Article

Teaching Kindness and Compassion: An Exploratory Intervention Study to Support Young Children's Prosocial Skills in an Inclusive ECEC Setting

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Abstract: In this exploratory intervention study, the aim was to teach 5–7-year-old children prosocial skills in an inclusive Finnish early childhood education and care (ECEC) setting. The intervention programme was based on previous studies and helps fill a gap in how to promote prosocial behaviour in an ECEC setting encompassing children with diverse needs. The theoretical framework draws on research on character strengths in the field of positive psychology, particularly what the literature refers to as the strengths of the heart, namely kindness and compassion. The study follows the methodological framework of pragmatism and a mixed-methods research perspective. Research methods include questionnaires and interviews with children (*n* = 23), some of their guardians (*n* = 8) and ECEC teachers (*n* = 2). The results were two-fold. With the picture-based questionnaire, the pre–post measures showed little advancement. However, individual interviews revealed developments in children's prosocial thinking that also translated into concrete actions. These findings were further supported by the positive feedback received from teachers and guardians. The contents of the programme can be integrated into daily, inclusive ECEC pedagogy. Methodologically, the intervention design serves as a starting point for the further development of data collection practices that capture children's voices in ECEC.

Keywords: early childhood education and care (ECEC); inclusion; kindness; compassion; intervention; character strengths

1. Introduction

'Oh no! Barrie imagined how much it must have hurt, when Furball fell from the big oak tree. And the more Barrie thought about this, the more sorry he felt for Furball.'

—A quote from a storybook co-created with the children for the purposes of this intervention study.

As human beings, we possess an innate sense of relation to other people's feelings and experiences. Indeed, research has shown that two-year-old children already possess the cognitive, affective and behavioural skills needed to act in compassionate ways [1]. Interestingly, neurological research has revealed an innate inclination to act in a prosocial manner from the very start, possibly due to reflexive forms of empathy existing in the brain [2]. However, it is important to nurture the budding growth of these inherently human traits so that they truly flourish. This thinking is also at the centre of the positive psychology paradigm, which views these '*strengths of the heart*' as equally important skills to learn as the more traditional, academic '*strengths of the head*' [3–5].

On the other hand, research from the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) has indicated that social exclusion is not an uncommon phenomenon among young children either [6,7]. Therefore, children should be taught to encounter their peers with a non-judgemental, kind and compassionate attitude from an early age. Most importantly,

no child should be left alone. Indeed, Baumeister and Leary [8] have argued that human beings are likely to experience severe consequences resulting from a sense of not belonging. Furthermore, a sense of belonging is an important aspect of human well-being on a general level [3,9,10]. Consequently, supporting each individual's right to feel that they belong is not so much a question of acceptance as one of appreciation, a mindset that is nourished by learning and improving one's prosocial skills.

1.1. The Role of Prosocial Skills in Supporting Inclusion

In the context of inclusive education, various international declarations, programmes and agreements have been made to safeguard every child's right to education, such as the United Nations' 1975 Declaration of the Rights of Disabled Persons and UNESCO's 1994 Salamanca Statement [11]. According to the national core curriculum for ECEC in Finland, where the present study was conducted, among the key objectives for ECEC is: '[...] the realisation of equality in education in line with the principles of inclusion. These principles include equal rights for all children, equality, equity, non-discrimination, appreciation of diversity as well as social participation and togetherness' [12] (p. 4). Indeed, in Finland, inclusion is considered an overarching core principle that runs through the entire educational system [12]. As a result, most daycare groups throughout the country include children with special educational needs (SEN), accompanied by varying levels of support and, in many cases, the children's peers are probably not even aware of the special arrangements (see also [11]).

On a practical level, one key element of supporting inclusion from an early age is explicitly and proactively teaching children certain core skills, such as kindness and compassion [13,14]. This is of particular importance since previous research has shown that children with SEN are subject to an especially elevated risk of encountering peer rejection [15,16]. From a preventive standpoint, it is better to begin this education of the heart early on, before any problems arise. Therefore, learning kindness and compassion can also be seen as a concrete tool for building bridges between individuals, enabling them to come together and even enjoy the views from the other side of the bridge. In this way, children learn from the start that everyone should be treated with kindness and compassion, even though they may look or seem different from the outside or behave in a different way. Interestingly, though, research on compassion, particularly among children in younger age groups, is surprisingly scarce [17,18]. Few recent studies have allowed for diverse children's voices to be heard as lead vocalists, even though the songs that are being written are all about them. Hence, the aim of this present study is to contribute to filling this gap by developing and testing an exploratory intervention programme for promoting children's prosocial skills in an inclusive ECEC setting.

1.2. Kindness and Compassion in Positive Psychology Research

Scholars have argued that one of the most important tasks of education is to foster and cherish children's prosocial skills [3,17,19–21]. Eisenberg et al. [21] (p. 646) defined prosocial behaviour as 'voluntary behaviour intended to benefit another', and this behaviour can take various forms, such as helping, sharing, comforting or donating. This skill set is also deeply rooted in the positive psychology paradigm in general and in research conducted on character strengths in particular [19,22]. According to the theoretical construct of character strengths proposed by Peterson and Seligman [22], six universal human virtues can be recognised across different continents and cultures. These virtues include the virtue of humanity, which, in turn, entails the character strengths of kindness, love and social intelligence. All three character strengths have been repeatedly associated with positive peer relationships, friendship quality and the formation of inclusive student groups among classmates [4,23]. In the present study, the main interest lies in kindness, defined quite simply as 'a common orientation of self toward the other' [22] (p. 326).

Another core character strength stemming from prosocial competencies is that of compassion. In this regard, it is worth noting that compassion is not listed among the character

strengths included under the virtue of humanity [22]. However, as noted by Peterson and Seligman [22] (p. 31), the set of character strengths is not final but constantly evolving. Moreover, it is indisputable that compassion is closely interlinked with all three character strengths in the category of humanity, kindness in particular. The present study makes the argument that the two character strengths of kindness and compassion are fundamentally intertwined, based on the idea that compassion is more inclined towards the emotional states experienced as a response to someone's suffering. Indeed, Dutton et al. [24] define compassion as a three-step process of noticing, feeling and acting upon someone's misfortune or suffering. The relationship between the two strengths can be characterised using the following example: kindness opens the door for a stranger, while compassion rushes to help if a stranger's finger becomes painfully trapped in the doorway. Moreover, previous research has identified courage, wisdom and dedication as core elements characterising compassion and thereby distinguishing it from kindness [25]. In this article, the concepts of kindness and compassion are considered a comprehensive skill set that forms the backbone of prosocial skills.

It is noteworthy that, just like character strengths in general, kindness and compassion can be learned and further developed [26–29]. Moreover, previous research has demonstrated that an efficient way to achieve change in this regard is through interventions [19,30,31]. Starting early is important in inclusive education settings in particular, since oftentimes individual differences act as catalysts for unwanted behaviour, disputes and exclusion [32]. Furthermore, researchers have pointed out that the level of a child's prosocial behaviour during preschool and later in childhood predicts the extent to which the child manifests various aspects of kindness and prosocial moral judgement in adulthood [22,33]. On the other hand, failure to establish positive peer relationships during preschool years adds to the risk of maladjustment during school years [34]. To conclude, Spinrad and Eisenberg [13] (p. 61) have pointed out that staging 'interventions to develop children's compassionate behaviour is a long-term goal and understanding the mechanisms involved in effective interventions is a key topic for future studies'.

1.3. Teaching Kindness and Compassion in the Finnish ECEC Context

The Finnish ECEC guidelines specify that the core principles of the pedagogical approach should include supporting children's development in ways that would enable them to learn how to utilise their skills also to benefit others [12]. Furthermore, Section 3 of the Finnish Act on Early Childhood Education and Care [35] (p. 3) stipulates that the main objectives of ECEC in Finland should aim to 'develop the child's interpersonal and interaction skills, promote the child's ability to act in a peer group and guide the child towards ethically responsible and sustainable action, respect for other people and membership in society'.

With respect to Finnish daycare, the system is based on the cross-cutting idea of 'educare', meaning that education and care are strongly intertwined [36]. Building on this foundation, educators provide children with age-appropriate care and nurturance while at the same time laying the groundwork for a smooth transition to school. Another typical trait of the Finnish daycare system is the central role of play as a part of the curriculum. Indeed, the national core curriculum for ECEC in Finland highlights the need for play as a key practice and working method in ECEC centres across the country [12]. Moreover, there is an important social component to play in ECEC settings. In other words, engaging in various forms of play with peers with diverse needs provides children with excellent opportunities to practice and develop their prosocial skills. According to the Finnish National Agency for Education [12], when playing together, children learn to manage their emotions, wants and needs, as well as learning how to make compromises while accounting for different points of view. The promotion of play links back to the initial notion of the evolving nature of the character strengths of kindness and compassion. From a longer-term perspective, the children are also provided with a fundamental human toolkit that will serve them throughout their lifetime. Moreover, Murray and Ahammer found in their research on

preschool-aged children that the most effective training programmes for teaching kindness are those in which kindness is taught in the form of roleplay [37]. In Finland, there are some encouraging previous examples of these kinds of structured character strength-based intervention programmes to date [17,18], but more research is needed, especially studies adapted to capturing younger children's needs and perspectives.

Kaplan et al. [38] have stated that the main benefit of intervention programmes focusing on teaching kindness is the fact that they bring the concept of kindness into the centre of the curriculum. The best way to achieve this is to let the children and their caregivers actively participate in the formation of the programme through day-to-day interactions, eventually becoming cultures that foster the development of kindness [38] and compassion [18]. Participation is a theme that is also emphasised in a seminal review project by Berkowitz and Bier [39], called What works in character education.

The emphasis on both participation and positive peer relationships was also highly visible in the official documents of the particular inclusive ECEC centre where the intervention programme was administered. For example, one of the main objectives of the daycare centre during the school year in question (2022–2023) was to strengthen peer relationships and emotional skills through different activities and initiatives. In connection with the daycare centre's operational culture, on the other hand, themes related to a positive atmosphere and interaction, as well as involvement and equality, were a central part of the unit's common values and daily operations.

1.4. Programme Design and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to support the development of kindness and compassion among preschool-aged children through explicit teaching in the form of a two-week intervention in an inclusive ECEC setting. The hypothesis was that teaching the character strengths of kindness and compassion to children would result in a positive change in their prosocial thoughts and behaviour.

The research questions were as follows:

1. How did the intervention programme work for this inclusive group of children, both regarding the design of the programme and its practical implementation?
2. Was there any change in the children's prosocial behaviour in terms of kindness and compassion, and if yes, how did this change appear in the children's responses to questions related to their feelings, actions and overall satisfaction?
3. How did the other-oriented acts of kindness and compassion performed by the children appear on a practical level?

2. Materials and Methods

The current intervention programme was first piloted in the same inclusive ECEC centre six months earlier [40]. Based on the experiences and results, the programme was developed further. It became evident that a simple structure with easy-to-apply, child-engaging activities was most successful. To best maintain the positive effects from the intervention, the contents needed to be of interest to the ECEC personnel as well.

2.1. Participants

The main participants in this study were two inclusive groups of children aged 5–7 years (*n* = 23, 11 girls and 12 boys) in one ECEC centre in the capital region. Two of the children in the diverse group had an official SEN status. This particular centre was selected as a convenience sample because of its compact size, good facilities for organising the routine and the motivation of the centre's staff to participate in this particular study. To obtain a more comprehensive picture of the research subject as a whole, additional data were collected from the ECEC teachers (*n* = 2) and some of the children's guardians (*n* = 8).

Participation in the study was voluntary, and the children's own desire to continue participating in the programme was assessed and re-evaluated on a constant basis throughout the intervention period. This entailed listening to the children's non-verbal and verbal

messages with a sensitive ear throughout the research process (see also [41]). The children had the right to stop participating in the study if they so desired at any time during the course of the intervention. In addition, research permits were obtained in advance from the local authorities, as well as from the children's guardians. Moreover, the ethical guidelines of The Declaration of Helsinki, as well as the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity [42], were followed at all stages of the study.

2.2. Study Design, Analytical Strategy and Data Collection

An experimental design was applied with pre–post measures probing the levels of kindness and compassion in the children's thinking and actions. To obtain a multi-sided picture of the outcomes of the intervention, a mixed-method approach consisting of both quantitative and qualitative elements was adopted [43].

2.2.1. Quantitative Measures

The quantitative measures were crafted to meet the specific needs of the present study, building on the foundation laid by previous research on the subject. As a result, an 18-item questionnaire was constructed, drawing particularly from the work of Nas and Sak [44] and Youngs et al. [45]. The items in the questionnaire were formulated with the target group of preschool-aged children with diverse needs in mind, with the aim of measuring the children's inclination to perform various acts of kindness and exhibit compassion towards others. The questions were divided into three main categories, each of which measured different facets of kindness and compassion, ranging from feeling bad if something bad happens to other people (Feeling) to actually trying to help them (Action) and feeling good as a result (Satisfaction) [24,44,45]. Both the pre- and post-tests followed the same protocol and were identical in terms of the questions asked and instructions given. Before beginning the actual test, the researchers made sure that the children understood the nature of the questions and how to interpret the picture-based questionnaire.

2.2.2. Qualitative Measures

In addition to quantitative measures, qualitative data were collected in the form of individual pre- and post-interviews. The interviews consisted of three questions that followed the same general themes (Feeling, Action, Satisfaction) as the more detailed quantitative questionnaire. In addition to the qualitative questions, the children were asked to provide examples of situations where they had performed good deeds for others. A full list of the qualitative questions, as well as examples of the quantitative questions, can be found in Table 1.

The datasets obtained from the children were complemented with interview data from the teachers (one teacher from each group) as well as some of the children's guardians. The questions asked in the interviews can be found in Table 2.

Table 1. An overview of the study's quantitative and qualitative measures.

Types of Prosocial Behaviour	Interview Questions (Qualitative Measure)	Examples of Questions in the 18-Item Questionnaire (Quantitative Measure)
FEELING (Feeling bad if something bad happens to other people)	1. How do you feel if something bad happens to somebody? Why?	1. You hear that your friend's favourite toy is broken beyond repair. What will you do: do you feel sorry for your friend, or focus on other things? 2. You are heading home from preschool when you notice that an old lady is trying very hard to make it to a bus but cannot make it. What will you do: do you feel sorry for the old lady, or do you forget the whole thing right away?
ACTION (Trying to help if something bad happens to other people)	2. What do you do if somebody needs help? Please give an example.	1. You bring your favourite toy to the preschool and your friend asks to play with it. What will you do: do you lend the toy to your friend, or do you keep it for yourself? 2. There is a new child in your group who looks a bit shy and lonely. You see him/her crying outside in the playground. What will you do: do you stop and talk to him/her, or do you run and play with your old friends?
SATISFACTION (Feeling good when trying to help other people)	3. How do you feel when you are helping somebody? Why?	1. You arrive at the toilet queue of your preschool group at the same time as another child. He/she looks like he/she really needs to go to the toilet badly. What will you do: are you happy to let him/her pass you in the queue or not? 2. You are playing with your friend in the playground when his/her gloves get wet. You remember that you have a pair of spare gloves with you. What will you do: are you happy to lend your gloves to your friend, or do you continue to play without saying anything?

Table 2. Interview themes covered with the early childhood education and care (ECEC) teachers and the children's guardians.

Interviewee	Themes
Teacher	General thoughts on the intervention
	What worked in this intervention? Why?
	What didn't work or could have been improved? How?
	Observations during the intervention
	Observations after the intervention
Guardian	Has the child mentioned the intervention at home?
	If yes, what has the child told you about the intervention?
	General thoughts about the intervention
	Other observations during or after the intervention

2.2.3. Data Collection and Analytic Strategy

During the first day of the pre- and post-tests, the children answered the first 12 questions of the 18-item quantitative questionnaire. This took them approximately 20–30 min. On the second day, the children completed the remaining six quantitative questions. Thereafter, each child was interviewed individually in a separate room for 2–4 min. Two of the total number of twenty-three participants were absent during the pre-test phase of the study and three were not able to participate in the post-test.

The quantitative testing took place in a playroom, where the children were instructed to sit approximately half a metre apart from each other. During the test, the researchers read each question out loud, after which the children marked their answers on the paper questionnaire form in front of them. Throughout this process, the children had the opportunity to ask for clarifications in case they had not heard or understood the question. The questionnaire was formulated using a 4-point pictorial Likert scale, where the options were presented as a series of squares and circles in different sizes. The bigger of the two squares represented a strong 'no', whereas the smaller square meant 'maybe no'. The smaller of the two circles, in turn, stood for 'maybe yes', while the larger of the two circles meant a strong 'yes'.

The interview data from the teachers and guardians were collected during the first two weeks following the intervention. Both teachers actively participated in the intervention, and were thus familiar with its contents and implementation at a relatively detailed level. This made it possible for the researchers to gain valuable insights from the teachers during the post-intervention interviews.

The teacher and guardian interviews were loosely formulated around pre-selected themes with the possibility of modifying the course of the interview as the discussion unfolded [46]. The interviews with the two teachers lasted for 30 and 45 min, respectively, while the interviews with the guardians were shorter, lasting around 10–15 min each. The number of guardians ($n = 8$) represented almost 40% of the children's families, since some of the guardians had two children participating in the study.

Both voice and video recordings were used to collect the research data from the children (data reported elsewhere) [47]. The individual interviews with the teachers and guardians were recorded in a video call format.

The results of the quantitative measure were assessed using the SPSS 28 statistics software. The qualitative data were first quantified, followed by a more thorough content analysis of specific subsets of the data. All research materials were treated in a way that protected the privacy of the participants, such as by replacing their identification information with codes.

2.3. Intervention Design and Contents

The two-week exploratory intervention programme was based on previous studies by Kaplan et al. [38], Lipponen et al. [18], Proctor et al. [48], Retnowati et al. [49] and Vuorinen et al. [17]. Adapted from the scope and priorities of character-strengths-based education stemming from research by Linkins et al. [4], the present intervention design consisted of the following elements: (1) developing a common language for what is meant by kindness and compassion, (2) learning to identify a wide range of occasions and opportunities for doing good deeds in one's everyday life, (3) starting to notice and appreciate the acts of kindness done by oneself and others, (4) practising the art of doing good deeds for others, and finally, (5) reflecting on the outcomes of such deeds together with the peer group in a diverse ECEC setting. The practical implementation of the intervention programme was administered by one of the researchers, together with the daycare teachers (one teacher per group). The structure of the intervention programme was kept relatively straightforward overall, ensuring easy adaptability within the age group of preschool-aged children in inclusive settings as well as possibilities for broader use within the Finnish ECEC curriculum.

The intervention participants were divided into two groups based on their age (5–6 year olds, $n = 11$ and 6–7 year olds, $n = 12$). The group division was natural, since

the groups were the same as the children's actual daycare groups in the ECEC centre. In total, both groups received 5–6 h of hands-on teaching during the intervention period, complemented by home assignments and more informal discussions around the themes of the intervention throughout the intervention period. A detailed intervention timeline can be found in Table 3.

Table 3. Intervention timeline.

	Week 1		Week 2	
	Days 1–3 (1 h per group per day)		Days 4–6 (1 h per group per day)	
Pre-test	• Introduction; • Lecture using the storybook (day 1) and short stories (days 2–3); • Group discussion; • Pictureboard of good deeds; • Tree of good deeds; • Notebooks of good deeds; • Respect frame; • Home assignments.		• Lecture of short stories; • Group discussion; • Pictureboard of good deeds; • Tree of good deeds; • Notebooks of good deeds; • Respect frame; • Home assignments.	Post-test

2.3.1. Storytelling and Co-Creation

The intervention model was built on stories created together with the children, based on a storybook that the researchers had specifically designed for the purpose. A similar model was adopted earlier by Retnowati et al. [49], with encouraging results. The role of storytelling through reading books to children is generally considered an important activity between grown-ups and children, both at home and in the daycare context. Through stories, children can safely make sense of the reality around them, learn new things and discover a variety of alternative paths to explore [50,51]. Lawrence and Paige [50] (p. 67) have also stated: 'Furthermore, storytelling is a collaborative nonhierarchical process that involves the learners as active agents in the learning process rather than as passive receivers.' Since the aim of this study was to approach the research question through the children's own lenses, the choice of storytelling through co-creation was a natural starting point for the intervention.

In the present model, the children's role as storytellers was emphasised, thereby allowing plenty of room for story co-creation and discussion throughout the duration of the programme. On the first day of the intervention, the researchers started by reading a storybook to the children, followed by a group discussion. The book was constructed in a manner that allowed for interaction, as the main characters needed the children's help on various occasions. The idea was to keep the story alive by engaging the children in its creation, inviting them to reflect on kind and compassionate solutions for the issues encountered by the characters in the storybook. The duration of the reading, followed by a group discussion, was around 20–30 min per group.

The characters of the storybook were imaginary creatures with animal-like attributes. This choice of characters was based on previous research showing that young children are particularly drawn to stories with animals as the main characters [52]. Furthermore, the usage of animal characters helps in taking the spotlight off factors such as gender, age and race, making it easier for each child to identify with the characters in the story. In addition to this important notion of portraying diversity, animal figures can also be used for sensitive subjects, such as teaching children about shortcomings or mistakes made by the characters in an indirect manner [49,51]. In addition, animal characters make it easier for children to understand abstract concepts, such as kindness or compassion [53]. In this particular study, the story had three main characters, one of them being particularly clumsy when it came to taking the others into account. This setup created many funny moments throughout the

story, offering the children the opportunity to teach this ill-mannered character how to be a good friend.

Each day of the intervention followed the same overall scheme. First, the children shared their acts of kindness in the morning circle, after which the researchers read a short follow-up story based on the storybook, where the children could participate and help the characters resolve issues related to kindness and compassion. After this, the programme varied somewhat depending on the day. On some days, for instance, the children would learn a song based on the storybook, while other days would include a group discussion about various forms of kindness. One way of seeing and doing good was through the respect frame, developed by one of the researchers as a part of an earlier study [54]. Here, each child was, in turn, invited inside the respect frame, after which the others had the chance to say something kind about the person inside the frame. The idea was that the frame would serve as a tool for the children to see and vocalise the good in others, thus creating a constructive and supportive atmosphere, one positive interaction at a time.

2.3.2. A Toolkit for Identifying and Performing Good Deeds

At the end of the first day of the intervention, the children were introduced to the picture board of good deeds, which listed examples of acts of kindness. The picture board acted as a source of inspiration for the children and made various forms of prosocial behaviour visible in a pragmatic way. Furthermore, the children received home assignments starting from day one of the intervention, where they were asked to perform acts of kindness for those close to them. Such persons could be friends at the daycare centre or known from their various hobbies, as well as family members or relatives. Focusing on actually performing these acts of kindness instead of only listening and talking about them is important, or as Jazaieri [55] (p. 47) put it: 'While compassion does not necessarily need to always include a prosocial or altruistic behavior, for young children, engaging in concrete behaviors can be a useful way of learning about the process of compassion.' Moreover, previous research has demonstrated the value of involving guardians in the intervention process through home assignments, since extending the contents of the intervention to the children's home environment supports their learning process at a more profound level [56,57]. In addition, providing the children with the possibility to decide on the actual content of these acts of kindness provided them with opportunities for participation and co-creation, with a potentially positive effect on their levels of intrinsic motivation as well [58,59].

These home assignments were offered every day during the intervention and shared with the group in the morning circle the following day. After the morning circle, each child received a leaf to attach to the tree of good deeds that the researchers had put up on the playroom wall, next to the picture board of good deeds. These leaves acted as signs of completed homework. In addition, the children were given notebooks of good deeds, where they received a sticker every time they completed their home assignment. They could also use the notebooks for making notes during the intervention and attach pictures of the storybook characters that they had coloured themselves. Pictures of the tree of good deeds and the notebook of good deeds can be found in Figures 1 and 2.
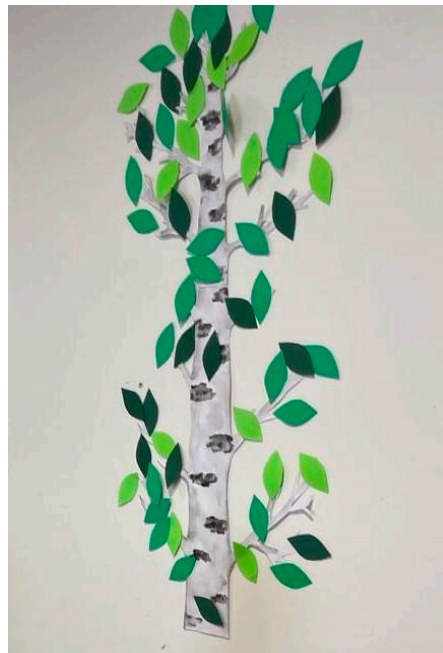
Figure 1. Tree of good deeds.

Figure 2. Notebook of good deeds.

3. Results

The following section first explores the quantitative results of the study, extracted from the children's answers to the pictorial questionnaire. Then, a closer look is taken at the qualitative side of the results, stemming from the children's individual pre- and post-interviews. Finally, the findings from the teachers' and guardians' interviews are examined and compared to the results from the children's dataset.

3.1. Quantitative Results

The quantitative results of the study are based on the 18-item pre-/post-pictorial questionnaire answered by the children. The questions were clustered into three subcategories, each of which depicted the three components of prosocial behaviour derived from previous research, i.e., Feeling, Action and Satisfaction. The total number of items

in each sub-category was eight, six and four, respectively. The sum variables for each sub-category can be found in Table 4. The variables ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alphas were above 0.8 for all the sum variables. There were nine missing values in the answers to the questionnaires, mostly on the pre-test forms for the 5–6-year-olds. However, these missing values were random and hardly appeared during the post-tests, indicating that the younger children also seemed to benefit from repetition and familiarity with the measure in question.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for the study variables.

| Measure | Pre-Test | | | | Post-Test | | | |
| | 5–6 y/o (*n* = 10) | | 6–7 y/o (*n* = 11) | | 5—6 y/o (*n* = 10) | | 6–7 y/o (*n* = 10) | |
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Feeling	2.80	0.89	2.82	0.86	2.17	0.91	2.77	0.88
Action	2.57	0.75	3.13	1.00	2.06	0.73	3.22	0.92
Satisfaction	2.67	0.81	3.15	1.03	2.14	0.87	3.20	1.03

Note. Variables range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

As the table shows, differences between the pre-/post-means are mixed and raise some interesting questions. In particular, some problems appeared while testing the intervention group of 5–6-year-olds. As can be seen from the table, the results of the post-tests for this age group were clearly lower across all categories compared to their pre-test results. This was not a total surprise for the researchers, since it had become evident during the post-tests that some children did not take the test situation seriously. Thus, the researchers' ability to make use of the quantitative data for this age group is limited. On the other hand, the testing of the group of 6–7-year-olds went smoothly. However, the Wilcoxon's test showed no statistical change in the children's answers in any of the three sub-categories.

3.2. Qualitative Results from the Children

The qualitative results of the intervention were based on the children's pre- and post-test interviews. The three interview questions (see Table 1 for a detailed list) followed the previous categorisation of Feeling, Action and Satisfaction. The researchers first transcribed each of the 41 individual interviews and then quantified the pieces of text related to the three categories. In total, 21 interviews were conducted during the pre-test phase and 20 during the post-tests. After this, the concrete acts of kindness performed by the children were examined more thoroughly using inductive content analysis [60].

In the first phase of the qualitative analysis, the researchers first read and compared the individual responses given by each child during the pre-/post-interviews. If a change was detected in the child's answer, it was marked on an Excel sheet with a code of either + (for a positive change) or − (for a negative change). Furthermore, if the child mentioned an example of a good deed during the interview, it was written down. An additional column was inserted into the Excel sheet with information on whether the examples were mentioned during the pre- or post-test interview, or both. A similar numeric coding (+ for positive change, – for negative change) was used here as with the other questions.

Overall, there was no apparent shift in the children's answers in the first two categories of the qualitative measure (Feeling, Action). However, a slight shift towards the positive end was detected in the children's answers pertaining to the third category (Satisfaction). Here, the number of positive feelings associated with helping others reported by the children during the post-test interviews rose by 17% (+3 out of 18 children, with some being absent) compared to the pre-test responses. This pattern was further accentuated by the number of examples of helping others given by the children in the post-test interviews, which was higher compared to the pre-test interviews, resulting in a 22% overall positive

change (+4/18 children). Based on this quantified output, derived from the qualitative interviews, it can thus be stated that a slight but consistent shift occurred in the children's answers in both age groups towards a more other-oriented direction.

When taking a closer look at the children's answers to each sub-category, the researchers were particularly interested in the reasons behind each individual answer ('*the why*'). In the first category (Feeling), the focus was thus on the follow-up question, '*Why does it feel bad if something bad happens to others?*' In contrast, in the third category (Satisfaction) the follow-up question was simply, '*Why does it feel good to help?*' Finally, the researchers further complemented the data by including concrete examples of good deeds given by the children, which were placed into the second category of the intervention framework (Action).

The analysis of the interview data followed the same logic for the first and third categories of Feeling and Satisfaction. First of all, all interviews were read thoroughly, with the aim of noting each reason given in response to the '*why*' question by the children. Each new answer was recorded in a new row, and when the same answer was given again by another child, this information was then added to the '*Number of mentions*' column of the table (see Table 5). Regarding both categories, the results were quite straightforward. The main reasons given for feeling bad if something bad happened to someone else were related either to the other person's mental or physical suffering or, alternatively, to that suffering based on the child's own similar feelings or experiences. The principal reasons for feeling good when helping others, in turn, were rather pragmatic. Several children mentioned that they simply felt good because they were able to help or that they liked helping in general. Other answers included reflecting upon the other person's feelings or even thoughts about benefiting from this good deed on a personal level in some way.

In the case of the second category in Table 5 (Action), the researchers first wrote down concrete examples of good deeds provided by the children in the one-on-one interviews. After the initial phase of simply listing such examples, the analysis was complemented by the examples that the children gave during the morning circles of the intervention programme. The main objective of this endeavour was to let the children's diverse voices be thoroughly heard, which was also in line with this study's initial aims. A total of 110 examples were compiled. Thereafter, the researchers assigned the agglomerated examples to different subcategories, which, in turn, were combined to form five more generic categories, ultimately resulting in the three main categories of the analysis, namely showing social responsibility towards others, thoughtful living with others and showing kindness towards others. A total of 49 examples fell into the category of showing social responsibility towards others, while 36 and 25 examples, respectively, fell into the categories of thoughtful living with others and showing kindness towards others. The overall results of the analysis regarding these three sub-categories can be found in Table 5.

The interviews with the children also shed some light on their thinking in relation to the quantitative test results. This was especially the case for the group of 5–6-year-olds, whose quantitative results were the most controversial. The researchers' attention was drawn to two post-test interviews in particular and, interestingly, they were both with the children who had categorically decided to answer in a certain way during the post-test questionnaire. In the first of the interviews, the child stated that:

'My answers are the same as [another child's name]. He told me how he was going to answer [the questions in the questionnaire] before it started.'

Another child also exhibited a clearly negative trend in his post-test questionnaire results. During the interview, the child first emphasised that he does not help out at home and does not feel anything when helping either. However, when the researcher asked if the child could give a concrete example of an act of kindness that he had recently done, he quickly gave one. When the researcher then continued and asked how the child had felt when doing the good deed, the child answered that he had felt good. This inconsistency in the child's answers accentuates the importance of including the qualitative measures as part of this particular study.

Table 5. Reasons behind, and examples of, acts of kindness by the children.

1. Feeling: Why does it feel bad, if something bad happens to others?	No. of mentions
Because perhaps the other person got hurt	6
Because the other person feels bad	3
Because something bad happened to the other person	3
Because it would not be nice, if the same thing happened to me	2

2. Action: Examples of acts of kindness			
Subcategory	No. of mentions	Generic category	Main category
Helping with household chores	24	Everyday actions	Showing social responsibility towards others
Helping siblings	16	Helpful attitude	Thoughtful living with others
Small acts of kindness	14	Kind gestures	Showing kindness towards others
Helping adults	13	Helpful attitude	Thoughtful living with others
Showing responsibility	12	Everyday actions	Showing social responsibility towards others
Cooperation, taking turns	9	Social intelligence	Showing social responsibility towards others
Helping a friend	7	Helpful attitude	Thoughtful living with others
Caring for others	5	Caring presence	Showing love towards others
Complimenting others	4	Social intelligence	Showing social responsibility towards others
Surprising others	4	Kind gestures	Showing kindness towards others
Giving of one's own to others	2	Caring presence	Showing kindness towards others

3. Satisfaction: Why does it feel good to help?	No. of mentions
Because I can be of help (to a friend)	5
Because the other person becomes happy	3
Because I like to help	3
Because it would be nice if I was helped too in a similar situation	2
Because then we can continue to play	1
Because it is worth helping to get friends	1

Note. The 'No. of mentions' column stands for the number of times each item was mentioned by the children.

On the positive side, several children showed an advancement in their levels of kindness and compassion in the post-test interviews. One example is that of a child who had clearly begun to form an image of herself as a kind and compassionate human being. First, she shared with the researcher how her mother had called her *'embathic'* [sic] in connection with her home assignments and explained in detail what the word meant as well as the contexts in which she had acted in empathic ways. Indeed, previous research

has shown that acting in compassionate ways may help in the process of seeing oneself as a caring person [61].

Another child described his feelings when helping others during the post-test interview as follows:

'It feels good, really good [to help]. Double-super-good.'

And when the researcher asked about why it feels so good, the child continued:

'Because then we can continue to play. Yes. [. . .] And then there will no longer be this scene that stops us from playing.'

One of the children with SEN considered the question of helping his friends as follows:

'I like to help with the pant legs. [To place the pant legs over other children's rubber boots.]'

When asked why, the child answered:

'Well, because when I do it myself, it feels pretty good. [. . .] I mean that the muscles get some movement when I do it. [. . .] Yes, and it feels good.'

In sum, the qualitative findings from the interviews indicate that the children actively embraced the challenge of reflecting on their own prosocial role in their community and seemingly enjoyed taking part in this endeavour. Moreover, it became evident that some children were further ahead in this process than others. However, a consistent, positive trend in the children's prosocial thinking and behaviour was visible in their post-test interview results.

3.3. Qualitative Results from the Teachers and Guardians

The individual interviews with the teachers and guardians were analysed following the same inductive methodology as was used in the children's interviews [60]. Here, the researchers first extracted the key words that came up during the interviews and wrote them down. After that, the words were arranged into clusters around different themes. For instance, the theme of exciting characters in the story came up often in the guardian interviews, and so this theme was assigned to the category of intervention content. Other categories included intervention duration and children's behaviour.

The intervention content theme mainly received positive feedback in all interviews. The teachers in particular stated that they really enjoyed being part of the intervention setup and co-creation process. Furthermore, both teachers and guardians mentioned that the children generally enjoyed the programme, and one of the teachers even noted that the children were still talking about the programme after the intervention had finished, expressing a desire for the programme to continue for a longer period of time. The only improvement here was one teacher's remark about adding some more elements where the children could move around, with the purpose of maintaining their focus a bit longer. Regarding the intervention duration theme, one teacher suggested that the intervention programme could be built around an entire school year instead of only lasting two weeks, thus extending the benefits of the programme over a longer period of time, allowing for more repetition and a deeper level of learning. This same remark was written down during the researchers' post-intervention reflective discussions as well.

A majority of the remarks from the teacher/guardian interviews had to do with the children's behaviour. In this respect, one of the teachers noticed a change in the children's behaviour right after the intervention, especially related to their skills at taking the others into account and listening to others in general, even if they had clearly contrasting opinions or demeanours. Furthermore, several guardians reported that their children did more good deeds at home during the intervention programme than before it, which was not a surprising result since this was the children's home assignment. However, two guardians reported that their children continued to help out more actively at home even after the intervention period. Naturally, a more thorough examination would be needed to determine whether this change was caused by the intervention itself or by other, external factors, such as the child's current developmental phase. Another interesting remark made by one of the teachers in relation to the children's behaviour was related to roleplay.

Namely, the teacher observed that the children who had not taken the quantitative post-tests seriously were currently in the phase of testing different roles within their daycare community. The teacher's view was that these children had chosen the role of a villain during the post-test measurements, testing how it made them feel. Here again, further input would be needed to formulate a stronger stance regarding this observation, but in light of the teacher's profound expertise, as well as her experience with those particular children, this could well be an interesting thread of thought to study further.

4. Discussion

This final section takes a closer look at the types of learning stemming from the overall results of this exploratory intervention. The analysis is based on a dialogue between the agglomerated results and the initial research questions of the study. Based on this synthesis, the value and significance of the intervention are assessed as a whole, followed by recommendations for future research in the field.

4.1. Intervention Programme Design and Implementation

The first research question assessed how the intervention programme worked in this particular context regarding both the design of the programme and its practical implementation.

At an overall level, the two-week intervention programme worked quite well and received positive feedback, both from the children themselves as well as their teachers and guardians. The insights from the individual teacher/guardian interviews confirmed the findings written down by the researchers during the course of the intervention. The teachers especially liked the chance to develop and co-create the programme's structure, together with the children. Indeed, a relatively high level of co-creation seems to be pivotal for the programme's structure, especially in a country like Finland, where the teachers' educational level is high and they enjoy a great deal of autonomy in their work (see also [11]). The co-creation process was seemingly an advantage of this particular programme. These findings are of importance in light of the results highlighted in previous studies (e.g., [38,48]), where a bottom-up approach, as well as an easily adaptable programme structure, were listed as key elements affecting the future viability of the programme.

Looking back at the quantitative testing conducted as part of the study, a few issues emerged with the group of 5–6-year-olds in particular. Some of the issues can be traced back to the test situation itself. Namely, some of the children had difficulties understanding the test questions, concentrating during the test situation and answering according to their own thoughts without looking at their peers' answers. All these factors affected the overall test results of the group. In addition, some of the children in this particular group did not take the post-test situation seriously, and categorically chose to answer in a certain way. Two children even agreed in advance that they would give the same answers during the post-tests. Since the number of those responding to the questionnaire was small, this behaviour had a clear effect on the entire group's results. Nevertheless, the results are reported in their entirety because they constitute an important learning opportunity for anyone who intends to run group testing for preschool-aged children.

A key point learned from this experience is that the quantitative test situation needs to be modified to provide children with the best possible conditions for answering the questionnaire without any distractions. Furthermore, the decision to videotape both the intervention itself and the individual test situations proved to be a good one. In this way, it was possible for the researchers to reliably verify the initial findings regarding the children's behaviour during the test situations afterwards. Altogether, the video materials provided abundant data that will be analysed and reported in more detail in a separate article.

In addition, it is possible that a certain degree of familiarity with the researchers may have played a role during the post-testing phase. Perhaps the fact that the children were more familiar with the researcher at the time of the post-testing influenced their answers, allowing them to feel free and fool around a little. In any case, this exploratory intervention study confirms the findings from previous research, namely that this kind of quantitative

testing alone is not enough [62]. In this particular study, the children behaved normally according to their age. This underlines the fact that mixed methods are needed to gain a more profound understanding of the data.

On the other hand, the individual interviews with the children worked well. The duration of the interviews was age-appropriate, and the children were able to give their answers easily and naturally. The fact that the interviews were held in a separate space reserved for this purpose served to make the interview situations calm and relaxed. Indeed, the children seemed to enjoy this experience and their time alone with the researcher. Some children even spontaneously uttered the words '*Is it already over*?' at the end of the interview. Also, one child with SEN was restless at times during the intervention and needed special assistance, but the child was calm and content during the interviews, answering the questions with depth and precision. One reason for this change might be the calming effect of the one-on-one interview space combined with the fact that the child received the researcher's full attention. It would be interesting to replicate a similar research setup for other children with SEN to study this finding in more detail, drawing inspiration from the work of, e.g., Hanks [63] and Johnson [64].

All in all, it can be concluded that, with some modifications regarding the setup of the quantitative testing in particular, this type of intervention programme can be successfully duplicated for future research purposes.

4.2. Change in the Children's Other-Oriented Behaviour

With the second research question, the researchers were interested in examining whether any change was evident in the children's prosocial behaviour between the pre- and post-test results. Furthermore, the present study assessed how this change was reflected in the children's responses to questions relating to their feelings, actions and overall satisfaction.

The results of this analysis were two-fold. In the picture-based questionnaire, the pre–post measures were mixed. However, the individual interviews revealed developments in the children's prosocial thinking that also manifested in concrete actions of kindness and compassion towards their peers, with them showing signs of caring for each other and seeing the good in each other. The results support the findings from previous studies (see e.g., [17]). This connection was particularly clear in the children's answers to the open-ended questions, where they were asked to describe their feelings related to helping others. In addition, the children's ability to provide concrete examples of their acts of kindness towards others clearly improved during the two-week intervention period. Furthermore, the children were quite skilled in verbally expressing the reasons behind their compassionate feelings and satisfaction linked to these feelings. Also, this finding was more prominent in connection with the post-test interviews, indicating a positive intervention effect. The findings fall in line with our initial hypothesis, confirming that the effect of this present exploratory intervention on the children's prosocial thinking and behaviour was indeed of a positive nature, thus offering a good starting point for a more consistent and longer-term teaching of prosocial skills.

4.3. An Overview of the Children's Acts of Kindness

The third and final research question sought to map how the other-oriented acts of kindness performed by the children looked at a practical level. Here, three main themes emerged as a result of the inductive content analysis of the research data. They were showing social responsibility towards others, thoughtful living with others and showing kindness towards others.

A total of 110 examples of good deeds were recorded during the intervention programme and individual interviews, which painted a colourful picture of other-oriented behaviour performed by preschool-aged children. The intervention resulted in a number of acts of kindness, with the researchers especially noting how the programme improved the children's general capacity to perform good deeds. These acts of kindness included

saying something kind to others and surprising others with small gifts, which are similar to the acts of kindness mentioned in earlier studies by, e.g., Uusitalo and Vuorinen [54] and Passmore and Oades [65]. Some children began by only expressing modest efforts, hardly being able to name any good deed that they could perform, but they matured beautifully towards the end of the intervention programme. Based on previous interventions adopting a similar methodology around storytelling and co-creation (see e.g., [49]), the researchers anticipated that some of the children might enjoy the co-creation process, but the scale of the children's excitement was bigger than expected. For example, during the last morning circle, the children spontaneously suggested that they could themselves go and teach these newly acquired skills to the younger groups in their daycare centre.

4.4. Limitations, Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

There are some limitations to this study that are worth mentioning. First of all, in classic interventions, a control group is included in the design [66]. However, since this one was a proof-of-concept still under development, there was none here. Instead, the children's development in relation to their own pre-test measurements was under focus in this particular exploratory intervention study.

Another limitation of the present study was the fact that a critical number of the respondents did not answer the test questions seriously, restricting the use of quantitative methods. In the future, more attention should be paid to the intervention setup, as well as to emphasising the importance of responding to the questionnaire truthfully according to one's own preferences. On the other hand, the number of participants was quite adequate for the purposes of the qualitative analysis. Furthermore, additional interviews with the children's teachers and guardians helped the researchers gain a comprehensive understanding of the study's overall results.

As the intervention progressed, it became evident that a longer intervention period would have been beneficial. This realisation was further confirmed in the one-on-one interviews with the children, as well as their daycare teachers, where this topic was raised autonomously as an expressed desire by both parties. Two weeks is a short timeframe for tracking children's evolution. Indeed, the intervention programme could benefit from being extended over a longer period of time, even an entire preschool year. This reflection is confirmed by previous studies as well. For example, Sin and Lyubomirsky [67] discovered in their earlier work that longer intervention programmes will more likely result in broader gains for the participants at a general level, since this allows them to turn their positive development into new habits. When accounting for the diversity of the children, the group of 5–6-year-olds in particular would have benefited from a prolonged intervention programme, being somewhat less advanced in their level of prosocial thinking compared to the older age group.

Other possibilities for future research also emerged during this intervention study. First of all, the window of opportunity to follow the development of these particular children for a longer period of time presents an interesting subject for a potential future longitudinal study. Moreover, regarding this particular dataset, the rich video materials call for a more profound, discourse-analytical inspection of the collected data. In addition, it would be interesting to expand the role of stories and storytelling in the intervention model to also include the testing phase, i.e., use short-story prompts in the pre- and post-test interviews as a measurement tool. Some previous studies adopted similar approaches, but adaptations of the methodology are still rather scarce, especially within this particular age group and field of study (see e.g., [68]). Based on the positive experiences from the present study, the method of one-on-one interviews also proved successful for children with SEN. This finding is also in line with the considerations introduced by, e.g., Hanks [63] and Johnson [64].

To conclude, as previous research has shown [17,19,38], prosocial skills can and should be taught to children early on. The present study contributes to this idea by introducing a pedagogical framework that can be integrated within various ECEC settings. The benefits of

this child-centred framework include modifiable contents, as well as easy implementation and adaptability for inclusive ECEC settings. A key advantage of the present programme structure is its focus on co-creation, thereby tapping into a source of intrinsic motivation within children (see also [19,38,58,59]). As one child put it: *'I really liked the stories about Furball and his friends! When can we do it again?'*.

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