

Not-So-Random Acts of Kindness: Modeling, Motivation, and Engagement to Build a School Culture of Compassion

“Be kind.” Yup, that was it, the totality of my new school’s rules and regulations—or more accurately, its expectation. And it applied to everyone, not just the children. No detailed lists of do’s and don’ts. No booklets outlining acceptable behavior or consequences for stepping out of bounds.

I was coming from a public school classroom, so I’m sure you can imagine my utter shock. When do the parents sign the behavior contract? When do we read the anti-bullying protocol? What’s the escalation procedure? **All of these questions were answered with a warm smile and a nod to the plaque on the wall. *Be kind.***

No, I hadn’t gone through Alice’s rabbit hole or hitched a ride with Dorothy to Oz. I was talking with my new boss, Jean, as I set up my office. I was the newly minted reading specialist at a private school dedicated to serving students with learning differences and behavioral challenges. All of our students had a variety of learning needs, and roughly 85% of them struggled with reading. Knowing that I would directly serve so many students, as well as support the classroom teachers, instruction had been my main focus. The “be kind” piece had flown under the radar, but now here it was, a wall plaque that was literally staring me in the face.

I busied myself with stacks of folders and cleared my throat. I knew I should nod and smile, but I couldn’t quite get on board. I was only able to hold my tongue for about 20 seconds before I flooded the room with questions.

Don’t our kids need clear boundaries? Aren’t we setting them up for failure with a vague mantra? What does “being kind” look like? What does it mean for a first grader? How does a “kind” classroom run? What do you do if someone isn’t kind to you?

“Aha,” said Jean. “That’s what the children will help you figure out.”

And that was my light bulb moment.

Of course there are rules and explicit procedures. But everything was driven by the simple principle—be kind. It gave us the **why** as we set up our classrooms. Kindness was the vehicle to explain **how** we should behave or speak in different situations. Teachers modeled kindness and thought aloud about how he or she decided to act. In real-life situations, students discussed the kind choice. We know from the work of social learning theorist [Albert Bandura](#) that children learn by observing behaviors and noting the natural consequences. Bandura outlined four steps to the modeling process that teachers can replicate in their own classrooms:



1. **Attention:** In the classroom, be explicit about the topic; in this instance, kindness. Thinking aloud calls attention to the process, and involves students in your internal conversation.
2. **Retention** and . . .
3. **Reproduction:** These two go hand in hand. We must give students an opportunity to engage in the discussion and practice kindness. Fishbowl activities are a great way for students to reproduce, or practice, what kindness looks like and sounds like.
4. **Motivation:** I believe that all students are intrinsically motivated to be kind. Creating a safe, welcoming environment promotes trust and builds a community of learners. The research on motivation asserts you can increase intrinsic motivation by attending to three main drivers:
 - **Autonomy** – Do my students have *choice* in how they display kindness?
 - **Mastery** – Do my students have an opportunity to *practice* kindness and feel like they understand what it looks like, sounds like, and what happens when you don't make the kind choice?
 - **Purpose** – Dan Pink, author and speaker on motivation, summarizes the idea of purpose beautifully by discussing our human need to “hitch your desires to a cause greater than yourself.” Are we having conversations with students about the big picture? Are we discussing how kindness *connects* to their lives, both inside and outside of school?

Of course all of that sounds lovely and ideal, but it doesn't mean we exist in a utopian bubble where everyone and everything was perfect. Quite the opposite. Our students have many challenges, and we have many opportunities to talk about and figure out the kind choice.

Lining up for a class trip at my new private school, I encountered a very common scene—second graders arguing about their place in line. Yes, the teacher could have assigned a line-up pattern. Sure, he could have called rows to line up in an orderly fashion to avoid a conflict. But then his students would have been robbed of this interaction.

“I'm sorry I cut you in line. That wasn't kind. I shouldn't have run to get in front of you. I'm sorry.”

“It's ok. I'm not mad anymore.”

Mr. D. smiled at the two students. “Nice job, fellas. Glad you worked it out.”

Think of the power in that interaction. They didn't need the teacher to referee and explain the rules. The students worked it out on their own and came to an amiable conclusion.

What I've seen escalate into tears, shoving, time outs, or even a call home, was diffused by the students. Real-world problem-solving at its finest.

The same held true for teachers. Gripping in the teachers' room was met with gentle reminders as teachers vented about students or parents. "Be kind," we reminded each other. The first time I saw this in action, I was sure the teacher on the receiving end would have a few choice words for the kindness police. My eyes grew wide as I held my turkey sandwich in the air, mid bite, thinking "This should be interesting." To my surprise, there were no fireworks. The venting teacher actually laughed and said, "Oh, it's harder some days than others. But you're right." Back in my old school, that exchange could have ended in a battle royale.

I realized I had a lot of thinking to do on the topic of kindness. Were the teachers in my new school fundamentally different than my former colleagues? I concluded they were not. And the students weren't that different either. In fact, these new students faced greater learning and emotional challenges. The difference was the culture of kindness: the not-so-random acts of compassion and understanding going on each day; vocalizing the kind choice; modeling empathy; holding everyone in the building to the same standard.

"Be kind" may seem overly simplistic, but that couldn't be further from the truth. It takes dedication, explicit modeling, a relentless focus, high expectations, and a safe space for discussing consequences when things go sideways.

There are many ways to choose kindness and to give students an opportunity to reach out within and beyond their classroom walls. Last school year, 24 elementary schools in Anaheim, California, took part in a [campaign to perform one million acts of kindness](#).

The kids not only reached that goal, but they doubled it. Small acts, like helping a friend, and larger acts, like supporting the typhoon relief fund in the Philippines, provided a vehicle for students to express their compassion for friends and strangers alike.

So what will you do this year to model kindness? How will you hold yourself, your students, and your colleagues to the simple mantra, "be kind?" No matter what your role—parent, teacher, principal—the model you provide will serve as a touchstone for those around you. Being kind isn't always easy. It's a choice. It's a state of mind. And it's one of the greatest lessons we can learn alongside of—and from—our students.



Posted by [Jessica Bianculli](#) for Catapult Learning
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