

Kindness Begins in Kindergarten

Young children are kind. Their unkind behaviors are learned reactions to an unkind world. I hope to teach them calm, kind, and positive ways to deal with unfair and unkind situations.

At a Carroll County Board of Education meeting a few months ago, I wanted to spend my three minutes of citizen participation asking for a new social-emotional curriculum for kindergarten. I

knew my time was limited and my speech needed to be quick, memorable, and powerful. I have spoken up before—last year I shared with our board of education information about ACES, the Adverse Childhood Experiences Score, as a way to explain the need for more guidance counselors and classroom instructional assistants and smaller class sizes. Everyone agrees that these are needs and that our children are experiencing trauma but, they say, there just isn't enough money to pay for more of those vital positions.

As I prepared to speak before the board again, I decided to take another approach to helping our students: I told the members that in my opinion, the most important thing I teach in kindergarten is kindness. I told them that I could certainly teach all the reading, math, and science skills, and all the social studies facts, that a kindergartener would need for academic success in first grade.



But without knowing what kindness is—without knowing how to be kind—no amount of skills or facts would prepare that student for success in the real world. I

then read aloud to them a picture book called *What Does It Mean to Be Kind?* by Rana DiOrio. Then I invited them to visit my room anytime and thanked them for their time

As I write this, school has started, my room is in place, and I know I have to live up to my new celebrity status as the teacher who reads picture books to the board of education. I told the board and the community that I believe kindness is the most important thing I teach and I am prepared to defend my position.

I didn't decorate my room in a color scheme or cute character theme this year. Instead, I decorated it with kindness. I put up positive posters about emotions, feelings, and manners. On one wall, we're creating our Kindness Wall, a place to record students' acts of kindness and those shown to them.

I will still teach the curriculum, of course, but I will intentionally embed kindness in everything we do.

For example, I am choosing to teach concepts of print, letter recognition, and their sounds and decoding skills through literature where character traits and story elements model and explain kindness.

In math, we will learn how numbers work together. For science, we will work in teams to problem-solve. In social studies, kindness will be my class focus. And every day, our reading time will illustrate kindness—what it is, how to show it, and what to do if someone isn't kind. I

will choose stories where characters show kindness and where they don't and illustrate problems and solutions where kindness is fundamental.

Together, my students and I will learn and explore kindness. We will practice it daily and fill our room with reminders and celebrations of our studies. I believe that by focusing on kindness, I will have fewer discipline issues.

Young children are kind. Their unkind behaviors are learned reactions to an unkind world. I hope to teach them calm, kind, and positive ways to deal with

unfair and unkind situations. I want them to know that our room is a kind, welcoming place where we treat each other with courtesy and respect. We will use the models of restorative practices and peace circles to come together should unkindness affect our classroom and we will open our kindness space up to all children and staff in our building.

Kindness is not just one more thing to teach. It should be embedded in how and what we teach, internalized as part of our lives and the lives of our students.

**TEACH
EMPATHY,
COURTESY,
AND
RESPECT.**

Choosing to be empathetic, thoughtful, and respectful is kindness. Isn't that all we really need to learn in kindergarten?

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