



# Teach Kindness: Using Children’s Literature to Foster Empathy and Understanding

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**Abstract:** *Kindness can be explicitly and implicitly developed through sharing and discussing stories presented in children’s literature. This article provides recommendations, an instructional outline, and resources to assist parents and educators in developing this important skill in elementary children.*

**Keywords:** *kindness, self-regulatory skills, elementary students, children’s literature*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Elementary school children spend a great deal of their waking hours with the other children in their class and with their teacher. As we envision the experiences of children with their ‘school family,’ we hope for an environment of safety and caring; a place where children can learn and grow supported by the kindness of others. Importantly, research has shown that the qualities of kindness and care for self and others can be explicitly and implicitly developed through acquisition of self-regulatory skills (Kaplan et al., 2016). Longitudinal research demonstrates that self-regulation is malleable, and, as children learn to control impulses and regulate actions, they establish patterns of behavior that promote success through adulthood in social, academic, and work environments (Moffitt et al., 2011).

Although self-regulatory abilities are “robust predictors of important outcomes across the life span, they are rarely taught explicitly in school” (Flook et al., 2015, p 44). However, we can assist children in developing self-regulatory skills for establishing and maintaining positive social relationships. Through sharing clear explanations and discussing examples of how the actions of one person influences the feelings and actions of another person, children learn to understand the cause-effect results of actions. Over time, most children will develop the cognitive flexibility and capability to envision alternative choices and the resulting consequences. Instruction to develop skills of kindness can be integrated with English Language Arts instruction through the use of children’s literature as elementary students consider perspective, identify possible actions, and anticipate outcomes.

A simple outline to aid instruction is the acronym IDEA (Jones et al., 2017).

I: Identify the kindness practice (such as friendly, considerate, sharing) for instruction and texts that address the competency.

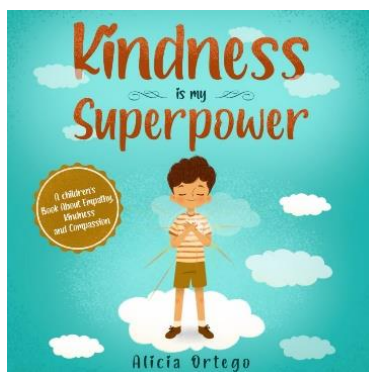
D: Develop think alouds to emphasize the kindness practice in the text.

E: Explicitly explain, model, and discuss with children the kindness practice and how the characters in the story exhibit kindness. Discuss alternative actions and the possible consequences of those actions.

A: Apply the kindness practices through role play, discussion, and other collaborative tasks to reinforce learning and application.

## 2. SELECTED CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

Over time, as parents and educators focus on sharing and discussing kindness practices presented in books, many examples of children’s literature will be identified. As a starting point, the following books are highlighted for use.



**Book:** *Kindness is my Superpower: A children's Book About Empathy, Kindness and Compassion* by A. Ortego, 2020.

**Brief Summary:** This is a story about a young boy who one day makes fun of another student in his class. The next day, he decides to be kind.

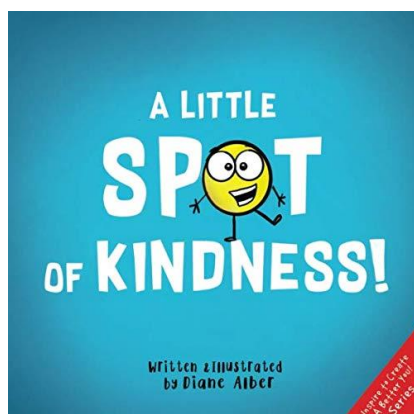
**Examples of Kindness Practices:** The book provides many examples of kindness practices such as sharing, inviting a new student to sit on the bus, and helping find a lost ball. Children could be asked to provide a thumbs up for examples and a thumbs down for non-examples, followed by a discussion of how to turn the example to a thumbs up. The final page of the book contains a chart of ways to show kindness. This could be used as a template for identifying and completing kindness acts.



**Book:** *Kindness Starts With You* by J. Stagg, 2018.

**Brief Summary:** This is a story about a young girl who exhibits kindness throughout the day. After each example of kindness, it states, "This is what I would want someone to do for me."

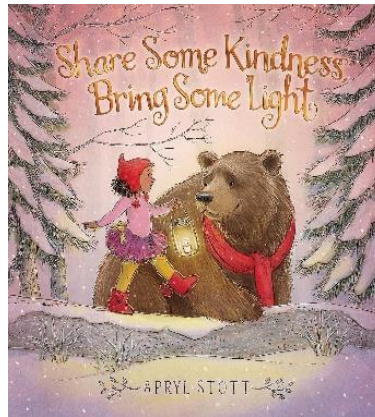
**Examples of Kindness Practices:** Examples are provided for kindness actions throughout the day such as saying thank you, asking others how they are, and helping someone who falls. The final pages of the book include a Kindness BINGO and a Kindness Challenge with conversation starters. Emphasis could be placed on the recurring theme of "This is what I would want someone to do for me" by using role play and positive examples of kindness behaviors.



**Book:** *A Little Spot of Kindness* by D. Alber, 2019.

**Brief Summary:** This book features a “spot” who helps two children remember to be kind.

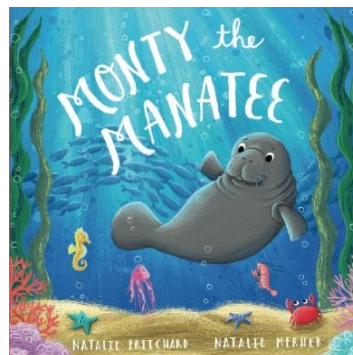
**Examples of Kindness Practices:** This is a book of examples of how to be kind such as providing encouragement, being friendly, and showing patience. The book repeats the phrase, “Remember, being \_\_\_\_ is being kind.” This phrase could be used for children to write their own examples of being kind.



**Book:** *Share Some Kindness, Bring Some Light* by A. Stott, 2020.

**Brief Summary:** This story is about a Bear and his friend, Coco. Bear is sad because other animals think he is mean because of his size. They decide to share some kindness so the other animals learn that he is kind.

**Examples of Kindness Practices:** Coco and Bear decide to give cookies and lanterns to other animals to show kindness, but the animals refuse the gifts. After Bear rescues a baby deer, the other animals learn that he is kind. This book can be used to discuss the meaning of kindness and how it means more than giving gifts. It can also be used for analysis of how the other animals approached kindness.



**Book:** *Monty the Manatee* by N. Pritchard, 2018.

**Brief Summary:** Monty’s is worried for his first day at school. He tries to make friends, but the other animals are mean to him.

**Examples of Kindness Practices:** Even though the other animals are mean to Monty, he saves them from a shark. This book is excellent for providing non-examples of kindness. Children can present alternative actions from the other animals that would show kindness.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Given the importance of kindness in our schools, communities, and personal lives, fostering this skill and other self-regulatory behaviors should receive dedicated attention. Through read alouds and focused discussions with children, we can promote qualities of kindness and care for self and others, thus, helping children to learn and grow.

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