

The power of kindness in improving brain health

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Kindness is powerful and does not just affect the recipient's feelings—kindness can also impact an entire family's brain health. A cross-disciplinary team of researchers and clinicians from Center for

BrainHealth at The University of Texas at Dallas sought to understand whether an online kindness training program improves preschooler's prosocial behaviors and their parents' resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings were published recently in *Frontiers in Psychology* by BrainHealth researchers Maria Johnson, MA, director of Youth & Family Innovations; Julie Fratantoni, Ph.D., [cognitive neuroscientist](#) and head of operations for The BrainHealth Project; Kathleen Tate, MA, clinician; and Antonia Moran, a graduate student at UT Dallas. The team discovered that teaching and practicing [kindness](#) at home improves both parents' resilience and children's empathy.

The researchers studied the impact of an online kindness training program, adapted from the curriculum of Children's Kindness Network, founded by Ted Drier, on 38 mothers and their 3- to 5-year-old children. The program, "Kind Minds with Moozie," features five short modules where a digital cow ("Moozie") describes creative exercises that parents can do with their kids to teach kindness.

"We aim to encourage parents to engage in practical, brain-healthy interactions with their children that aid in a better understanding of one another, especially during times of stress," said Johnson. "Research shows that kindness is a strong potentiator of vibrant social engagement, which in turn is a critical component of overall brain health."

To determine how kindness influences brain health, the team asked parents to survey their own resilience and report on their kids' empathy before and after the training program. They found that parents are more resilient and preschoolers are more empathetic after kindness training. Both resilience and empathy require [cognitive skills](#) like responding well to stressors or considering different perspectives. Their findings therefore support the idea that kindness can influence cognitive function

and overall brain health.

Surprisingly, the researchers found that children's empathy levels remained below average despite the noticeable improvement after training. This might be because COVID-19 safety measures significantly limited kids' normal social and emotional learning.

The researchers also tested whether understanding the science behind the kindness [training program](#) affects parents' resilience. A random group of 21 participating mothers received a few additional paragraphs to read on the brain's flexibility and plasticity, but the researchers did not find any differences in the parents' level of resilience, or their children's empathy, with the addition of brain science teachings.

Parents can learn simple strategies for practicing kindness effectively, right in their own home, to create a brain healthy environment for their kids. "In times of stress, taking a moment to practice kindness for yourself and model it for your children can boost your own resilience and improve your child's prosocial behaviors," said Fratantoni. "Do not underestimate the power of kindness, because it can ultimately change and shape brain health."

The impacts of kindness may even extend beyond families. "Kindness can be a powerful [brain](#) health booster that raises resilience, not only for parents and families, but for society as a whole," said Johnson.

More information: Maria Teresa Johnson et al, Parenting With a Kind Mind: Exploring Kindness as a Potentiator for Enhanced Brain Health, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.805748](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.805748)

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