an ethics of other-orientedness, i.e. philosophical accounts that have discussed the concept of kindness and principles of development because it is about the *study* of the principle of conduct, i.e. kindness, across development. Ethics seeks to describe the characteristics of kindness (descriptive ethics) and evaluate them (normative ethics). In contrast, morality in psychology has to do with standards of right (moral) behaviour and serves as a guide for people's action tendencies. This shows that the meanings of ethics and morality overlap. The distinct feature is that morals are individual standards of right and wrong, whereas a system of ethics deals with a description and possibly evaluation of those standards. In this new framework, kindness is considered a virtue and here I aim to describe its expressions on various dimensions of psychological functioning, i.e. emotions, cognitions, and behavioural tendencies.

As such, the concept of kindness overlaps with psychological theories on moral development. Rooted in Piagetian theorizing on the development of the child's cognitive capacities, the majority of those theoretical frameworks have focused on the study of moral judgement and reasoning from a social and cognitive-developmental perspective (e.g. Kohlberg, 1969). For instance, domain theory has described domains of social development and identified three domains of social knowledge, i.e. the moral, conventional, and personal

domains (Turiel, 1983). Empirical work in this tradition has studied the development of moral judgements across childhood and adolescence (with a focus on principles of justice, rights, and welfare) in comparison to other domains. The cognitive-developmental tradition in psychology was also heavily influenced by Kantian philosophy and the rational, unconditional principle of the Categorical Imperative. Despite more emphasis on the emotional experience as a foundation of human morality and kindness, the approach to kindness introduced here shares the view of cognitive-developmental accounts on morality and that our ability to be introspective and reflect on how our own actions affect us and others is essential in the development of kindness.

In developmental accounts of morality, sentimentalist ideas have only been considered in a very limited way with a focus on specific emotional experiences. For instance, in my work, I have provided a conceptual framework for the development of ethical guilt feelings (Malti, 2016). There are also some attempts aimed at integrating cognitive-developmental and affective-clinical accounts on morally relevant behaviours, such as bullying, aggression, and exclusion (Killen & Malti, 2015; Malti & Keller, 2010). Here, I argue that these attempts need to be moved one step further in developmental psychology because our discipline can contribute knowledge on how emotional experiences in the ethical realm unfold across the lifespan and as such inform contemporary theorizing on ethics and ethical development across disciplines. Importantly, it also has the potential to offer direct implications for educational and public health attempts to nurture goodness (for the study on other-oriented ethical principles).

The neglect of emotional experiences in ethical encounters in developmental psychology stands in stark contrast to philosophy. Both Western and Eastern philosophical traditions have discussed other-oriented emotions as a core principle in ethics for centuries. For instance, Adam Smith's theory of moral sentiments was a breakthrough by emphasizing the social nature of morality (Smith, 1976). Accordingly, moral principles are derived from sentiments. This theorizing is similar to Hume's, who placed emphasis on sympathy as a core capacity to make moral judgement and morally right behaviour possible (see Hume's moral sense theory, Hume, 2000).

In Confucian discourse, ethical emotions are at the core of our human nature, and the unity of emotion and nature leads to the assumption that our natural condition is to experience and express emotions in the realms of everyday ethics. Interestingly, Confucius stressed the need to promote flexibility and awareness of limitations in our emotional states and thus recommend that trusting one's emotions as guides to ethical value and virtue

requires practice (Sarkissian, 2010). Eastern philosophical accounts, particularly those rooted in Buddhist philosophy, have also clearly emphasized that the virtue of kindness is rooted in compassion and a deep understanding of the other as being similar ('oneness') to the self (Nhat Hanh, 2004). The concept of *ren* reflects this notion as it stands for the warm feelings between humans and is a guiding ethical framework for human relationships in Confucian ethics, with a focus on virtues such as kindness (Tao, 2000). This awareness of the interrelatedness of the self and others helps relieve the others' suffering. By transcending the learned difference between the self and others, it also directs us away from a focus on ourselves to the other. This involves the ethics of intentionally listening to others, and leads to compassion, which manifests in kindness. Similar to this notion, Buber's philosophy of dialogue emphasized the 'I-Thou' relationship (Buber, 1923/1997), a holistic experience of two beings that creates meaning through making universal experience actual. My conceptualization of kindness is rooted in those ideas and integrates them with a developmental approach, which describes typical processes of continuity and change across the lifespan, as well as the role of social experiences in those dynamic patterns.

Because of my focus on kindness as a virtue and its theoretical roots in Eastern philosophy and an ethics of care, I deliberately chose to use the term 'ethics' over 'morality.' Accordingly, being kind is a virtue that is different from being moral as the former focuses on 'what constitutes being good' and how we can evaluate it at different points in development. Kindness as a virtue reflects an inner, moral compass and our personal choices regarding 'what constitutes being good in everyday life' or 'what constitutes a good life.' In contrast, morality focuses on 'what are just, fair, or caring behaviours.' It is also clear that there is overlap because both ethics and morality are concerned with standards of right and wrong or good and bad. For instance, compassion as the foundation for kindness reflects the Golden Rule in the affective domain. Philosophical accounts have described it as an understanding of the suffering of another (and an attempt to alleviate it, a kind act) which reflects a realization that it is as if it were one's own (sense of shared suffering). Kant himself acknowledged that respect as a 'rational emotion,' the equal treatment of all humans with dignity, is both a direct expression of the Golden Rule and a core foundation for ethical conduct (Kant, 1797/1966; see Malti et al., 2020b). The notion that our growing capacity to be sensitive about the self and others is at the core of kindness and its development, and it is also a conceptualization shared by Neo-Piagetian

accounts on moral development which acknowledged that limited attention had been paid to other-oriented emotions and emotional experiences in early moral development (Keller et al., 1989).

How kindness develops

The debate about whether humans are born as blank slates continues to date. While there is empirical evidence for and against this idea, it is reasonable to assume that the reality is to be found somewhere between both extremes, i.e. our mind being blank at birth versus fully programmed. Thus, humans are likely not (simply) born kind, and thus it becomes necessary to describe the developmental processes underlying kindness as they unfold across the life course. Because kindness is made up of different components, various developmental trajectories need to be distinguished. In what follows, I briefly discuss how select kind emotions, kind cognitions, and kind behaviours develop from the early years through adolescence. As will become evident, the development of kindness is not a homogeneous, linear process. Rather, its components develop in distinct ways and an understanding of the developmental processes can help explain how kindness may present itself at different ages. At the same time, many of the components of kindness are interrelated, and increasing synchrony and integration contributes to inter-individual differences in kindness at any point in development.

Kind emotions

Both other-oriented and self-oriented emotions that express genuine care for others are considered kind. Importantly, independent of the type and valence of the emotion, these emotions are considered 'ethical' because they are concerned with the ethics of care, which has to do with kindness and how it is expressed in relationship.

The various types of kind emotions develop along distinct trajectories. Here, I focus on a select subset of prototypical kind emotions to illustrate this principle, including empathy, sympathy, sadness for one's wrongdoing, and respect. These emotions have been chosen because they have been frequently studied in developmental psychology and illustrate that kind emotions can be both other-oriented (i.e. empathy, respect) and self-oriented (i.e. sadness following wrongdoing, self-respect).

One prototypical emotion, empathy (and the related term, sympathy) is important because it can serve as a motive for deep concern and

another-orientedness. Empathy and sympathy have often been used interchangeably in the literature. However, empathy primarily involves experiencing a similar or the same emotion as another (Eisenberg, 2000; Malti et al., 2016a). Sympathy refers to feelings of concern for the other but does not require experiencing the same or a similar emotion to the other. Both empathy and sympathy are thought to include an understanding that the emotion experienced is related to the other and not the self (Hoffman, 2000). Both emotions have been linked to prosocial behaviour outcomes. In the following framework, empathy is used as an umbrella term that includes both empathy and sympathy.

When does empathy develop? To at least some degree, infants as young as 8 to 14 months seem to react to the distress of others with resonant negative affect (Roth-Hanania et al., 2011), which may be viewed as a precursor to empathy. The first signs of true empathy emerge as early as toddlerhood (Davidov et al., 2013). Active, empathic responding gradually increases from early to late childhood. While some research suggests that concern for others does not increase across the early childhood years (Roth-Hanania et al., 2011; Vaish et al., 2009), other longitudinal findings suggest that there is an increase in feelings of concern for others from mid-childhood to early adolescence (Malti et al., 2013). Despite general increases in prosocial behaviours (i.e. kind actions) from the early years until early adolescence (Eisenberg et al., 2015), findings depend on the subdimensions of the prosocial behaviour examined (e.g. costly, altruistic behaviours versus simple forms of sharing), the informant, and the measure.

Another frequently studied kind emotion is sadness over one's own wrongdoing. Such feelings of sadness evolve following our own transgressions and/or imagined violations of ethical norms that we care about. In the past, my colleagues and I have coined such feelings ethical guilt. This is because I have conceptualized the experience of guilt specifically in the context of ethical transgressions. In these contexts, guilt occurs when a child believes or realizes that they have violated ethical standards and assumes responsibility for that violation. However, guilt can also refer to an experience that occurs when someone assumes responsibility for actions beyond their control or out of proportion to their wrongdoing. In such contexts, children may feel obsessively guilty about things for no rational reason. Because it may reduce confusion in my own and others' future research, I suggest a change in the terminology that is used for the study of ethical guilt feelings. From now on, I will therefore call 'ethical guilt feelings,' sadness over wrongdoing. It should also be noted that there is a conceptual

overlap between sadness over own wrongdoing and interpersonal regret. Thus, guilt feelings or sadness over one's own wrongdoing can include feelings of regret and sorrow, and therefore have sometimes been labelled interpersonal regret. Yet, regret often reflects intrapersonal feelings, i.e. harm to oneself, whereas feelings of sadness over wrongdoing reflect an understanding that we have harmed someone else (which can, but does not necessitate to include regret and an understanding that we harm ourselves by harming others; see Berndsen et al., 2004).

Such feelings of sadness over wrongdoing evolve as a consequence of realizing that one's own actions may have hurt others. As such, they reflect an internalized understanding of, and compliance with, the guiding principle of compassion or kindness. Early precursors of sadness, such as distress following a perceived transgression, emerge between the first and second years of life (Kochanska et al., 2002). Around 3–5 years of age, children begin to report sadness in response to specific transgressions, such as imagining pushing another child off the swing, and these feelings predict prosocial behaviours (Malti, 2016) and prevent aggressive behaviours (for a meta-analytic review, see Malti & Krettenauer, 2013). Research on the development of sadness following one's own wrongdoing indicates that there is a strong increase in these emotions between 4 to 8 years of age (Malti & Ongley, 2014).

Although less has been written about the development of the emotional experiences of respect and appreciation, I have recently elaborated on respect as a kind emotion (Malti et al., 2020b). The theorizing of respect as a kind emotion is based on philosophical notions of respect that have recognized a particular type of respect (i.e. appraisal-respect) as an expression of kindness. According to Kant (1797/1966), appraisal-respect is a positive appraisal of a person or their merits, which are features of persons that manifest the very good quality of their character and their features as agents. Thus, it is based on an evaluation of ethically relevant personal characteristics and engenders a genuine expression of esteem for those who possess excellence.

Appraisal-respect is thus conceptualized as a feeling towards others based on their goodness (i.e. their kindness and the like). Esteem refers to a positive recognition of the qualities of one's character, typically ethical in nature (Malti et al., 2020b; see Drummond, 2006). This type of respect is most commonly referred to in everyday life when we speak of someone as deserving of our respect. It can also be applied to the self (i.e. when a child recognizes her actions are benevolent, which can elicit feelings of self-

esteem). My recent work has documented that children increasingly acknowledge the good qualities in others, and the majority of all children between the ages of 5 to 15 years deem good, other-oriented qualities respect-worthy.

Kind cognitions

Similar to kind emotions, kind cognitions can be other- or self-oriented. A prototypical example of a kind, other-oriented cognitive capacity is perspective-taking (i.e. stepping into someone else's shoes). A related term, theory of mind, refers to an understanding of others' and one's own mental states, including thoughts, desires, and feelings. Perspective-taking capacities develop gradually from the early years throughout childhood and into adolescence (Astington, 1993). Such skills are associated with children's moral judgement and increasing ability to provide differentiated justifications about why a particular action is right or wrong (Killen et al., 2011). Of course, such social-cognitive capacities are not a direct expression of kindness but also often underlie, and are intertwined with, the formation and development of kind emotions, motives, and behaviours (Hoffman, 2000; Malti, 2016). This is because, with a growing sense of the self and self-related cognitions, emotions, and inner states, each of these components become increasingly integrated. An awareness of our own actions and how they affect our environment, as well as how they relate to others and their wellbeing, expands. We also become increasingly aware of how the self's and other's inner states are similar. As such, kind cognitions can serve as prerequisites to foster an other-oriented, positive approach to life.

One self-oriented skill related to kind cognitions is self-reflection. Self-reflection is the ability to observe and think about oneself, including one's own feelings, desires, and behaviours. Its development is very much based on children's growing self-awareness (Hoffman, 2000; Mead, 1934). This introspective capacity is essential for personal growth and an increasing understanding of the sameness between the self and others. A related term, mindfulness, refers to the awareness of one's own thoughts, feelings, and bodily reactions. With the increasing capacity to reflect on the self and be mindful and simply observe without being preoccupied by what they feel, children begin to appreciate the evaluation of their actions from others' perspectives, and consequently feel good about themselves after other-oriented behaviours. Both capacities

can thus profoundly influence the way children relate to others and behave in the world.

As such, self-reflection and mindfulness may underlie the formation of, and change in, kind emotions and kind actions. Self-reflective capacities increase from childhood to adolescence, partly due to our increasing cognitive capacities. We also become increasingly aware of our own inner worlds through interactions with an increasingly diverse and broad range of people, from family members to peers and strangers, and through exposure to different communities and society at large. Each context offers new opportunities to learn about the self as it relates to others.

Kind actions

Lastly, kindness is manifested behaviourally. The overwhelming majority of previous developmental research has focused on *other-oriented* prosocial action tendencies. Other-oriented prosocial behaviours cover a broad range of actions, among others, helping, sharing, including, and comforting others (Carlo, 2014; Eisenberg et al., 2015). The literature on the development of various subtypes of other-oriented prosocial behaviours is vast. Overall, there is some evidence to suggest that overt prosocial tendencies increase from childhood to adolescence (Eisenberg et al., 2015).

In a recent study, children from kindergarten through third grade predominantly were asked to depict kindness in drawings. Interestingly, the majority of children associated kindness done by the self with other-oriented prosocial behaviours, including maintenance of friendship, physically helping others, and showing respect (Binfet, 2016). Similarly, drawings in which they were asked to depict kindness done by teachers reflected mostly prosocial behaviours, including academically helping a student, teaching and helping the class learn, and physically or emotionally helping students.

Here, I also consider *self-oriented* prosocial actions because (as described above) they can be an important expression of kindness. Self-oriented prosocial behaviours refer to various self-caring behaviours that express a particular gentleness with one's own limitations or feelings of inadequacy, an understanding of one's capacities, and an appreciation of one's unique qualities (Neff, 2011). At the behavioural level, it means applying the same strategies described in the other-oriented literature (e.g. comforting) to the

self. Less is known about the developmental trajectories of self-caring behaviours. However, in pedagogy, learning to self-care is considered an essential goal of education. For example, according to Montessori philosophy, learning to identify one's own needs and care for the self, including physical needs, is as essential as acquiring academic skills. Mastery of these skills is related to cognitive skills, such as being able to concentrate and focus, and it prepares children to navigate challenges in everyday life with increasing self-reliance and independence (Montessori, 1948).

Relations between components of kindness across development

It has become evident that the three components of kindness (i.e. emotions, cognitions, and behaviours) entail various subcomponents. The development of each of these subcomponents can be seen as distinct trajectories, albeit their shared features (e.g. complex emotions, such as sadness over wrongdoing or respect for others, requires a basic understanding of others' perspective and may thus emerge around 3–5 years of age). What is less known is if, how, and when the various subcomponents become more integrated within a person over time. For instance, are empathy and ethical respect increasingly related across the lifespan, or can they remain distinct (e.g. a person who expresses low levels of empathy may still show high levels of respect)? Similarly, it is not clear if variability in the three pillars of kindness and their subcomponents between people remains relatively stable across time, and/or if there are changes that may lead to higher or lower amounts of kindness in the total population. For example, does an increase in perspective taking skills lead to more respect, or do the processes develop relatively independent of each other for the majority of the population? [Figure 2](#) illustrates the possible developmental vicissitudes of kindness and selected dimensions (e.g. helping, perspective taking) of each of the three core components (i.e. kind emotions, cognitions, and actions).

As can be seen, there are likely going to be distinct trajectories in the subcomponents of kindness (e.g. empathy, respect, or perspective-taking skills), but also similarities in the directionality and pace of development. Each of the three domains of kindness include growth, multifaceted change, and some stability. Yet, overlap between the domains at various points of development can be expected as well. This is rather unsurprising, as increasing complexity and growth in our understanding of the

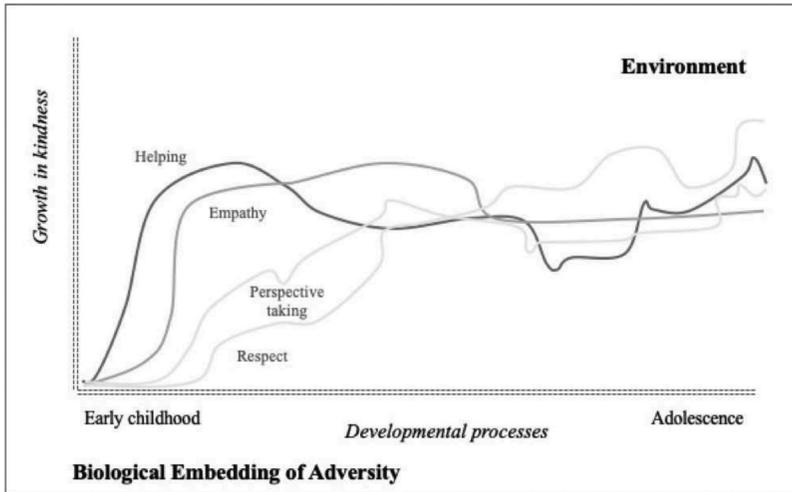


Figure 2. The developmental vicissitudes of kindness: example trajectories of kind emotions, cognitions, and behaviours.

social world likely facilitates changes in the experience of social emotions, such as empathy, and vice versa.

Beyond the multifaceted interrelations between emotions, cognition, and behaviours in the kindness domains, growth in kindness depends on the context (Figure 2). Historical time, cultural traditions, and social norms and values shape the growth of kindness across the lifespan. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the role of context, including culture, socialization experiences, and exposure to unique customs and traditions, on the development of kindness, but much literature has explored how environmental factors, both proximal and distal, affect dimensions of prosocial development (for a discussion of socialization effects on prosocial development, see Brownell et al., 2016; Kartner, 2015; Malti & Dys, 2018). Acknowledging the biological embedding of experience and its behavioural expression and consequences, this discussion includes questions regarding the role of exposure to early biological and psychosocial challenges, such as poverty-related adversity or traumatic events, on brain functioning, child development, and potential (e.g. Blair & Raver, 2012; Nelson, 2017).

Below, I highlight a few domains in which the interrelatedness of the kindness subcomponents can be observed.

Emotion-cognition links

Prominent links between kind emotions and cognitions have been elaborated within developmental theories on empathy. According to Hoffman (2000), empathy is strongly intertwined with social-cognitive development and thereby changes as children develop increased social-cognitive capacities, such as the increasing capacity to understand and coordinate perspectives of the self and others.

Similarly, I have argued that a core prerequisite for experiencing sadness over wrongdoing or feeling respect for doing good is the ability to step into others' perspectives (Malti, 2016; Malti et al., 2020b; see Frijda, 1986; Izard, 2011). In our recent work, we used eye-tracking to explore whether attending to other-oriented cues (e.g. a victim's face) versus self-serving cues (e.g. a stolen good) is associated with more kind emotions in an ethnically diverse sample of 224 4, 6, and 8-year-old children. The findings revealed that attending to other-oriented versus self-serving cues was indeed relatively more related to more kind and fewer selfish emotions, and the relationship remained across age groups (Dys et al., 2020). Controlled cognitive processes then, may help to reframe and refine one's initial emotional response in light of additional cognitive insights (Lazarus, 1991).

Overall, developmental links between kind emotions and cognitions likely depend on the types of emotions and cognitions. Nevertheless, they may be increasingly coordinated in middle childhood due to children's increasing ability to integrate various perspectives and experiences to the self. For example, children often do not understand why they may feel sad in response to breaking rules to get what they want, or why intentionally inhibiting desires to abide by rules should make them feel good below the age of 7 (Lagattuta et al., 2015). By late childhood, motivational factors likely play an increasingly important role in the anticipation of kind emotions and related action tendencies (Malti & Ongley, 2014). For example, it may become increasingly important to a child to act in line with their values, which may motivate them to step into the shoes of others and feel with them. Thus, early advances in kind cognitions are necessary prerequisites and correlates of kind feelings as the integration of kind affect and cognition continues across adolescence.

Emotion-behaviour links in the kindness domain

Developmental models on emotion-behaviour links in the kindness domain have argued that affective concern for others plays an important role in motivating prosocial, kind behaviour (Eisenberg et al., 2010; Malti et al., 2009) and mitigating antisocial behaviour (Malti & Ongley, 2014). Similarly, research suggests that sadness over wrongdoing facilitates kind behaviours (Kochanska & Aksan, 2006; Malti et al., 2016c). While the links between kind emotions and kind behaviours have been shown across childhood and adolescence, it is also likely that the relationship is moderated by other psychological processes. As an example, children's translation of empathy into other-oriented behavioural outcomes likely depends on their emotion regulation skills, and emotional expressivity (Hay, 2009). Unregulated, intense negative emotions that accompany empathy may lead to personal distress instead of sympathy.

Cognition-behaviour links in the kindness domain

From a social-cognitive theoretical perspective, increases in perspective-taking and cognitive differentiation are likely going to facilitate prosocial behaviours. According to the cost perception/gain-construction perspective, the development of prosocial behaviours is facilitated by moving away from a cognitive focus on costs and an increasing focus on the gains of prosocial engagement (Lourenço, 2004). This is based on the increasing capacity for children to understand contradictions between actions. It is also related to increasing coordination between positive affirmation and negation, based on children's growing ability to see both concrete, obvious, and hidden, nontrivial features of social interactions, which helps them to focus on the positive aspects of their actions (Piaget, 1974).

Emotion-behaviour-cognition links in the kindness domain

Lastly, there is evidence suggesting that the development of kind emotions is associated with particular types of reasoning and that both are related to kind behaviours. For example, my colleagues and I (2009) showed that both sympathy and sadness over wrongdoing are associated with prosocial behaviour over time. In addition, sadness over wrongdoing was correlated with altruistic reasoning, which in turn has been shown to relate to prosocial behaviour (Malti et al., 2016c).

Similarly, kind cognitions may underlie emotion-behaviour links in the kindness domain by facilitating the translation of the emotional experience into behaviour (Feshbach, 1978). For example, children's abilities to translate empathy into other-oriented, kind behaviours likely depend on their emotional understanding of a particular social context (Denham & Couchoud, 1991).

Consequences of kindness

Developmental research has supported a link between kindness and wellbeing. For example, children with more prosocial behaviours have better peer relationships and are perceived as trustworthy (Malti et al., 2016b). It has also been argued that children grow when they successfully help others (Staub, 2015). In other words, being kind can contribute to children's and adolescents' wellbeing and further positive development. Observing the positive effects that one's kindness may have on others likely increases a child's willpower and efficacy in this domain (Edelstein, 2005).

Supporting this argument, studies have shown a link between adolescents' prosocial behaviours and self-esteem (Zuffianò et al., 2014). This is important because research indicates that perceived self-efficacy in the regulation of affect and in interpersonal relationships affects prosocial behaviour (Caprara & Steca, 2005). Vice versa, research has also shown that the development of kind emotions from middle childhood to early adolescence is inversely related to aggression and mental health challenges (Zuffianò et al., 2018). In addition, findings suggest that kindness is associated with increased subjective well-being in adults (e.g. Gherghel et al., 2019; Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013).

Research also indicates that kind orientations contribute to academic achievement. For example, Caprara and colleagues showed positive relations between prosocial behaviour in third-grade children and academic achievement five years later (Caprara et al., 2000). Thus, there is some empirical evidence that kindness can contribute to the wellbeing and productivity of the self and others across the lifespan. Scholars and public figures alike have also argued for the potential of kindness to contribute to tolerance and peace in the world. According to the Dalai Lama (see Piburn, 1990), kindness allows for more meaningful dialogue and openness to communicate with others, which is essential to maintain and re-establish harmonious relationships between people, communities, and nations.

From a humanistic psychological perspective, advancing the human potential to be kind and transcend self-interest is integral to self-actualization and helps individuals live up to their full potential (Maslow, 1943). Similarly, from a psychotherapeutic perspective, the curative element in counselling is the counsellor's capacity to understand the client's potentialities (i.e. to be able to activate and express the full range of the client's capacities as a human entity; Rogers, 1961).

Nurturing kindness

My developmental perspective on kindness suggests that kindness has both other- and self-oriented dimensions. Promoting other-oriented dimensions of kindness across childhood and adolescence has been widely recognized as an important educational goal. For example, many programmes and techniques have been developed to enhance children's capacity for empathy (see Mahoney et al., 2018; Schonert-Reichl, 2019). More broadly, interventions aimed at promoting social-emotional development in children and adolescents often cover dimensions of other-oriented kindness, and, albeit to a lesser degree, self-oriented dimensions as well. Many social-emotional learning (SEL) programmes have been developed and evaluated in the preschool and school contexts (see Durlak et al., 2011; Murano et al., 2020; Weissberg, 2019).

Several other interventional approaches have been developed that target various dimensions of other-oriented kindness and its components, such as empathy, sympathy, and prosocial behaviour. Some of these interventions, including the Child Development Project (Child Development Project; CDP; Battistich et al., 1991), also incorporated the idea of changing the climate and culture of the classroom or community to nurture kindness (Lickona, 2004). Another example of a research-informed, SEL programme that implements a warm and supportive environment to enhance children's respect and kindness is the Caring School Community (Battistich et al., 1997). Similarly, theorists in the domain of critical education argue that children need to learn the virtue of care through sensitizing them to inclusive, warm environments and teaching them how they can (and cannot) contribute to caring for others, while maintaining a healthy sense of their own needs (Freire, 2007; Walker, 2014). These interventions and orientations align with our developmental kindness model, which emphasizes the role of kind environments on children's capacity to grow (Malti & Dys, 2018).

Lastly, ethics and character education approaches have emphasized the function of moral or ethical exemplars in promoting kind orientations and actions in children and youth, such as engagement in voluntary services (Colby & Damon, 1992). Ethical exemplars do not merely talk about kindness or respect, but rather live these concepts in their relationship with the child (Noddings, 2003). Experiencing the power of this lived ethics of compassion and care in a meaningful mentoring relationship can be transformative for the child's development and can help the child grow their capacity to care for others and for themselves.

In addition to educational and clinical efforts to promote other-oriented kind capacities, numerous clinical frameworks have targeted *self-oriented* dimensions of kindness, such as self-care and self-regulation, as central outcomes of health interventions. For example, one important goal of interventions targeting depression and anxiety is to increase a child's or youths' self-esteem and wellbeing, and to (re)establish a healthy balance between caring for others and the self. Going beyond a focus on mere symptom reduction, such approaches align well with the assumption of self-regulation and emotion theories of developmental psychopathology, that is, that both under- and overregulation can create challenges in one's well-being by making us prone to rage and anger, or depression, anxiety, and rigidity (Beauchaine, 2001; Cicchetti et al., 1995; Malti, 2016). It is also likely that experiencing gentleness towards yourself stimulates growth and openness to new experiences. As such, practicing kindness itself entails a developmental process. The more you learn about kindness yourself, the more positive change can be expected.

When it comes to attempts to promote kindness, an essential question is: How can we create inner strength and a flexible kind of stability at any point of development? By establishing this intuitive knowledge about the self, we have the opportunity to help the child be able to balance between self-oriented and other-oriented dimensions of kindness in a flexible manner without losing purpose and a sense of continuity. This kind of mindset thus helps navigate inner struggles, challenges, and conflicts that we all inevitably encounter in our interactions with the external world (Malti, 2016). In developmental psychological and developmental psychopathological models alike, it is widely assumed that the ability to self-regulate is essential to help children establish this sense of inner strength and respond to environmental challenges in a proactive, rather than a reactive or overly controlled manner. Our kindness model extends this notion by emphasizing

a second, affective capacity (i.e. the ability to be gentle with oneself and one's own limitations and capacities).

Moving forward, more integrated approaches seem warranted to nurture the kindness components comprehensively and include both self-oriented and other-oriented capacities. In a review of the active ingredients of school-based programmes that target SEL across childhood and adolescence, my colleagues and I found that targeting higher numbers of empathy-related constructs were, in part, associated with larger effects on externalizing outcomes, including aggression and antisocial behaviours (Malti et al., 2016a). This may provide some support for the argument that an approach focused on the nurturance of kindness may be broadly beneficial and decrease engagement in, and exposure to, risk behaviour.

In addition, it is essential to tailor any promotional approach to kindness to the developmental capacity of every child (Malti, 2016). My team and I have shown elsewhere that the majority of research-informed, school-based programmes that target SEL show some degree of developmental differentiation between grades. Yet, developmental differences within grades was rarely considered in the interventions. Because of the wide range of capacities between and within children, developmental tailoring in intervention efforts thus needs to include both across-age and within-age variation (Durlak et al., 1991; Malti et al., 2016a).

Developmental tailoring requires an in-depth understanding of a child's social-emotional development and its various subcomponents. In other words, it needs to be informed by detailed knowledge of the child's developmental needs and strengths. Informing the decision-making process about service selection may be facilitated through the use of screens and assessment tools (Malti & Song, 2018). Thus, knowledge about normative developmental processes in each subcomponent of kindness, such as sympathy or sharing behaviours, is helpful when planning interventions aimed at promoting kindness. Screening and assessment tools that measure dimensions of kindness exist and can be helpful to generate individual or group-level profiles that can be used to identify strengths and challenges in particular areas, such as sympathy. If a practitioner is aware of when, how, and why an expression of kindness can be expected by a child in a given context, it provides essential information about if and how a specific intervention technique or practice aimed at nurturing kindness (or a particular subdimension) should be applied. Of course, many practices to

enhance kindness also apply across development, such as nurturing a calm mind, which enables us to be aware of and see our and others' perspectives in everyday life.

My collaborators and I have implemented the Social-Emotional Responding Task (SERT), a research-informed tool to screen and assess for core dimensions of social-emotional development and kindness across ages, across countries (Malti, 2017; Malti, Zhang, & Yavuz, 2020a). Many other tools to measure SEL dimensions exist (Denham et al., 2016; Malti et al., 2018). Using such tools may help to enable better identification and inform targeted efforts to promote individual growth in dimensions of kindness, as well as group-level growth in kindness (e.g. in a classroom).

Conclusion

The proposed developmental model of kindness assumes that promotional efforts will be effective at nurturing kindness when they a) acknowledge that balance between self- and other-oriented tendencies is beneficial to remain healthy and contribute to a greater good, b) are developmentally sensitive and, c) take the principle of equifinality to heart and enhance multiple facets of kindness in both the child and in the environment. This comprehensive approach goes beyond traditional intervention programming and emphasizes a need to shift the cultures of education and learning.

In conclusion, educational efforts to increase learning in meaningful ways have come a long way, and contemporary research-informed models emphasize both cognitive and affective (i.e. SEL) dimensions of learning. In this paper, I have proposed that virtue ethics, humanistic psychology, and developmental research on kindness can further inform this process and evolve our current thinking about what, when, and how to promote the affective components of learning. Nurturing kindness does not merely represent an essential goal of any holistic educational approach; it reflects an optimistic view of life, a focus on our capacity to grow and find meaning through a lived other-orientedness, and care of the self through our mind, feelings, and actions (Schweitzer, 1966). Practice and policy applications that are rooted in a developmental framework can contribute to this aim by making them sensitive to the needs of every child, everywhere, at every time.

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