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A Scoping Review of Interventions Promoting Kindness in Primary Schools

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ABSTRACT

Kindness is a moral and relational virtue involving compassionate understanding of one's own and others' emotions, along with behaviors that foster deep social bonds. Experiencing kindness at school has been associated with academic success, stronger student–teacher relationships, and fewer mental health and behavioral issues. However, interventions promoting kindness in primary schools are limited and under-documented. This scoping review maps and examines school-based interventions aimed at promoting kindness in children aged 6 to 11. Following PRISMA 2020 guidelines, 17 peer-reviewed studies were retrieved. Most interventions labeled as “kindness programs” were based on the social and emotional learning (SEL) approach (71%), some of which also included mindfulness (50%) or self-compassion (42%). Definitions of kindness were often vague or inconsistent, with kindness frequently addressed through related constructs such as prosocial behavior (41%), empathy (35%), or social-emotional competence (59%), rather than as an autonomous, holistic variable. Outcomes often focused on related constructs or partial aspects of kindness, while assessment tools rarely measured kindness directly or comprehensively. This lack of clear definition and consistent measurement creates conceptual and operational ambiguity, limiting comparability across studies and weakening evidence on the true impact of kindness interventions. To improve research and practice, future studies should clearly define kindness and use specific, validated tools tailored to this construct. Longitudinal designs are necessary to assess lasting effects. Consistent use of “kindness” as a keyword will enhance conceptual clarity and research visibility. These improvements will support rigorous, evidence-based educational policies that recognize kindness as a complex, multifaceted construct essential for child development and social well-being.

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Introduction

Kindness has long been recognized as one of the main virtues contributing to human flourishing (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). It can be conceptualized as intentional prosocial behaviors, oriented toward the well-being of others grounded in dispositions of care, concern, and respect. Thus, kindness is not limited to mere behaviors, but it also encompasses a broader relational and

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emotional orientation, involving compassionate understanding of one's own and others' internal states (Malti, 2021). Over time, kindness may be internalized as part of children's developing sense of self, contributing to the formation of stable relational patterns and social values. Cultivating kindness therefore means nurturing the fundamental qualities that support healthy relationships and promote cohesive communities (Malti, 2025; Malti & Colasante, 2024). Since its early development, kindness has had a social function of cohesion and mutual recognition. The term has gradually taken on broader meanings, including *kinship*, which implies the realization that we are all part of the same human race. This evolution has led to a more complex understanding of kindness, which has been studied in various disciplines, including modern human sciences ranging from positive psychology to developmental psychology and contemporary education (Schonert-Reichl & Weissberg, 2014; Seligman et al., 2009; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Zins et al., 2004).

The psychological literature offers multiple definitions and theoretical perspectives on kindness, reflecting its conceptual heterogeneity. For example, Long (1997) defined kindness as a behavior guided by a feeling of compassion. Campos and Algoe (2009) conceived kindness as an emotion-based motivation that promotes prosocial behavior without the expectation of reciprocal benefit. Peterson and Seligman (2004) defined kindness as the tendency to be compassionate toward other people, showing concern for their well-being through caring behavior. Binfet and Gaertner (2015) conceptualized kindness as an individual's ability to relate to their own and others' emotional states, resulting in acts of emotional or physical support. To address the fragmentation, Malti (2021) proposed kindness as a multidimensional construct that includes prosocial behaviors and related emotional and cognitive processes directed toward others (e.g. sympathy and empathy) and the self (e.g. guilt, emotion regulation, and self-care). This definition resonates with a broader understanding of kindness as a fundamental aspect of the human heart—one that reflects the deep importance of caring for oneself, others, and life as a whole. From this perspective, kindness is not merely superficial or situational behavior, but rather a profound expression of inner emotional states and moral dispositions that manifest in actions, shaping human relationships and the surrounding social environment. People engage in kindness not only for pragmatic or evolutionary reasons, but also as a meaningful way to express their humanity and to nurture a shared sense of connection, purpose, and growth (Malti & Colasante, 2024). From a developmental perspective, this deeply rooted capacity begins to emerge early in life. Infants begin to show the first signs of empathy and sympathy through emotional contagion and sensitivity to the expressions of others, which are considered affective precursors of kindness (Davidov et al., 2013; Eisenberg et al., 1989; Hay et al., 2009; Hoffman, 1991; Malti & Davidov, 2023; Roth-Hanania et al., 2011). Primary school represents a critical period for the development of kindness, as children show increasing maturation of metacognitive functions, including moral judgment. During this period, children become increasingly able to reflect on their own mental states, evaluate the consequences of their behavior, and integrate others' perspectives. At the same time, advances in emotion regulation support more consistent and context-appropriate responses to others' emotional needs (Malti et al., 2016; Malti & Dys, 2018; Malti & Speidel, 2024). Motivational processes - such as empathy, gratitude, and especially compassion - further support the emergence of kind behavior, enabling children to recognize others' needs and respond with supportive actions (Peplak & Malti, 2022; Svetlova et al., 2010; Vaish et al., 2009).

During primary school, there is also a shift in the centrality of relationships from the family to the peer group. The school environment provides a key relational context in which kindness can be practiced and reinforced through peer interactions and cooperative activities (Binfet & Gaertner, 2015; Binfet & Passmore, 2019). In recent years, educational institutions have shown a growing interest in implementing intervention programs aimed at promoting kindness (Kaplan et al., 2016; Lee & Huang, 2021). In fact, a kindness-oriented school climate is associated with increased self-esteem and motivation to learn, and a decreased risk of dropping out of school; it has also been linked to improved mental health and reduced bullying and aggressive behavior among peers (Datu et al., 2023; Thapa et al., 2013).

However, despite this growing body of evidence, there is still limited integration across frameworks explaining how kindness-based interventions produce their effects. In this regard, the model proposed by Kaplan et al. (2016) provides a useful framework for understanding kindness-based interventions in schools. The model identifies multiple interconnected domains, including students' social-emotional skills, school climate, and broader contextual factors, and provides a structure for organizing both mechanisms and outcomes of kindness-based interventions.

Building on this perspective, existing research on kindness promotion in school contexts can be broadly organized into three main intervention approaches. In particular, these include social-emotional learning (SEL), mindfulness-based approaches, and positive psychology interventions.

Meta-analyses and systematic reviews (Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017) show that SEL programs effectively promote social-emotional skills and prosocial behaviors. Such interventions target core skills such as emotion regulation, empathy, and perspective-taking, which are key antecedents of prosocial and kind behavior (Malti et al., 2016; Speidel et al., 2024).

The development of these competencies is also associated with improved academic engagement and positive peer relationships (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Zins et al., 2007). Evidence from program evaluations and developmental research further indicates that strengthening these skills is associated with increased prosocial behavior and reduced aggression (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2010; Greenberg et al., 2017; Kramer et al., 2014). These findings suggest that SEL programs create the conditions for the emergence and stabilization of kind and cooperative behaviors within everyday classroom interactions (Dempsey et al., 2024; Hein et al., 2018; McDaniel et al., 2022; Silke et al., 2024).

SEL programs also incorporate activities aimed at fostering prosocial and cooperative behaviors, such as sharing, mutual aid, and collaborative problem-solving (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017).

At the same time, mindfulness-based interventions (MBI) have shown positive effects on children's socioemotional development. Among these, the Kindness Curriculum (Flook et al., 2015; Haines et al., 2023) represents a notable example of an intervention explicitly designed to promote kindness; in fact, this program is grounded in compassion-based practices and integrates attentional awareness and emotional regulation, fostering both intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. Although originally developed for preschool settings, the Kindness Curriculum has informed subsequent interventions in primary education, providing a structured model for cultivating kindness, particularly through the enhancement of attentional regulation, emotional awareness, and self-regulation processes. These mechanisms are considered central to reducing impulsive reactions and fostering more intentional and prosocial responses in social interactions.

Building on this line of research, a systematic review by Perkins et al. (2022) provides an important synthesis of kindness and compassion-based meditation (KCBM) interventions in children and adolescents, offering one of the few existing overviews of interventions explicitly targeting kindness within a mindfulness framework. In doing so, the authors distinguish KCBM from standard mindfulness-based interventions, highlighting its explicit focus on prosocial emotions such as empathy, altruism, and compassion. Perkins and colleagues further distinguish between "pure" interventions, derived from contemplative traditions (e.g., loving-kindness meditation), and multicomponent programs in which KCBM practices are integrated within broader approaches such as SEL or mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR). Overall KCBM interventions have been associated with improvements in emotional well-being and emotional regulation, reductions in stress, and promising effects on prosocial outcomes.

In regards to the aims of the current study, the systematic review by Perkins et al. (2022) focuses specifically on mindfulness-based approaches and does not provide an integrated overview of kindness-promoting interventions across different theoretical frameworks or educational models.

A complementary line of research is represented by positive psychology interventions within educational settings, which conceptualize kindness as a core character strength associated with both individual and collective well-being (Binfet & Gaertner, 2015). Experimental studies on “acts of kindness” (e.g., prosocial behavior toward others) show that engaging in kind actions is associated with increased subjective well-being and social connectedness (Curry et al., 2018; Dunn et al., 2014; Hui et al., 2020 Otake et al., 2006).

Despite these three types of interventions (e.g., mindfulness-based, socio-emotional competence-based, and positive psychology-based) that promote components of kindness, such as compassion, gratitude, optimism, and prosocial behavior (Baourda et al., 2024; Caeleon et al., 2017; Pardon et al., 2023; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2012; Zava et al., 2025), none explicitly focused on the overarching construct of kindness that remains limited and insufficiently systematized. Given this gap in the literature, a scoping review is warranted to systematically map existing interventions aimed at promoting kindness as a broad concept in primary school children.

Unlike traditional systematic reviews focused on evaluating effectiveness, a scoping review methodology is particularly suited to exploring an emerging and conceptually heterogeneous field. It allows for the examination of the intervention approaches used, how kindness is conceptualized and measured, the types of outcomes assessed, and the gaps that remain to guide future research and practice on kindness-promotion interventions.

The present study

This scoping review aims to answer the following overarching research question: how have existing interventions promoted kindness in children aged 6–11? Specifically, through a systematic analysis of empirical, school-based interventions explicitly identifying kindness as the core intervention aim, this review seeks to:

1. Identify the key characteristics of the interventions and their implementation, including their operationalization of kindness, content, theoretical frameworks, duration, and delivery formats;
2. Analyze the methodological approaches and assessment tools used to evaluate their effectiveness, including the types of instruments used to assess kindness and related constructs, if present;
3. Examine the reported outcomes and benefits for children within the target age group, with particular attention to domains such as prosocial behavior, well-being, and cognitive development.

Although previous studies have examined interventions based on self-compassion, social-emotional learning and related approaches, no review to date has provided an integrated overview of how these models conceptualize and address kindness in the primary school context. Therefore, the added value of this study lies in examining how kindness is conceptualized and assessed across different studies, including their theoretical frameworks, measurement tools, and the range of outcomes considered in a field that remains fragmented. This scoping review provides an integrated overview of current evidence, highlights promising practices, and identifies directions for future research and intervention development.

Method

Exploratory search strategy and query optimization

Before starting the review process, an exploratory approach was adopted to survey the research that has investigated kindness in childhood, with the aim of identifying the keywords most frequently used to define the construct. Among these, the word “*kindness*” emerged, along with

its derivatives, such as “*kind**”, “*kinship*”, and “*gentleness*.” Terms related to primary school were added to these, such as “*primary school*” and “*elementary school*,” as well as “*children*”, “*pupil*”, and “*student*” to isolate school-age children, and the term “*school intervention*” was added to limit the interventions to the school context. The strings entered into the PubMed, PsycInfo, Education Search, and Eric databases initially produced limited and sometimes irrelevant results, as the word “*kindness*”, considered individually or in combination with the terms “*primary school*”, “*children*”, and “*intervention*”, was difficult to identify. Thesauri were therefore used, which are lexical tools that provide a controlled list of organized terms, reflecting the semantic relationships between words. This approach made it possible to identify other terms associated with the word “*kindness*”, allowing us to refine our search strategies by including terms such as “*empathy*”, “*compassion*”, “*care*”, and “*gentleness*”, which were semantically related and are theoretically understood as core constructs of kindness (Gilbert et al., 2019; Kristeller & Johnson, 2005; Malti, 2021; Malti & Speidel, 2024; Masterson & Kersey, 2013; Neff, 2003; Niemiec et al., 2024). In addition, there was a need to broaden the search using terms most associated with the concept of “*intervention*”. To achieve this, the thesauri were consulted again, and hierarchical and associative relationships were analyzed. It emerged that, although the terms “*school-based intervention*”, “*teaching intervention*”, and “*classroom intervention*” were the most recurrent, the inclusion of these terms in the query limited the search field to specific categories of intervention, such as those related to learning and methods of assessing school-related skills. Therefore, it was decided to include broader terms of “*intervention*”, “*strategies*”, and “*best practices*”. At the end of this process, the following query was formulated: (*kindness or compassion or empathy or caring or gentleness*) AND (*primary school or elementary school*) AND (*interventions or strategies or best practices*). The query process was carried out between May and September 2024. Subsequently, to guarantee the inclusion of all relevant studies for the objectives of this review, the same search string was relaunched in May 2025.

Study selection and eligibility criteria

The review was conducted following the PRISMA guidelines (2020) adapted from Page et al. (2021) as shown in the flow chart below.

Search criteria:

- Only the English language filter was applied;
- no time limit was set for publication.

Study inclusion criteria:

- only articles published in international peer-reviewed scientific journals were considered;
- studies that described and evaluated intervention programs aimed at promoting kindness - or its closest semantic relatives described in the above query - in primary school children (aged 6-11 years) were selected;
- evidence-based interventions supported by rigorous scientific studies with experimental or quasi-experimental designs, including studies showing preliminary evidence of effectiveness.

Studies were excluded if they did not meet the above criteria. Specifically, these included articles not published in peer-reviewed journals, studies conducted outside the 6–11 age range, interventions not explicitly aimed at promoting kindness or related constructs (e.g., those primarily addressing problem behaviors or teaching practices), and studies lacking empirical support from experimental or quasi-experimental designs or without preliminary evidence of effectiveness.

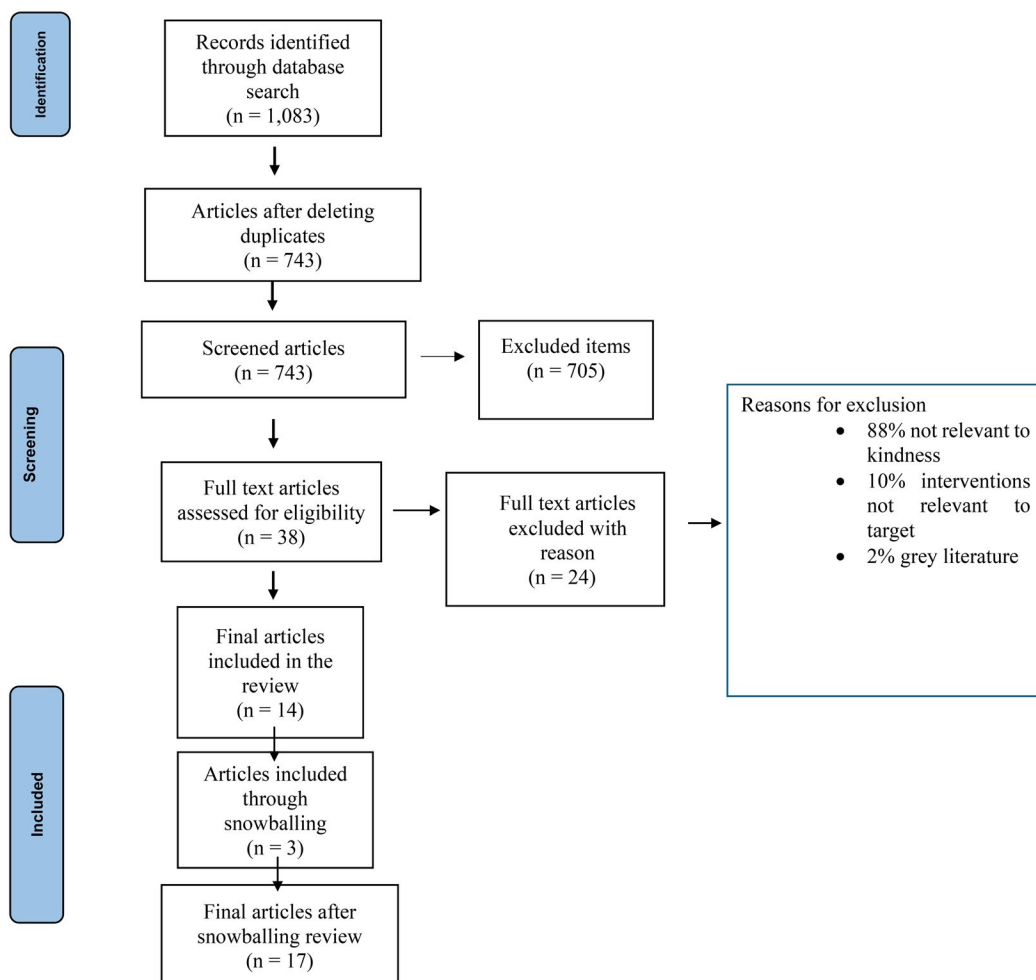


Figure 1. Prisma diagram (Page et al., 2021).

As reported in the PRISMA statement (see Figure 1), the query initially generated a pool of 1,083 articles. After removing 340 duplicate and grey literature records, 743 articles remained. These articles were analyzed based on titles and abstracts according to the inclusion criteria. Two independent reviewers screened titles and abstracts according to the eligibility criteria and subsequently assessed the full-text articles for inclusion. At the end of the first screening phase, 705 articles (94.89%) were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria, while the remaining 38 (5.11%) underwent a second review phase focused on full-text analysis. Of these 38 full-text articles, 24 were excluded for the following reasons: 88% were not directly relevant to the construct of kindness, 10% referred to interventions not suited to the target population, and 2% were grey literature. To further expand the search, a snowballing strategy was adopted (see Jalali & Wohlin, 2012), which allowed for the identification of 53 papers after eliminating 2 articles already included in the initial corpus, of which only 3 were found to be eligible. In conclusion, the total number of studies included in the final review was 17.

Results

The results are organized into three main areas corresponding to the three objectives of the present review. Descriptives are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptions of studies included in the review.

Article	Objective	Sample	Country	Intervention method	Instruments	Results
Di Perna et al. (2018)	General objective: To evaluate the effectiveness of the SSIS-CIP on social, behavioral, and academic outcomes in first grade. Objective of interest: To examine how its activities foster kindness, empathy, respect, and care.	N = 696 students aged 6 (number of students in experimental and control groups not specified).	USA	The SSIS-CIP is a 12-week evidence-based program with three weekly lessons (20–25 min each) aimed at enhancing social-emotional, behavioral, and learning skills. It covers receptive skills, attention, and interactive abilities across 10 modules.	No instrument specifically measuring kindness was used.	Increase of social-emotional skills, including cooperation, communication, self-control, caring behaviors, empathy toward others, and motivation to learn.
Curtis and Norgate (2007)	General objective: To evaluate the effectiveness of the PATHS curriculum in promoting social-emotional learning. Objective of interest: To examine how its activities support social-emotional development and foster kindness.	N = 287 students Experimental group on student aged 6–7: N = 114. Control group on students aged 6–7: N = 173.	UK	The PATHS curriculum is a year-long, evidence-based intervention with 101 lessons across three units—self-control, emotional understanding, and problem-solving. It promotes social-emotional learning through structured lessons, peer collaboration, and parental involvement.	No instrument specifically measuring kindness was used.	Improvement in emotional literacy skills, in peer relationships, in prosocial behaviors (sharing, mutual help) and reduction in behavioral problems in experimental group compared to the control group.
Tarrasch and Berger (2022)	General objective: To evaluate the effectiveness of the Call to Care-Israel programs for teachers (C2C-IT) and students (C2C-I), based on mindfulness and compassion. Objective of interest: To examine how the programs develop emotional awareness, empathy, and supportive relationships.	Combined group on students aged 9–11 and 3 teachers: N = 87. Indirect group on student aged 9–11 and 2 teachers: N = 60. Control group students aged 9–11 and teachers: N = 90.	Israel	The Call to Care-Israel programs are evidence-based mindfulness interventions delivered over 20 weekly sessions and aimed at enhancing emotional and social skills. The teacher program focuses on emotional awareness and self-regulation (90-minute sessions), while the student program promotes receiving care, self-care, and extending care (45-minute sessions).	Behavioral measures included the frequency of helping behaviors and questionnaires assessing prosocial behavior, life satisfaction, teacher attachment, and classroom climate.	In the two groups (combined and indirect), an improvement in life satisfaction levels, positive feelings toward the class group (prosocial behaviors and behaviors aimed at care, kindness, and compassion), and availability and acceptance by teachers were found compared to the control group. Only the combined group showed significant improvements in both mindfulness and prosocial behaviors. Decreases in anxiety levels and attention and somatization problems were observed in both the indirect and combined groups.

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Article	Objective	Sample	Country	Intervention method	Instruments	Results
Morizio et al. (2024)	General objective: To evaluate the effectiveness of the Creating Compassion program in promoting social-emotional skills and prosocial behaviors. Objective of interest: To examine how the program fosters kindness through experiential learning, modeling, reinforcement, and a supportive learning environment.	N=9 students aged 6–8 (all participants receive the intervention in 3 separate groups. No control group was included in the study)	USA	Evidence-based arts-based intervention delivered twice a week for six weeks (45-minute sessions), aimed at fostering empathy, kindness, and prosocial behaviors such as active listening, emotional expression, cooperation, and perspective-taking in children.	No instrument specifically measuring kindness was used.	Students who participated in the intervention reported an increase in social-emotional skills and prosocial behaviors (talking to a classmate in a kind manner, showing respect and consideration). Significant improvement in these skills was found in students with emotional difficulties.
Schonert-Reichl et al. (2015)	General objective: To evaluate the effectiveness of a mindfulness-based program (MindUP) on academic well-being and social-emotional learning. Objective of interest: To examine how mindfulness promotes socio-emotional skills, stress regulation, kindness, and gratitude.	N=99 Experimental group students aged 9–11: N=48. Control group students aged 9–11: N=51.	Canada	The MindUP evidence-based program combining mindfulness, socio-emotional learning, and kindness promotion includes 12 weekly lessons (40–50 min) and daily mindfulness practices (3 min, three times per day) fostering self-regulation, empathy, optimism, gratitude, and reciprocal acts of kindness.	Peer nomination of prosocial behaviors (sharing and collaboration, reliability, helping others, kindness, and understanding the point of view of others).	Improvements in positive emotions, emotional regulation, self-awareness, self-kindness, and self-compassion in students and teachers of the experimental group compared to the control group.
Suldo et al. (2015)	General objective: To evaluate the effectiveness of a Positive Psychology intervention (PPI) based on gratitude and kindness on well-being in the classroom. Objective of interest: To examine gratitude, kindness, and the strengthening of positive relationships between teachers and students.	Experimental group students aged 9–10: N=12. Control group was not included.	USA	Curricular program (PPI) based on gratitude practices, character strengths development, acts of kindness, and positive peer-teacher relationship building. The program consists of 11 weekly sessions (30–50 min).	No instrument specifically measuring kindness was used.	Increases in the perception of positive emotions and satisfaction with life in student participants. No changes were found in school satisfaction and family relationship quality.
De Carvalho et al. (2017)	General objective: To evaluate the effectiveness of the MindUP program, based on mindfulness and social-emotional learning, for teachers and students. Objective of interest: To examine students in planning acts of kindness and practicing gratitude and compassion.	Experimental group students aged 7–8: N=223 and 13 teachers. Control group students aged 7–8: N=231 and 7 teachers.	Portugal	The MindUP program enhances self-awareness, attention, self-regulation, and social-emotional skills through four structured activities. It includes a 50-h course: 25 h of expert-led training and 25 h of classroom implementation over 6 sessions.	Self-Compassion Scale (SCS-C): "Self-Kindness" subscale measures the ability to be kind and compassionate toward oneself.	Improvements in positive emotions, emotional regulation, self-awareness, self-kindness, and self-compassion in students and teachers of the experimental group compared to the control group.

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Article	Objective	Sample	Country	Intervention method	Instruments	Results
Dobia et al. (2019)	General objective: To evaluate the effectiveness of the Circle Solutions program, focused on social-emotional learning, inclusion, and school belonging. Objective of interest: To examine kindness through the principles of agency, safety, positivity, inclusion, respect, and equity.	Experimental group student aged 9–11: N = 157 and 5 teachers. Control group: N = 3 school (waitlist) (number of teachers and students in the control group is not clearly specified).	UK	Circle Solutions foster positive relationships and social-emotional skills through games and discussions, grounded in inclusion and respect. The program was delivered in weekly 30- to 45-minute sessions.	A questionnaire with open-ended questions was used to assess participants' experiences (thoughts and emotions) and learning. Thematic analysis of student responses was highlighted. Kindness/friendliness is one of the most frequently coded outcomes.	Increase in students' inclusiveness, emotional awareness, and self-esteem, improvement in teachers' effectiveness, empathy, and kindness. No significant group differences emerged in social-emotional skills or behavior.
Bearden et al. (2023)	General objective: To evaluate the effectiveness of the HeartMath Heart Lock-In program on emotional regulation and academic well-being. Objective of interest: To examine emotional well-being through heart-focused breathing, gratitude, and kindness practices toward self and others.	Experimental group students aged 10–11: N = 24. The study used a within-subject repeated measures design; no separate control group was included.	Canada	Curricular intervention based on the Heart Lock-In practice, implemented daily for 5 min over 4 wk. Structured in three phases: heart-focused breathing, activation of positive emotions, and kindness/gratitude practices.	No instrument specifically measuring kindness was used.	Improvements indicated <i>via</i> heart rate variability (HRV), and better emotional regulation, self-esteem, empathy, kindness, focus, and emotion management in the experimental group
Russell et al. (2013)	General objective: To evaluate the effectiveness of a book-based educational intervention on children's character development, kindness, and comprehension skills. Objective of interest: To examine values such as kindness, tolerance, and honesty through story books activities.	N = 300 students aged 6–10 (number of students in the experimental and control groups is not clearly specified).	USA	Evidence-based program using read-aloud sessions and guided discussions to promote kindness, honesty, and tolerance. Reading frequency increased from monthly in the first year to both monthly and weekly sessions in the second year.	Teachers conducted structured observations with researchers to assess student behaviors (honesty, respect, courtesy, friendship, kindness, patience, caring, compassion, and tolerance) and classroom climate.	Improvement in classroom climate, and in character traits such as compassion, honesty and kindness with a reduction in behavioral difficulties.

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Article	Objective	Sample	Country	Intervention method	Instruments	Results
Mathias (1992)	General objective: To evaluate the impact of different types of counseling-based interventions in school organizations aimed at promoting socio-emotional skills within the classroom. Objective of interest: To examine a more kind school climate and improve students' social well-being through school counseling.	Not detected in the study.	USA	The Bells of Caring Project, implemented over two weeks, reinforced kind behaviors through positive reinforcement; Warm Fuzzy Week, held during National School Counseling Week, encouraged expressions of kindness such as warmth, affection, and appreciation (verbal or written).	No instrument specifically measuring kindness was used.	The intervention programs were judged by teachers to be useful in promoting a positive classroom climate, increasing socialization, self-esteem and kind behaviors among peers.
Froh et al. (2014)	General objective: To evaluate the effectiveness of the Daily Benefit-Appraisal Curriculum and the Weekly Benefit-Appraisal Curriculum, two educational interventions designed to promote gratitude through understanding and appreciating altruistic social exchanges, which include acts of helping, caring, and kindness. Objective of interest: To examine children's awareness of social cognitions through kind interactions that foster gratitude and emotional well-being.	Study 1 on students aged 9–10. Experimental group: $N=62$. Control group: $N=60$. Study 2 students aged 8–11: Experimental group: $N=44$. Control group: $N=38$.	USA	Two randomized studies tested a gratitude-based curriculum focused on intention, cost, and benefit. The lessons included role-playing to help children understand and apply the concepts of gratitude, care, and kindness. Study 1: Daily 30-minute sessions over one week using discussions, writing, and role-play. Study 2: Same content delivered weekly over five weeks to allow deeper integration. Control groups received neutral lessons.	No instrument specifically measuring kindness was used.	In both studies, greater awareness and appreciation of altruistic acts in experimental groups compared to the control group. The Daily Benefit-Appraisal Curriculum increased gratitude and well-being, while the Weekly version had more lasting effects, maintained up to 5 months post-intervention.
Layous et al. (2012)	General objective: To evaluate the effectiveness of a kindness-focused intervention aimed at encouraging children to perform kind acts and promoting subjective well-being and peer acceptance. Objective of interest: To examine children to engage in specific acts of kindness toward peers, parents, and teachers such as helping others, expressing affection, and courtesy gestures.	$N=415$ students aged 9–11 from 19 classes. Classes were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: "Acts of Kindness" and "Whereabouts"	Canada	The Kindness Counts program is a four-week intervention in which children perform three acts of kindness per week or visited and wrote down three places each week.	No instrument specifically measuring kindness was used.	The group associated with the "Acts of Kindness" condition showed a significant increase in peer acceptance. Both groups improved in psychological well-being, with greater gains in the kindness condition. No significant differences emerged in emotional well-being between groups.

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Article	Objective	Sample	Country	Intervention method	Instruments	Results
Samuels (2018)	General objective: To evaluate the effectiveness of the Caring for Life program to promote the development of kind, compassionate, and prosocial behaviors through caring for others, animals, and the environment. Objective of interest: To examine children in cooperative learning experiences that develop emotional intelligence and encourage kind and caring actions toward animals and the environment.	N=2255 (25 public elementary schools). Experimental group students aged 6–8: N=1764. Control group students aged 6–8: N=461	China	The program includes 10 teacher-led sessions over a year (5 sessions per semester, two sessions per week), focusing on cooperative learning, caring gestures toward animals, emotional self-efficacy, prosocial behavior, and social skills. In one school, a more intensive version was tested to assess whether increased participation enhanced prosociality compared to the standard program.	Prosocial Teacher Observation of Classroom Adaptation Checklist (TOCA-C): assesses aspects of kindness through observation of students' prosocial behaviors in various school and social contexts.	Increase in prosociality in the experimental group, especially sophomores and those with lower initial levels. The intensive program led to greater improvements in caring behaviors compared to the standard version.
Kim et al. (2025)	General objective: To evaluate the effectiveness of the Mindfulness-Based Social-Emotional Growth (MSEG) program in improving the health and well-being of elementary school students in Korea. Objective of interest: To examine an attitude of kindness toward oneself and others through practices of mindfulness, compassion, gratitude, and self-care.	Experimental group: N=70 participants, lower-grade (LG) students (aged 6–9): 35; upper-grade students (UG) (aged 9–12): 35. Control group: N=72 participants, lower-grade students (aged 6–9): 36; upper-grade students (aged 9–12):36.	Korea	The Mindfulness-Based Social-Emotional Growth (MSEG) program consists of 12 weekly sessions (40 min each) structured in three phases: an introduction with basic mindfulness exercises, a central phase focused on developing mindfulness, self-compassion, kindness, and gratitude, and a concluding phase with reflection and planning for practice.	Universal Altruism Test: an adaptation of the “Dictator Game” in which children had to decide how many candies to donate to unknown children.	Improvement of emotional regulation and overall well-being in younger students, while older students showed notable gains in emotional regulation, resilience, tolerance for negative affect, and supportive relationships in experimental group compared to the control group.
Min et al. (2024)	General objective: To evaluate the effectiveness of a six-week intervention program based on the SEE Learning curriculum, aimed at enhancing resilience and social-emotional competencies among elementary school students in Daegu, South Korea. Objective of interest: To examine students' social and emotional skills through activities that encourage kindness and compassion in the classroom.	Experimental group students aged 8–10: N=348 (no control group included).	Korea	The SEE Learning-based intervention aims to develop mindfulness, compassion, kindness, emotional regulation, self-awareness, and resilience through a 6-week program of 12 sessions (90min each). Activities included self-introductions, classroom rules, acts of kindness, interdependence exercises, and mindfulness practices, totaling 9h of training.	No instrument specifically measuring kindness was used.	Improvements in resilience (including self-efficacy and tolerance of negative affects) and social-emotional skills (emotional regulation and social abilities) in participants. While some gains declined at follow-up, overall scores remained higher than at pretest.

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Article	Objective	Sample	Country	Intervention method	Instruments	Results
Crompton et al. (2024)	To evaluate the effects of a school-based mindfulness program, called “Paws b,” on empathy and prosocial behavior, and on the sense of connection with the classroom. Objective of interest: To examine whether the intervention can increase kindness and prosocial interactions among classmates, thus contributing to a positive learning culture.	N = 133 (10 classes): Experimental group students aged 7–10: N = 81. Waiting list control group students aged 7–10: N = 52.	UK	The Paws b mindfulness program consists of 12 weekly lessons designed to foster kindness, gratitude, and prosocial behavior in children through activities like “puppy training” and “growing happiness.” It includes classroom practices, home mindfulness exercises (three times per week), and tasks such as sticker-sharing to promote cooperation and emotional awareness.	The children nominated classmates who matched five characteristics (kind; shares and collaborates; helps others when they have a problem; is reliable; and understands other people’s points of view).	Increased prosocial scores and (peer-nominated) kind and cooperative behaviors in experimental group compared to the control group. The study found no overall group differences in mindfulness or empathy.

Characteristics, conceptualization, and implementation of kindness-promoting interventions

Definition and operationalization of kindness as a construct

Analysis of the studies included in this review highlights marked heterogeneity in the definition and operationalization of the construct of kindness. Only half of the contributions (47%) provide an explicit definition of kindness as an autonomous theoretical construct, describing it as intentional prosocial behavior motivated by empathy or compassion and oriented toward the well-being of others, sometimes emphasizing its relational and emotional dimensions (Bearden et al., 2023; Crompton et al., 2024; Froh et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2025; Layous et al., 2012; Min et al., 2024; Samuels, 2018; Suldo et al., 2015).

However, many of the interventions labeled as “kindness programs” do not provide an explicit or autonomous definition of kindness. Instead, they tend to describe related constructs capturing only some components of the broader concept. The majority of studies (65%), in fact, embed kindness within larger educational frameworks, particularly those grounded in social-emotional learning, without clearly delineating it as a distinct theoretical construct (Bearden et al., 2023; Curtis & Norgate, 2007; De Carvalho et al., 2017; DiPerna et al., 2018; Dobia et al., 2019; Mathias, 1992; Morizio et al., 2024; Russell et al., 2013; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Suldo et al., 2015; Tarrasch & Berger, 2022).

In these cases, kindness is treated as an implicit subcategory, a positive side effect, or a secondary outcome of interventions focused on the development of other relational and affective skills. It is rarely the explicit focus of the intervention or directly measured and instead emerges as a desired outcome of the enhancement of related skills, such as empathy (35%), social-emotional competences (59%), and prosocial behaviors (41%), which are best understood as components included under the conceptual umbrella of kindness. Overall, kindness appears “diluted” within related constructs: it is often included but not clearly distinguished, promoted but not explicitly evaluated, and rarely treated as a standalone construct. Nonetheless, the majority of interventions (76%) promote kindness through concrete actions and observable behaviors (Bearden et al., 2023; Crompton et al., 2024; De Carvalho et al., 2017; Froh et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2025; Mathias, 1992; Layous et al., 2012; Min et al., 2024; Morizio et al., 2024; Russell et al., 2013; Samuels, 2018; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Tarrasch & Berger, 2022). In these studies, the term “kindness” serves as a descriptive label for a range of actions and practices involving respect, mutual help, sharing, cooperation, and active participation in school life, which, although not always labeled as “acts of kindness,” can be considered operational indicators of kind behaviors.

This conceptual ambiguity and heterogeneity is also reflected in the terminology used, where kindness overlaps with constructs such as prosocial behavior, empathy, compassion, gratitude, and social-emotional learning. Across the included studies, kindness was conceptualized in partially overlapping ways rather than through mutually exclusive categories. Rather than imposing a predefined classification, the present review aimed to map how kindness was described within each intervention, in line with its exploratory objectives. This choice was motivated by the high variability observed across studies. In many cases, authors did not explicitly situate their intervention within a clearly defined theoretical model of kindness, nor did they consistently distinguish kindness from closely related constructs such as prosocial behavior, social-emotional competence, or compassion. As a result, grouping conceptualizations according to predefined frameworks (e.g., social-emotional learning, mindfulness, or positive psychology) would have required an interpretative reclassification not always aligned with the authors’ original theoretical positioning.

From this perspective, several recurring tendencies emerged across studies, reflecting different emphases in how kindness was framed: it was described as intentional prosocial behavior; as part of broader social-emotional competencies; as a relational disposition; as a character strength or moral value; and as an outcome of mindfulness and reflective practices.

To preserve this heterogeneity, Table 2 reports the definitions and theoretical framings of kindness as presented by the original authors, allowing readers to appreciate both the diversity of conceptualizations and the limited explicit alignment with existing intervention models.

This ambiguity is further reflected in the selection of keywords in the included articles. In many cases, the term “kindness” does not appear explicitly among the listed keywords, despite being addressed in the text, making it more difficult to identify relevant studies through database searching. The analysis of keywords confirms this: only one study among those included explicitly mentions “kindness” as a keyword (Dobia et al., 2019). Several studies do not report keywords at all, further complicating their identification (Froh et al., 2014; Layous et al., 2012; Mathias, 1992). In the remaining articles, the most frequent keywords include “*prosocial behavior*”, “*social-emotional learning*”, “*mindfulness*”, and “*compassion*”. This suggests that kindness, although intuitively recognized and frequently promoted in educational programs, does not yet enjoy a defined conceptual status within the scientific literature. It appears rather as an “umbrella” concept, rich and polysemic, but at the same time elusive.

A closer examination of the intervention content provides illustrative examples of how kindness is operationalized across different types of intervention. There is a clear distinction between interventions that explicitly define and operationalize kindness-related behaviors and those in which kindness is promoted indirectly within broader theoretical frameworks. Overall, 47% of the studies provide explicit or semi-explicit descriptions of kindness-related behaviors (Crompton et al., 2024; Curtis & Norgate, 2007; Dobia et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2025; Layous et al., 2012; Mathias, 1992; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Suldo et al., 2015), whereas 52% conceptualize kindness implicitly as an emergent outcome of broader socio-emotional processes (Bearden et al., 2023; De Carvalho et al., 2017; DiPerna et al., 2018; Froh et al., 2014; Min et al., 2024; Morizio et al., 2024; Russell et al., 2013; Samuels, 2018; Tarrasch & Berger, 2022).

Studies with more explicit operationalization conceptualize kindness in terms of observable prosocial actions such as helping others, sharing resources, offering emotional support, expressing gratitude, and engaging in caring interactions with peers, family members, and the wider community. These behaviors are typically embedded in structured classroom activities that allow repeated practice and generalization across contexts. For example, the PATHS program (Curtis & Norgate, 2007) promotes positive peer recognition through structured compliment exchanges, encouraging children to express specific affirmations (e.g., “I like your smile”) and to extend such behaviors to family interactions. Similarly, interventions such as MindUP (De Carvalho et al., 2017; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015) embed prosocial actions within mindfulness-based and SEL activities, including greeting others, expressing appreciation, and participating in cooperative and community-oriented tasks such as collective projects or school-based initiatives. Positive psychology interventions (Suldo et al., 2015) explicitly instruct students to engage in regular acts of kindness toward peers and family members (e.g., helping with homework, sharing materials, offering compliments) and to reflect on their emotional responses. In some cases, structured practices (e.g., gratitude exercises) further link prosocial actions to emotional experience. Other interventions employ classroom-level relational norms and behavioral reinforcement strategies. For instance, Circle Solutions (Dobia et al., 2019) fosters kindness through norms such as respectful communication, attentive listening, and peer support, while the Bells of Caring Project (Mathias, 1992) uses reinforcement systems and structured communication training to encourage prosocial expression and conflict resolution.

In some interventions, kindness is promoted through structured behavioral assignments designed to encourage repeated prosocial engagement in daily life. Layous et al. (2012) require students to perform a set number of kind acts per week, extending prosocial behavior beyond the classroom context into family and community settings. Other interventions combine behavioral, reflective, and relational components (Crompton et al., 2024; Min et al., 2024), although kindness is sometimes inferred rather than directly trained as a distinct construct. A particularly relevant dimension emerging from mindfulness- and compassion-based interventions (Bearden et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2025; Tarrasch & Berger, 2022) is the emphasis on human

Table 2. Theoretical models, and behavioral operationalizations of kindness according to the articles included in the review.

Article	keywords	Definition of kindness	Theoretical model
DiPerna et al. (2018)	SSIS-CIP, Social skills, Approaches to learning, Social-emotional learning, Cluster randomized trial.	Kindness is conceived as a skill that is part of a broader set of students' social-emotional skills.	No explicit theoretical model of kindness is proposed; kindness is conceptualized implicitly within the broader Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) framework. The SSIS-CIP adopts a change-oriented model including proximal outcomes (social-emotional skills such as listening, helping, cooperation, emotion regulation), mediating outcomes (improved motivation, engagement, and attention), and distal outcomes (academic achievement and school success) (DiPerna et al., 2005, 2016). Kindness is therefore operationalized as a behavioral expression emerging from social and relational competencies rather than directly taught. Kindness behaviors examples: No explicit examples of kind behavior are provided. However, children are encouraged to participate in group activities, discuss strategies for making collective decisions, and work toward achieving common goals. Through role-play activities, students learn to express their needs clearly and respectfully, such as asking for help when necessary. They are also encouraged to follow classroom rules and reflect on the positive consequences of their behavior.
Curtis and Norgate (2007)	Not specified.	Kindness is conceived as a skill that is part of a broader set of students' social-emotional skills.	Kindness is not explicitly defined as an independent construct but is implicitly embedded within the socio-emotional competencies promoted by the PATHS curriculum. The program is grounded in the ABCD model (affective, behavioral, cognitive, dynamic; Kusche & Greenberg, 1994), which fosters empathy and emotional understanding (affective), prosocial behavior through self-regulation strategies such as the "turtle technique" (behavioral), reflection on action consequences (cognitive), and generalization of these skills through reinforcement and supportive social contexts (dynamic). Kindness behaviors examples: Children give compliments to the "Helper of the Day." These compliments are written and later shared with parents. Examples of compliments include: "I like her smile, and when she smiles, it makes me smile." Children also apply this behavior at home, for example, saying to their parents, "Thank you for breakfast, you are a very good cook."
Tarrasch and Berger (2022)	Students, Mindfulness, Compassion, Attention, Classroom atmosphere, Call to Care – Israel.	Kindness is conceptualized as an attitude that is part of social-emotional skills.	No specific theoretical model is explicitly provided for conceptualizing kindness; however, it is situated within a broader mindfulness-based approach. Mindfulness and compassion foster a non-judgmental and intentional attitude, which can translate into prosocial behaviors such as acts of kindness. In particular, the practices focus on the concept of care and caring for others, divided into three modalities: receiving care, developing self-care, and extending care. The teacher program (C2C-IT) aims to promote caring and supportive classroom environments that encourage student learning and well-being while the student Program (C2C-I) aims to cultivate the three modes of care in direct contact with students, tailoring the intervention to the child's developmental needs (Berger et al., 2018; Tarrasch et al., 2020). These practices not only enhance students' well-being but also contribute to a more positive classroom climate. This perspective is grounded in the understanding that socio-emotional skills, including empathy and compassion, are essential for prosocial behavior and can be cultivated through regular mindfulness practice. Kindness behaviors examples: No explicit examples of kind behavior are provided. However, children are encouraged to volunteer and help peers in need, such as by participating in donation activities for disadvantaged children. They also develop active listening skills to better understand and respond to others' needs, practice extending care to friends, and learn how to offer help. Additionally, they are taught to cultivate a compassionate mindset, recognize shared humanity, and create a social action plan for the school or community, with an emphasis on caring for all of humanity.

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Article	keywords	Definition of kindness	Theoretical model
Morizio et al. (2024)	Empathy, Compassion, Prosocial behavior, Intervention, Social-emotional learning, Single subject designs.	Kindness is described as prosocial behavior motivated by empathic understanding.	No explicit theoretical model of kindness is proposed; kindness is conceptualized through empathy as a core component of prosocial functioning and socio-emotional competence. Empathy is described as promoting positive peer interactions, cooperation, and prosocial attitudes, while supporting broader social awareness and emotional regulation. Artistic activities integrated into the SEL curriculum are identified as facilitating empathic learning and opportunities for prosocial behavior (Morizio et al., 2022). Kindness behaviors examples: No explicit examples of kind behavior are provided. However, children are encouraged to listen actively, both verbally (e.g., repeating or saying “uh-huh”) and nonverbally (e.g., eye contact, nodding). They practice empathy by using phrases like “That would have made me so happy!” or “Are you okay?” and by interpreting and responding to emotions (e.g., “You look sad”). In group activities, they learn to cooperate, take turns, and communicate positively through body language (e.g., thumbs-up/down). They are also taught to say “no, thank you” when faced with inappropriate behavior and to remove themselves from conflicts.
Schonert-Reichl et al. (2015)	Social and emotional learning, Well-being, Mindfulness, Intervention, Prosociality.	Kindness is described as an attitude that can be enhanced through social-emotional learning and the practice of compassion and gratitude.	No explicit theoretical model of kindness is presented; kindness is framed within the broader Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) framework, including self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. The MindUP program links kindness to executive functions, stress regulation, and self-reflection fostered through mindfulness practices (Hawn Foundation, 2008). Mindfulness and perspective-taking activities promote emotional awareness, self-control, understanding of others’ perspectives, and engagement in concrete prosocial acts such as gratitude and caring behaviors. Kindness behaviors examples: Children are involved in community service activities (e.g., collecting food for those in need or participating in neighborhood cleanups). Students are encouraged to perform acts of kindness both in the classroom and in the community (e.g., congratulating classmates, helping a friend in need, or simply smiling and saying hello to their classmates). Compared to peer nominations, which assessed five types of prosocial behaviors (“sharing,” “being trustworthy,” “being helpful,” “being kind,” and “considering others’ perspectives”), children who participated in the MindUP program were more frequently nominated by their peers for behaviors such as “sharing,” “being helpful,” and “considering others’ perspectives.”
Suldo et al. (2015)	Elementary school children, Positive psychology interventions, Class-wide implementation, Subjective well-being.	Kindness is described as a prosocial behavior that underlies subjective well-being.	Kindness is described as a prosocial behavior capable of triggering a virtuous cycle of positive emotions, thereby contributing to subjective well-being (Seligman, 2002). This concept is supported by Fredrickson’s (2001) theory, which falls within the framework of positive psychology and suggests that positive emotions experienced in the moment can have a lasting impact by improving social relationships and increasing well-being. One way to directly increase the frequency and quality of positive emotional experiences is by performing acts of kindness, which have a positive effect on children’s well-being and their popularity among classmates, thereby contributing to a more positive school environment (Suldo, 2014). Kindness behaviors examples: Children are encouraged to perform acts of kindness toward their peers, such as helping with homework, complimenting a friend, or sharing school materials. They reflect on moments where they witnessed or demonstrated kindness, and facilitators ask students to share recent experiences of kindness. Students are also invited to reflect on how these acts made them feel, such as feeling happier or more joyful. They are also encouraged to write and deliver thank-you letters (Gratitude Visits) to important people in their lives, such as teachers, family, or friends. Additionally, children participate in group projects like “Creative Coloring,” where they work together to complete an artistic task, reflecting on the link between peer support and feelings of happiness.

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Article	keywords	Definition of kindness	Theoretical model
De Carvalho et al. (2017)	Social and emotional skills, Mindfulness, Children, Teachers, Schools.	Kindness is conceived as a skill that is part of a broader set of students' social-emotional skills.	No explicit formal theoretical model of kindness is proposed; kindness is implicitly framed within Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), mindfulness and positive psychology frameworks (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). Within mindfulness, kindness is conceptualized as an attitudinal quality of attention characterized by acceptance, non-judgment, openness, compassion, self-compassion, and loving-kindness. Within SEL, kindness is behaviorally expressed through core competencies such as self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, particularly <i>via</i> empathy, perspective-taking, and prosocial behavior. Kindness behaviors examples: No explicit examples of kind behavior are provided. However, children are encouraged to perform acts of kindness and practice gratitude. They are also involved in community-oriented activities, particularly within the school context (e.g., projects that benefit the school community). Children develop social and emotional understanding through the practice of perspective-taking, optimism, and appreciation of happy experiences. Kindness is not formally defined as an explicit construct but is implicitly embedded within the social-emotional and relational framework of the Circle Solutions model. The approach emphasizes classroom cohesion, relational climate, and group belonging through the ASPIRE principles: agency, safety, positivity, inclusion, respect, and equity (Roffey, 2017). Within this framework, kindness emerges through the development of empathy, listening, caring for others, and respectful peer interaction fostered during Circle Solutions activities.
Dobia et al. (2019)	Circle Solutions, ASPIRE, Social and emotional learning, Inclusion, Kindness, Relationships.	Kindness is conceptualized as an attitude that promotes positive relationships, respect, and empathic cooperation.	Kindness behaviors examples: Students who participated in Circle Solution reported learning "not to tease others" and "to try to listen more." They also expressed the idea that kindness is its own reward and emphasized being friendly and having fun in interactions (e.g., "I learned that if I try to listen to others, I may understand more."). Others highlighted the importance of expressing feelings and ideas (e.g., "we can share our ideas with others"), getting to know and caring for others (e.g., "learning more about people to become better friends"), and helping others ("helping others find the answer or solve a problem"). Students offered several suggestions for improving Circle Solutions lessons. One theme that emerged was that many students stated that "classmates are kind to each other most of the time," indicating a positive classroom climate. Teachers have noted an increase in children's attention to special needs children (e.g., Children began using phrases such as "No insults," "Children appear to think more before saying something they shouldn't,") which encouraged respectful behavior among peers. No specific theoretical model is explicitly provided, but kindness is incorporated within the Heart Lock-In intervention model. This model is based on emotional regulation and physiological coherence, aiming to enhance children's resilience, self-regulation, and overall well-being (HeartMath Institute, 2014). Kindness appears as a component of renewing emotions such as care, compassion, love, and gratitude which foster balance in the autonomic nervous system and increase heart rate variability (HRV) (Fredrickson et al., 2008). In the final phase, these positive emotions are extended toward oneself and others, enhancing empathy and kindness. With repeated practice, intervention produces measurable effects on children's physiological functioning, emotional stability, and social relationships, demonstrating that cultivating kindness is both a skill and a practical tool for promoting well-being and learning. Kindness behaviors examples: No explicit examples of kind behavior are presented. Children are encouraged to focus their attention on the heart area gradually slowing and deepening their breath. They are guided to activate and sustain a self-selected positive emotional state, such as care, love, gratitude, or compassion.
Bearden et al. (2023)	Emotion regulation, Heart Lock-In, Heart Math, Heart rate variability.	Kindness is described as a state that an individual can achieve through awareness and compassion.	

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Article	keywords	Definition of kindness	Theoretical model
Russell et al. (2013)	Character development, Character education, Character traits, Morals, Ethics, Values, Role models, Read aloud, Questioning, Guided discussions, Comprehension, Behavior, and Attitudes.	Kindness is considered as a positive character trait that students can develop in the classroom.	Kindness is presented as a character trait that can be developed through character education, drawing on the contributions of several key authors in the field. Edgington (2002) highlights how literature has historically been used to instill ethics, morals, and values in children. Similarly, Leming (2000) emphasizes the importance of integrating core values throughout the school day. Furthermore, Noddings (2002) offers an alternative perspective, emphasizing the importance of raising morally responsible individuals. Within this framework, character education can be integrated into the school curriculum through the use of children's literature, which plays a fundamental role in providing contexts in which values such as responsibility, respect, kindness, honesty, and tolerance can be understood and internalized. Kindness behaviors examples: No explicit examples of kind behavior are presented, but readers, acting as role models, read and discuss stories that feature characters who embody values such as kindness, honesty, and tolerance, thus encouraging students to imitate such behaviors. Guided discussions and questions posed during the readings facilitated the emergence of gentle emotions such as empathy.
Mathias (1992)	Not specified.	Kindness is conceived as a skill that is part of a broader set of students' social-emotional skills.	No formal theoretical model of kindness is presented; the article adopts a systemic school counseling approach grounded in the triadic interaction among counselors, children, teachers, and parents. Within this framework, kindness is conceptualized as a socio-emotional skill fostered through prosocial behavior promotion, positive relational climate, social reinforcement, modeling, and emotional-linguistic support. Kindness is framed as a conscious behavioral choice contributing to emotional regulation, conflict de-escalation, and collective school well-being. Kindness behaviors examples: Students are encouraged to engage in acts of kindness. For instance, in initiatives such as the <i>Bells of Caring Project</i> , children receive a sticker on a classroom display each time they demonstrate kind behavior (e.g., how to compliment and help each other). They are also encouraged to express kind and affectionate words, both verbally and in writing (e.g., "I'm glad you're my friend," "Thank you for helping me earlier"), as promoted during activities like <i>Warm and Fuzzy Week</i> . Additionally, students are taught through the " <i>DeBug System</i> " to use polite communication as a first response to conflict (e.g., "It bothers me when you do that; could you please stop?").
Froh et al. (2014)	Not specified.	Kindness is conceived as intentional, altruistic, prosocial behavior and is realized through acts of help, support, or benevolence in favor of another person.	No explicit model of kindness is proposed; kindness is conceptualized as an intentional action providing a benefit to another ("benefit received from a benefactor"; Froh et al., 2014). The article frames kindness within the gratitude process, suggesting that experiencing gratitude promotes prosocial and kind behaviors such as reciprocation and helping others. Gratitude is understood as cognitively mediated and influenced by perceptions of benefactor intention, benefactor cost, and beneficiary gain, consistent with attribution theories (Heider, 1958; Weiner et al., 1979). Kindness behaviors examples: No explicit examples of kind behavior are provided. However, students are encouraged to discuss the meaning of "grateful" and write down three things they are grateful for (gratitude journal), explore the concept of intentionality behind acts of kindness by writing about a time when someone helped them and focus on the cost incurred by the benefactor, encouraging children to consider the emotions associated with such acts of helping others. Children who participated in the daily benefit assessment program wrote 80% more thank-you notes to their Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) than the control group, demonstrating behavioral gratitude.

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Table 2. Continued.

Article	keywords	Definition of kindness	Theoretical model
Layous et al. (2012)	Not specified.	Kindness is defined as prosocial behavior that involves intentional, positive actions directed toward others.	No explicit theoretical model of kindness is proposed; kindness is operationally defined through intentional prosocial behaviors aimed at benefiting others. The article frames kindness within the bidirectional relationship between prosociality and well-being, suggesting that happier individuals are more likely to engage in helpful and cooperative behaviors, while prosocial actions further enhance well-being and social adjustment. Kindness is therefore conceptualized as a behavioral expression associated with happiness, academic success, and social acceptance. Kindness behaviors examples: The intervention promoted kind and prosocial behaviors by asking children to perform three acts of kindness per week (toward a family member, a friend or a stranger) such as bringing the groceries, hugging their mother when she is stressed, sharing their lunch with someone, or helping with household chores such as vacuuming.
Samuels (2018)	Humane education, Caring-for-life education, Urban, Elementary, Prosocial behavior, First graders, Second graders, Intervention, People's Republic of China.	Kindness is described as an attitude to benefit or support other people and is expressed in a series of prosocial behaviors such as sharing, helping, and showing empathy.	No explicit model of kindness is presented; however, the Caring for Life (CFL) program adopts an integrative prosociality framework in which kindness is conceptualized as empathic and cooperative behavior toward people, animals, and the environment (ACT). Kindness is framed as the capacity for empathy, care, and responsible action, supported by predictors of prosocial behavior including empathic self-efficacy, cooperative learning, reflection on prior prosocial behavior, emotional intelligence, adaptive empathic concern, and stress management. These principles are operationalized through activities fostering empathy, cooperation, emotional recognition, and constructive social responding Kindness behaviors examples: no explicit examples of kind behavior are provided; children engage in cooperative learning activities that simulate animal actions. These activities help students understand animals' emotions and needs, how to care for them, and the environment, promoting empathy and reflecting on and reinforcing the prosocial behaviors previously demonstrated by the children. No specific theoretical model is explicitly provided; however, kindness is implicitly conceptualized as the outcome of a socioemotional development process based on the integration of mindfulness and compassion (Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Saltzman, 2014). Specifically, mindfulness fosters awareness and self-regulation, while compassion promotes sensitivity to suffering and the motivation to alleviate it. The interaction of these processes leads to the emergence of kind and prosocial behaviors. Compassion and self-compassion are considered fundamental components for promoting students' mental and social well-being, as they encourage a caring attitude toward both self and others. Likewise, developing the ability to understand the perspectives of others fosters a sense of connection and interdependence with others and the world. Kindness is developed through practical and experiential exercises that help students recognize and accept their own difficulties, treating each other with understanding in critical moments, and recognizing such experiences as part of the common human condition (Strauss et al., 2016).
Kim et al. (2025)	Mental health promotion, Social-emotional competency, Mindfulness, Compassion, Elementary school, Children.	Kindness is defined as an attitude of compassion toward oneself and others that involves acknowledging suffering, understanding its universality, and having the motivation to act to alleviate that suffering.	Kindness behaviors examples: Kindness is developed through practical, experiential exercises that help students recognize and accept their own difficulties, treat others with understanding during challenging moments, and view such experiences as part of the shared human condition. They practice gratitude, self-compassion, and kindness through activities such as identifying things they are grateful for and using kind words. Students also engage in cooperative activities that promote collaboration, communication, and kindness, while reflecting on the impact of their actions on others. Furthermore, students explore their relationship with nature, reflecting on the importance of spending time outdoors and participating in mindful observation of the natural environment. Through symbolic activities, such as the "web of connection," they develop an understanding of human interconnectedness and reflect on how to apply mindfulness and kindness in their daily lives

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Article	keywords	Definition of kindness	Theoretical model
Min et al. (2024)	COVID-19, Elementary students, Resilience, Social-emotional development; SEE learning.	Kindness can be defined as intentional and thoughtful behavior, oriented toward one's own and others' well-being, which is manifested through acts of care, mutual recognition and building positive relationships.	No specific theoretical model is explicitly provided; however, it presents kindness as an integral component of the SEE Learning program, which incorporates compassion and mindfulness practices as essential elements for character development (Center for Contemplative Science and Compassion-Based Ethics, CCSCBE). Compassion is defined as the ability to recognize and alleviate one's own suffering and that of others and plays a crucial role in developing social-emotional skills, fostering positive relationships, and promoting prosocial behavior. Kindness is expressed through acts of care and mutual recognition, facilitated by the cultivation of compassion. Students participating in the program are encouraged to reflect on acts of kindness received and to practice kindness toward others, thus contributing to a more compassionate and supportive classroom environment. Kindness behaviors examples: No explicit examples of kind behavior are provided. However, children participated in a self-presentation activity in which they reflected on the acts of kindness they had received. In the second week, they established classroom rules and practiced kindness. In the third week, the students explored authentic kindness, completed interdependence activities, and considered kindness in relation to their successes.
Crompton et al. (2024)	Prosocial behavior, Empathy, School-based mindfulness program, Primary school, Randomized controlled trial.	Kindness is a prosocial behavior that includes intentional and voluntary, and sometimes altruistic, actions among children, and represents a key element of a positive learning culture in the classroom where helping, sharing, and cooperating are fundamental to social competence.	No explicit theoretical model of kindness is proposed; within the PAWS b program, kindness is conceptualized as an observable indicator of prosociality alongside sharing, helping, cooperation, trustworthiness, and perspective-taking. The program links kindness to mindfulness-based emotional regulation and empathic understanding, suggesting that non-judgmental awareness enhances sensitivity to others' emotions and supports more reflective social responses. Gratitude- and kindness-focused activities further promote awareness of the emotional impact of one's behavior, fostering positive peer relationships and supportive classroom climate (MiSP Mindfulness in Schools Project, 2023). Kindness behaviors examples: Children are introduced to the concept of gratitude using a Venn diagram that includes terms such as gratefulness, kindness, and happiness, helping them recognize the positive impact of their actions on others. Practical activities, such as the "sharing task," are used to measure prosocial behavior, where children decide how many stickers to share with their peers, thereby encouraging sharing and cooperation. Through structured activities, such as reflecting on gratitude and the "Magic Mix" (gratitude, kindness, and happiness), children are encouraged to recognize how their behavior influences both their own emotional experiences and those of others. Focusing children's attention on positive everyday events that can generate happiness helps them become more aware of and sensitive to their peers' positive behaviors, such as their willingness to help, fostering feelings of gratitude and appreciation. Children in the intervention group PAWS b were rated by their peers as significantly more "helpful" than those in the control group, indicating that they were perceived as more willing to help others. They were also considered more popular by their classmates, suggesting that prosocial behaviors, such as helping and sharing, can enhance peer acceptance.

interconnectedness. Here, kindness is framed not only as behavior but also as an expression of relational awareness and interdependence, cultivated through reflective and mindfulness-based practices.

In the remaining studies (47%) (Bearden et al., 2023; De Carvalho et al., 2017; DiPerna et al., 2018; Froh et al., 2014; Morizio et al., 2024; Russell et al., 2013; Samuels, 2018; Tarrasch & Berger, 2022), kindness is conceptualized implicitly as an emergent outcome of broader developmental processes rather than as a directly defined or measured construct. For example, in DiPerna et al. (2018), kindness is inferred from participation in cooperative learning, respectful communication, and social-emotional skill development. Similarly, in Tarrasch and Berger (2022), kindness is embedded within a broader caring orientation cultivated through mindfulness and compassion practices.

In De Carvalho et al. (2017) and Froh et al. (2014), gratitude, perspective-taking, and reflective processes are conceptualized as proximal mechanisms expected to facilitate prosocial behavior, although kindness itself is not operationalized behaviorally. In Bearden et al. (2023), kindness is embedded in the cultivation of renewing emotions such as care, compassion, love, and gratitude, which are intended to support emotional regulation and physiological stability. In Russell et al. (2013), it is indirectly promoted through narrative moral modeling and character education, while Samuels (2018) extends the concept to an ecological and ethical dimension encompassing humans, animals, and the environment without specifying discrete behavioral indicators. Overall, this distinction reflects broader theoretical orientations underlying the interventions. Programs grounded in prosocial behavior theory and positive psychology tend to emphasize observable, intentional actions and their measurable outcomes. In contrast, mindfulness-, compassion-, and character-education-based approaches tend to emphasize internal dispositions, reflective awareness, and relational attunement, conceptualizing kindness as an emergent property of these processes rather than a directly instructed skill. This variability highlights the coexistence of more behaviorally defined and more process-oriented approaches, with implications for how kindness is conceptualized, promoted, and assessed across intervention studies.

Intervention content, approaches, and implementation characteristics

The included studies examined a highly representative sample of 5772 children from first to fifth grade in different school contexts (see Table 1), both European and international, and identified a range of intervention approaches and implementation strategies for pupils and, in some cases, teachers. Studies were conducted in 17 countries, mainly in America (35%), England (18%), and Canada (18%). Almost half of the studies promoted kindness through mindfulness (50%) and compassion (42%). These components often co-occurred within the same interventions (Crompton et al., 2024; De Carvalho et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2025; Min et al., 2024; Morizio et al., 2024; Samuels, 2018; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Tarrasch & Berger, 2022).

As for the age of the sample, 65% of the interventions involved pupils aged 9–11 years (Bearden et al., 2023; Crompton et al., 2024; Dobia et al., 2019; Froh et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2025; Layous et al., 2012; Min et al., 2024; Russell et al., 2013; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Suldo et al., 2015; Tarrasch & Berger, 2022). The remaining 35% involved students aged 6–8 years, as reported in Curtis and Norgate (2007), De Carvalho et al. (2017), Kim et al. (2025), Morizio et al. (2024), Russell et al. (2013), and Samuels (2018). Furthermore, Dobia et al. (2019), De Carvalho et al. (2017), and Tarrasch and Berger (2022) involved both teachers and students in their interventions. Of the interventions reviewed, 47% combine contemplative practices with the development of empathy and key social-emotional skills, such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, gratitude, and prosocial behavior (Crompton et al., 2024; De Carvalho et al., 2017; DiPerna et al., 2018; Dobia et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2025; Min et al., 2024; Shonert-Reichel et al., 2015; Tarrash & Berger, 2022). Notably, Morizio et al. (2024) document a program using creative and artistic expression to improve empathy and social skills.

Another category of interventions identified in the review consists of programs rooted in positive psychology and aimed at enhancing students' subjective well-being by improving

relationships between teachers and the classroom group. These studies, which account for 24% of the total (Froh et al., 2014; Layous et al., 2012; Samuels, 2018; Suldo et al., 2015), emphasize fostering kindness through relational and emotional well-being within the school environment. In terms of organizational structure, there is a predominance of weekly programs divided into recurring teaching modules, with sessions generally lasting between 30 and 50 min each, integrated into the curriculum (Dobia et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2025; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Tarrasch & Berger, 2022).

This structure appears to facilitate integration within school routines and support continuity over time. The most common interventions are administered during school hours and have a total duration of between 6 and 12 wk, with between 10 and 12 sessions (Crompton et al., 2024; DiPerna et al., 2018; De Carvalho et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2025; Morizio et al., 2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Suldo et al., 2015). Some studies, on the other hand, report long-term interventions, structured throughout the school year and spread over more than 100 sessions (Curtis & Norgate, 2007; Samuels, 2018), or courses with monthly or bimonthly meetings (Dobia et al., 2019; Morizio et al., 2024; Russell et al. 2013). Conversely, some interventions are short and intensive experiences (Froh et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2025; Min et al., 2024), developed with daily or weekly sessions for a limited period (Crompton et al., 2024; Curtis & Norgate, 2007; Kim et al., 2025; Layous et al., 2012; Morizio et al., 2024; Russell et al., 2013; Samuels, 2018; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Tarrasch & Berger, 2022), for example, over a single week with daily 30-minute meetings (Froh et al., 2014) or with activities spread over just four weeks (Bearden et al., 2023; Layous et al., 2012).

Overall, this variability reflects the diversity of implementation strategies and intervention formats across studies. In about 35% of the studies, students are encouraged to practice breathing techniques, perform acts of kindness toward others, and reflect on how they felt, sharing examples of kindness they have observed or practiced and the impact of these actions on their happiness and social relationships (Bearden et al., 2023; Crompton et al., 2024; Froh et al., 2014; Layous et al., 2012; Min et al., 2024; Samuels, 2018).

The remaining studies (12%) explored educational methodologies and school counseling interventions, further highlighting the variety of strategies used to support the development of kindness (Mathias, 1992; Russell et al., 2013). These approaches included the use of reading activities and encouragement of warmth, affection, and appreciation, with the goal of improving students' self-esteem and the overall classroom climate. It is interesting to note that these relatively unique educational methodologies were mainly conducted in countries outside Europe, particularly in America. This pattern may reflect a wider diffusion of such practices in these countries compared to Europe, or greater funding opportunities available at the time for developing innovative educational programs.

Training of operators in educational programs for the promotion of kindness

The implementation of the interventions is mainly entrusted to the curricular teachers, often after having received specific training (Bearden et al., 2023; Crompton et al., 2024; Curtis & Norgate, 2007; De Carvalho et al., 2017; DiPerna et al., 2018; Dobia et al., 2019; Min et al., 2024; Samuels, 2018; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Suldo et al., 2015). In some cases, however, the programs are conducted by psychologists (Layous et al., 2012; Morizio et al., 2024), educators, school counselors, university researchers, or experts in mindfulness practices and social-emotional learning (Crompton et al., 2024; Froh et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2025; Mathias, 1992; Min et al., 2024; Morizio et al., 2024; Russell et al., 2013; Samuels, 2018; Terrash & Berger, 2022), highlighting significant variability in the professional profiles involved.

The training of operators, when foreseen, is extremely heterogeneous in duration, content, and methods. Teachers are invited to take part in one-day introductory workshops (DiPerna et al., 2018; Dobia et al., 2019) or in-depth modules on mindfulness, relaxation techniques, kindness and gratitude practices, and techniques to support relational skills between students and teachers (Bearden et al., 2023; Crompton et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2025; Min et al., 2024;

Samuels, 2018; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Suldo et al., 2015). For example, in the Paws b program (Crompton et al., 2024), teachers must complete an eight-week course in mindfulness followed by specific training on the program.

Similarly, in the Mind UP program (De Carvalho et al., 2017; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015), teachers receive a 50-h targeted training course led by experts to implement the 12 modules required by the intervention protocol and are encouraged to actively participate in practices with students.

The training content varies according to the program objectives and includes topics of mindfulness, emotion regulation, classroom management techniques, and strategies to support prosocial behavior. In some interventions, training is not limited to a preparatory phase, but continues throughout the entire course through supervision, structured feedback, and periodic meetings between researchers and teachers (Morizio et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2025; Russell et al. 2013; Samuels, 2018; Tarrasch & Berger, 2022).

Continuous teacher training enhances the effectiveness of the program implementation in the classroom, encouraging the adoption of practices by teachers even outside of formal sessions. In other cases, training is carried out by specific accredited bodies, such as the *Mindfulness in Schools Project* (MiSP, 2023; Crompton et al., 2024), in which teachers are invited to complete an 8-week mindfulness course and a training course to learn how to integrate meditation practices into the school curriculum. Sometimes, as in the *Call to Care Israel* (Tarrasch & Berger, 2022), *Caring for Life* (Samuels, 2018), and *See Learning* (Min et al., 2024) programs, teachers are co-facilitators, contributing to the educational continuity and sustainability of the program alongside an expert. Overall, teacher training and involvement have been found to be essential to effectively integrate kindness-centered interventions and educational practices in the school context (De Carvalho et al., 2017; Dobia et al., 2019; Tarrasch & Berger, 2022). Psychologists and other non-teacher experts have been predominantly involved in designing interventions, evaluating results, and supporting teachers during classroom activities (Bearden et al., 2023; Curtis & Norgate, 2007; De Carvalho et al., 2017; DiPerna et al., 2018; Froh et al., 2014; Layous et al. 2012; Morizio et al., 2024; Tarrasch & Berger, 2022) (Table 3).

Methodologies and assessment tools for evaluating program effectiveness

Methodologically, the studies mainly use self-report questionnaires administered to students and teachers (Tarrasch & Berger, 2022), behavioral observations made by teachers or researchers (Bearden et al., 2023; Crompton et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2025; Russell et al., 2013; Samuels, 2018), or qualitative measures, such as open-ended interviews or self-completed diaries (Froh et al., 2014; Morizio et al., 2024).

However, in most cases (53%), no instruments have been designed or validated to directly measure the construct of kindness, because, as already said, kindness is rarely assessed as a distinct construct and so authors did not use dedicated validated measures to investigate it (Bearden et al., 2023; Curtis & Norgate, 2007; DiPerna et al., 2018; Froh et al., 2014; Layous et al., 2012; Mathias, 1992; Min et al., 2024; Morizio et al., 2024; Suldo et al., 2015). In some studies, kindness is inferred from indirect measures, such as the *Self-Compassion Scale* (De Carvalho et al., 2017; Neff, 2003), peer nominations (Crompton et al., 2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015), open-ended questions. It is also assessed through teacher-administered measures, including structured observations and surveys of behaviors related to kindness and other positive traits (e.g. respect, courtesy, friendship), along with broader indicators of the classroom's social functioning, such as students' ability to get along, obedience, and respectfulness (Russell et al., 2013).

Consistent with this approach, Dobia et al. (2019) combine self-report measures of school-related well-being, such as the *California Healthy Kids Survey* (CHKS), with qualitative data from open-ended questions exploring pupils' subjective experiences of the intervention. These qualitative responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, through which kindness emerged from

Table 3. Descriptions of the program facilitators and training for each article included in the review.

Article	Program facilitator	Training provider	Training description
DiPerna et al., (2018)	Teachers	University research team and school psychologist	Teachers completed a one-day workshop with an overview of SSJS-CIP materials and practiced lesson delivery with feedback.
Curtis and Norgate (2007) Tarrasch and Berger (2022)	Teachers Research assistants	Psychologist and school staff Psychologist	Teachers received a two-day training overview course. Research assistants received fifteen hours of preparatory training. The program included lectures, discussions, contemplative practices, and experiential exercises. Research assistants were supervised weekly by a psychologist to ensure fidelity.
Morizio et al. (2024)	A research team composed of doctoral students and school psychologists	School psychologist	Operators received specific training to observe and record prosocial behaviors, video examples, and real-case evaluations. A fidelity checklist ensured correct implementation.
Schonert-Reichl et al. (2015)	Teachers	Not specified	Teachers received training on the curriculum and were encouraged to practice mindfulness alongside students.
Suldo et al. (2015)	Teachers	Research group formed by school psychologists	The intervention began with a meeting to introduce teachers to the curriculum and social support strategies for students. Teachers were actively involved throughout the process, strengthening their skills and promoting their long-term application capacities.
De Carvalho et al. (2017)	Teachers	Psychologist	Teachers learned content related to social and emotional learning, mindfulness, neuroscience, and positive psychology.
Dobia et al. (2019)	Teachers	Pedagogists	Teachers received one-day training focused on facilitating the program and applying the six ASPIRE principles (Agency, Safety, Positivity, Inclusion, Respect, Equity) to enhance relationships and promote a positive classroom climate.
Bearden et al. (2023)	Teachers	Certified instructors of the Heart Math Institute represented by psychologists and health professionals	Teachers received instructions and used tools like the Inner Balance app and biofeedback sensors to monitor Heart Rate Variability (HRV).
Russell et al. (2013)	Volunteer Readers	Research team	Reader training included specific sessions on reading procedures and discussion strategies. Readers, seen as role models, were instructed on how to use the selected books and lead discussions.
Mathias (1992)	School counselor	Guidance committee composed of teachers	Counselors worked with teachers to plan and implement strategies to improve the school environment.
Froh et al. (2014)	University students	School psychologist	Three graduate students in school psychology received detailed training on the curriculum materials.
Layous et al. (2012)	Team of researchers in Psychology	Not specified	Not specified.
Samuels (2018)	Teachers	Team of experts (ACTAsia)	The teachers followed three training sessions on pedagogical strategies to promote empathy and prosociality among students and subsequently developed and attended ten meetings during the year with activities aimed at the care of animals, people, and the environment.
Kim et al. (2025)	Team formed by teachers and experts in mindfulness	Research team and university hospital	Instructors completed basic and advanced Mindfulness-Based Social-Emotional Growth (MSEG) training with live demonstrations and feedback. The academic team provided supervision and meetings to ensure program understanding and teaching quality.
Min et al. (2024)	Prospective SEE Learning Instructors/Teachers	Certified SEE Learning instructors	Six trained See Learning instructors received a 2-h orientation to practice the curriculum activities. Teachers attended and participated in the sessions to ensure continuity of the program after the instructors' departure.
Crompton et al. (2024)	Prospective expert teachers in mindfulness	Training Mindfulness in Schools Project (MISP) staff	Teachers underwent an 8-week mindfulness course followed by specific "Paws B" training, learning to integrate mindfulness into the personal, social and health education (PSHE) curriculum.

student reports as a recurrent theme, alongside related concepts such as helping others, peer inclusion, and more thoughtful communication. In addition, teachers' survey responses and qualitative comments provided converging evidence of observable changes in pupils' behavior consistent with prosocial and kind behaviors.

Only a few studies use instruments explicitly focused on measuring kindness or closely related constructs. For example, Kim et al. (2025) used a structured behavioral measure, the *Universal Altruism Test* adapted from the dictator game, in which children are asked to decide how many sweets to give to unknown peers, as a concrete indicator of kind and altruistic behavior (List, 2007; List et al., 2023). Similarly, Samuels (2018) used the teacher-reported *Prosocial Teacher Observation of Classroom Adaptation Checklist* (TOCA-C, Leaf et al., 2002), which assesses the expression of kindness by students through the observation of prosocial behaviors in different school and social contexts. A different but complementary approach is the one adopted by Morizio et al. (2024), who used self-compiled diaries not only as an educational support, but also as an ecological observation tool to gather qualitative data situated and contextualized within the lived experiences of children. In this case, kindness is detected through the subjective narratives of the students, an exploratory and naturalistic approach that might provide a better chance of reflecting the holistic nature of kindness, albeit potentially with less psychometric precision.

Overall, the studies show substantial heterogeneity in methodological approaches and assessment tools. Across studies, different and only partially overlapping dimensions are assessed, often without a clear or shared operational definition of kindness. In many cases, it is not explicitly specified what aspect of kindness is being measured or how it is conceptually framed. This variability limits the comparability of findings across studies on the basis of kindness.

Outcomes and benefits for children

Most of the studies included in the review (59%) reported a significant increase in prosocial behaviors, such as acts of cooperation and comforting toward peers (Crompton et al., 2024; Curtis & Norgate, 2007; DiPerna et al., 2018; Froh et al., 2014; Mathias, 1992; Min et al., 2024; Morizio et al., 2024; Samuels, 2018; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Tarrasch & Berger, 2022).

Programs focused on gratitude and kindness (Bearden et al., 2023; Froh et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2025; Suldo et al., 2015) showed improvements in caring behaviors and popularity among peers. Similarly, mindfulness-based activities with a relational focus (Crompton et al., 2024; De Carvalho et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2025; Min et al., 2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Tarrasch & Berger, 2022) were effective in strengthening empathy, listening, and willingness to help. Studies such as those by Morizio et al. (2024) reported considerable increases in social-emotional competence scores, suggesting that the activation of relational processes, based on empathy and the expression of behaviors aimed at caring for others, can foster a range of positive, growth-related capacities in children. About 53% of studies highlighted improvements in emotion regulation, in the ability to recognize emotions, in kindness directed toward oneself, and in the reduction of states of anxiety and somatization (Bearden et al., 2023; Curtis & Norgate, 2007; De Carvalho et al., 2017; Dobia et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2025; Min et al., 2024; Morizio et al., 2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Tarrasch & Berger, 2022). Mindfulness and self-compassion approaches appear to be particularly effective in strengthening the skills of self-regulation, self-reflection, and self-kindness, promoting a kinder and more compassionate attitude toward oneself and helping to develop more adaptive emotion regulation strategies that have been shown to facilitate kind orientations to others (Crompton et al., 2024; De Carvalho et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2025; Min et al., 2024; Morizio et al., 2024; Samuels, 2018; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Tarrasch & Berger, 2022). Improvements in classroom cohesion and in the quality of interpersonal relationships at the classroom level have also been reported. Indeed, 47% of studies reported an improvement in the perceived school climate in terms of inclusion, active participation, and peer

socialization (Curtis & Norgate, 2007; Crompton et al., 2024; Dobia et al., 2019; Layous et al., 2012; Mathias, 1992; Min et al., 2024; Russell et al., 2013; Tarrasch & Berger, 2022).

Additionally, two studies reported a reduction in oppositional and aggressive behaviors (Curtis & Norgate, 2007; Russell et al., 2013), while another study (Tarrasch & Berger, 2022) documented a decrease in attention difficulties. Interventions based on “circle time” or shared reading seem particularly effective in promoting mutual respect and a sense of belonging to the school community (Dobia et al., 2019; Russell et al., 2013).

In terms of research design, approximately half of the programs analyzed (47%) can be considered evidence-based, as they used controlled experimental designs with pre- and post-intervention evaluations to assess the impact of the intervention (Crompton et al., 2024; Curtis & Norgate, 2007; De Carvalho et al., 2017; Froh et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2025; Samuels, 2018; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Tarrasch & Berger, 2022). The remaining 53% of studies do not specify the sample structure and the survey procedure, making a systematic evaluation of the validity of the intervention more difficult (Bearden et al., 2023; DiPerna et al., 2018; Dobia et al., 2019; Layous et al., 2012; Mathias, 1992; Min et al., 2024; Morizio et al., 2024; Russell et al., 2013; Suldo et al., 2015). Only a minority of studies (18%) included a medium-to long-term follow-up to monitor the potential for sustained improvements over time (Froh et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2025; Min et al., 2024). Only one study (Froh et al., 2014) reported lasting benefits after the end of the intervention, suggesting a possible long-term effect. In contrast, one study (Min et al., 2024) observed a decline in some benefits during the post-intervention phase. Interpreting these results requires caution, as they are likely influenced by the way in which the construct of kindness was conceptualized and operationalized in each study. As such, although many papers reported improvements in “kindness”, these improvements are often inferred through indicators that do not explicitly or exclusively refer to kindness. This conceptual and operational vagueness poses a challenge for evaluating the real impact of kindness-promotion programs, limiting the possibility of comparing findings across studies and drawing firm conclusions about their relative effectiveness in promoting kindness.

Discussion

The studies examined here have highlighted how intervention programs focused on kindness are associated with positive effects on children’s intra- and inter-personal development. Most interventions have focused on social-emotional skills, the development of positive relationships, and the promotion of an inclusive school climate *en route* to kindness (Crompton et al., 2024; Curtis & Norgate, 2007; De Carvalho et al., 2017; Dobia et al., 2019; Froh et al., 2014; Mathias, 1992; Morizio et al., 2024; Russell et al., 2013; Samuels, 2018; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Suldo et al., 2015; Tarrasch & Berger, 2022).

Furthermore, the current review demonstrates a strong focus on mindfulness and self-compassion among school-based kindness interventions (Crompton et al., 2024; De Carvalho et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2025; Min et al., 2024; Morizio et al., 2024; Russell et al., 2013; Samuels, 2018; Schonert-Reichl & Weissberg, 2014; Tarrasch & Berger, 2022). From a theoretical perspective, the effectiveness of these approaches may be explained by their impact on core socio-emotional and regulatory processes. Mindfulness-based practices enhance attention regulation and emotional awareness, which support children’s ability to recognize internal states and modulate their responses in social interactions (Amundsen et al., 2020; Maloney et al., 2016; Thierry et al., 2022; Zelazo & Lynos, 2012). These processes are closely linked to the development of prosocial behavior, as they facilitate perspective-taking and reduce impulsive or reactive responses (Miller & Verhaeghen, 2022; Suárez-García et al., 2020; Vickery & Dorjee, 2016; Viglas & Perlman, 2018). Furthermore, mindfulness-based interventions have been shown to promote social and emotional competencies that underpin prosocial and kind behavior in educational contexts (Berti & Cigala, 2022; Stapleton et al., 2024; Stapleton & Blanchard, 2026). Similarly, compassion-based and self-compassion interventions are designed to enhance empathic concern and sensitivity to others - mechanisms widely associated with helping behavior (Carro et al., 2020; Flook et al.,

2015; Jansen et al., 2025; Lozada et al., 2017; Ozawa-de Silva & Dodson-Lavelle, 2011). By fostering a caring and non-judgmental orientation toward oneself and others, these approaches may strengthen children's motivation to engage in supportive and cooperative interactions. Interventions incorporating gratitude and reflection further reinforce these mechanisms by promoting awareness of social exchanges and the perceived value of prosocial actions (Bearden et al., 2023; Froh et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2025; Suldo et al., 2015). Overall, these findings suggest that mindfulness and compassion-based approaches may be particularly effective because they simultaneously target regulatory, emotional, and motivational processes underlying kindness, rather than focusing solely on observable behaviors. The review also indicates that kindness can be promoted through the integration of these approaches within everyday educational practices. This can include using reading and writing activities, and group activities based on exchange and cooperation (Crompton et al., 2024; Curtis & Norgate, 2007; De Carvalho et al., 2017; DiPerna et al., 2018; Dobia et al., 2019; Layous et al., 2012; Mathias, 1992; Morizio et al., 2024; Russell et al., 2013; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Suldo et al., 2015; Samuels, 2018). These strategies together with training on social-emotional skills seem to be particularly effective in promoting school satisfaction and encouraging relationships between students, the class group, and teachers. Finally, one study specifically focused on school counseling interventions (Mathias, 1992), which could be effective assuming the school has sufficient resources. Another important aspect that emerged from the review, concerns the central role of psychologists and other specialized professionals in designing interventions and training teachers. Studies indicate that teachers are frequently trained by psychologists or certified instructors to deliver school-based interventions (Bearden et al., 2023; Curtis & Norgate, 2007; De Carvalho et al., 2017; DiPerna et al., 2018; Dobia et al., 2019; Samuels, 2018; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Suldo et al., 2015). These interventions have been associated with improvements in areas such as emotional regulation, prosocial behavior, classroom relationships, life satisfaction, and overall classroom climate. Although other professionals also contribute to the delivery and fidelity of program implementation (Crompton et al., 2024; Froh et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2025; Layous et al., 2012; Mathias, 1992; Min et al., 2024; Morizio et al., 2024; Russell et al., 2013), active teacher involvement, supported by targeted training, appears to be a key factor in consolidating the skills acquired and in ensuring the intervention's success.

Psychologists, in particular, can provide guidance in understanding and managing emotional and relational dynamics, supporting teachers in managing behavioral and emotional challenges that may emerge during the intervention.

A common element that emerged from the review concerns the low explicit presence of the term "kindness." Although many programs aim to promote kindness as a secondary effect to their general objective, the term "kindness" appears only in a minority of contributions, and even more rarely as a primary keyword (Dobia et al., 2019). In several studies, kindness is evoked in the titles or discussed in the results but is not operationalized or measured as a stand-alone construct (Layous et al., 2012; Samuels, 2018). It is rather captured by sub-concepts, such as prosocial behavior, empathy, and emotional regulation (Bearden et al., 2023; Crompton et al., 2024; Dobia et al., 2019; Froh et al., 2014; Layous et al., 2012; Morizio et al., 2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Suldo et al., 2015). Similarly, in other works, it is operationalized through behavioral indicators (e.g., helping and cooperation) without a clear theoretical or methodological distinction. This conceptual fragmentation shows a structural weakness in the definition of the construct in educational contexts, with repercussions on both theoretical and empirical levels. On the one hand, conceptual confusion arises, as kindness tends to overlap with other similar constructs, making it difficult to accurately attribute the observed effects. On the other hand, critical issues arise in its measurement: the tools used do not directly or completely assess kindness as a multifaceted construct. Revisiting our comprehensive definition of kindness proposed in the introduction, future interventions should define and measure kindness in a way that reflects its complexity and depth, for example, as prosocial behaviors motivated by compassionate self- and other-oriented emotions and further internalized into a stable virtue or "kind sense of self" as children develop (Malti, 2021; Malti & Colasante, 2024). We acknowledge that this working definition remains a work in progress, but it represents a promising step

forward from the fragmented and narrow definitions of kindness proposed in the developmental intervention literature reviewed herein. These shortcomings have relevant implications for research and practice in this field. First, the lack of presence of the word “kindness” among the text and keywords makes it difficult to identify relevant studies in the literature review phase, with the risk of under-representing the currently available literature. Second, such conceptual ambiguity complicates the interpretation of the results, as many of the benefits reported for kindness are based on indirect measures, with possible distortions in the understanding of the actual contribution of the interventions to kindness. There is thus a need for future research to explicitly clarify the theoretical and operational dimensions of kindness in a comprehensive manner; to develop or adopt valid and specific measurement tools that equally reflect the complexity of kindness; to monitor through longitudinal follow-ups whether promoting kindness in school-age children can influence developmental trajectories; and to include “kindness” among the key words and text, so as to enhance its conceptual profile and promote greater comparability between interventions. With greater conceptual and methodological clarity of kindness, data can be used to better inform educational policies and to better support school practices.

Implications for future research

This review has some limitations related to the review process itself. Although the search strategy was conducted rigorously and systematically, the lack of consistent terminology in the literature to describe kindness-focused interventions may have limited the identification of additional potentially relevant studies. In line with the approach adopted and the predominantly descriptive nature of the review (focused on analyzing the reported benefits of kindness interventions without conducting a meta-analysis), no quantitative synthesis of the effects was performed, nor was a systematic assessment of the overall strength of the available evidence. While the screening and data extraction processes were conducted by two independent reviewers, no formal risk of bias assessment was performed due to the high heterogeneity of the included studies, which limits the ability to evaluate the methodological quality of the evidence. A critical analysis of the methodological quality of the selected studies was nonetheless conducted, considering variables such as sample composition, intervention methodology, evaluation tools used, and the individuals involved in implementation and operator training.

Conclusions

Kindness has long been implicitly understood as more than discrete prosocial behaviors. Accounting for the evolution of its conceptualization over time, it can be regarded as a multifaceted construct rooted in compassionate cognitive and emotional motivations and increasingly internalized as part of a “kind self” across childhood. However, this review reveals that current interventions in the critical period of primary school rarely reflect this conceptual richness. Kindness is still seldom operationalized, measured, or promoted in ways that capture its depth and developmental complexity. We hope this review provides a foundation for rethinking and redesigning kindness interventions in childhood to align more closely with the construct’s full psychological and developmental significance.

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Data availability statement

The authors confirm that the findings of this study are available within the article.

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