Conversations with young people about kindness

Foreword

Kindness is at the heart of our wellbeing. Everyday relationships and broad social connections with people around us – not just close friends and family – contribute to our sense of identity and belonging. Yet we are living at a time when our communities are increasingly disconnected; when the spaces that we have for people of all ages and backgrounds to come together are dwindling.

In March 2018, the Carnegie UK Trust brought together a Kindness Innovation Network (KIN), comprised of professionals and people from across Scotland, to explore different ways to encourage human connections in organisations and communities. KIN brought together a wide range of perspectives, however Carnegie UK Trust wanted to extend the conversation further and incorporate the voices of young people into the discussion. To achieve this, they commissioned Scotland's national information and citizenship charity for young people, Young Scot, to work with young people to produce this report. This report is therefore designed as a parallel to KIN, and contributes to it by providing a specific focus on young people, who may have different perceptions and experiences of kindness.

Anecdotally, and particularly in the media, we are told that older generations were taught to practise kindness, and young people simply aren't brought up the way that they used to be. We also hear people blaming the influence of social media for changing social norms and transforming behaviours.

Conversely, data from the Carnegie UK Trust's report, *Quantifying kindness, public engagement and place,* suggests that young people in Scotland are more likely than other age groups to be actively involved in their local community, through activities like volunteering; and that, while they are less likely to report *doing* acts of kindness, they are also less likely to *experience* kindness from other people in their local area.

The Trust and Young Scot worked together to explore some of these contradictions and complexities with young people themselves, and to incorporate young people's particular understandings and reflections into our wider knowledge on kindness. The report highlights this information, and also suggests novel ways that young people would like to see kindness promoted and supported in the communities that they live and work within, and wider society. It is hoped that their reflections and ideas for building a kinder Scotland will inspire KIN and others to challenge existing structures, and embrace innovation and creativity as methods to tackle barriers to a kindness.

While the report does reflect on issues that we might consider specific to young people, such as their experiences of school life, the major themes that emerge are analogous to those that have been identified by Carnegie UK Trust in previous work.

Young people reflected on the importance of social norms and values – whether or not kindness was seen as “cool” – and on the way that anxiety, stress and simply “being under pressure” influenced people’s behaviour. They also talked at length about how the space they were in affected their interactions with others: a point which is particularly relevant for young people who spend a significant amount of time in a school environment that is governed by rules and structures that they have little control over (and which may not always encourage kindness).

We hope you enjoy this report, which offers a new angle to the Trust’s existing research on kindness and adds to the Young Scot Observatory’s growing body of co-design work. The learning from this project will contribute to wider knowledge generated through KIN, which we will use to develop our work on the challenges and opportunities for embedding kindness in our communities and institutions. Further, we believe this report highlights the contributions that young people can make to KIN and discussion about the decisions that impact them, and demonstrates that their knowledge, experiences and ideas are integral to planning a kinder future for all.

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Background

Carnegie UK Trust teamed up with Young Scot to gather the views and ideas of young people on kindness and how kindness could be more widely encouraged and embedded in their communities. This work feeds into Carnegie UK Trust's Kindness Innovation Network (KIN) and the output from these workshops with young people will form a part of the KIN's wider learning on kindness and influence the project's final report.

Two workshops were delivered as part of this project, following Young Scot's co-design process (Appendix A), with 17 young people. One workshop took place with a group of young people at North Berwick High School in East Lothian, and one with a group of Young Scot volunteers in Edinburgh. This report captures the output from the activities that took place during these workshops.

Key Themes

Over the course of the workshops, the young people discussed different aspects of kindness, and determined four key themes which impacted perceptions of kindness and the likelihood of acting kindly: kindness as a learnt behaviour; social pressure; mental health and emotional wellbeing; and external environments.

Kindness as a learnt behaviour

The young people discussed whether an individual's own experiences of kindness could be a deciding factor in how likely they are to act kindly themselves. They thought that a person who had experience of others being kind to them and witnessed acts of kindness regularly would be more likely to be kind to others. Conversely, they suggested that those who did not see kindness performed by others, including people in the local community and public figures, or who experienced adversity during childhood would be less likely to be kind to others.

Social pressure

For many young people, especially those at school, kindness was not a popular behaviour among peers. There was social pressure to not be kind, with young people worried about being labelled "teacher's pet" or being laughed at if they are kind. Similarly, those who did act unkindly were often socially rewarded for such behaviour. This perception was coupled with an awareness of the more formal consequences of kind and unkind behaviour, with young people picking up on how bullying is often not punished or discouraged enough by those with power. One young person identified the 'Bystander Effect' as being a factor in

deciding whether to be kind to another person on not – the belief that someone else will help a person in need can discourage an individual from acting.

Mental health and emotional wellbeing

A range of factors to do with a person's psychological and emotional state were cited by the young people as influencing a person's decision on whether to act kindly. The young people identified being in a bad mood, feeling stressed, experiencing poor mental health, feeling hungry, being unhappy or sad, not trusting someone, and feeling angry or jealous, as individual feelings which might make someone less likely to be kind. These kind of emotions, thoughts and mental health conditions can be especially prevalent in young people as they undertake exams and juggle deadlines, are bullied, fall out with friends and romantic partners, and experience frequent mood changes.

External environments

The external environment arose as a factor among young people, including features such as the physical appearance and cleanliness of the places they spend their time, how much personal space is available to them, the noise levels and weather, but also more intangible aspects of the environment such as the rules that govern their interactions with the world. For those in school, the school environment was a big factor, with a lack of comfy seating, a loud and intrusive school bell, not enough space in social areas, and uninspiring or hectic décor were identified as factors that discourage kind behaviour. In addition, those in school felt that things like school uniform and the management of access to resources (such as locker allocation or which year group goes to lunch first) were examples of ways in which they did not feel as though they were treated kindly. Outside of school, the workplace and the local community were both

places where the young people suggested that kindness could be encouraged or discouraged by the presence of enforced rules and guidelines to manage behaviour, and by the extent to which spaces are interesting or pleasant to be in.

Methodology

Braindump & Group Discussion

Each workshop began with a braindump activity, which was aimed at getting workshop participants thinking about the topic at hand and writing down some initial thoughts about kindness, for example trying to describe what kindness looks like or what it means to them. Splitting into small groups, the participants then talked amongst themselves about who is kind and where kindness takes place, recording their thoughts as they went. Each small group fed back some of the ideas they had discussed.

Individual, Social & Material Factors

Following on from this, the young people considered the different factors than can influence people's behaviour, looking at the individual, social and material influences on their behaviour and that of other young people. Individual factors included personal beliefs, emotions or skills. Social factors included social norms, the influence of opinion leaders, or the ways identity might affect a person's choices. Finally, material factors included environmental features, rules and buildings. The young people discussed their ideas in small groups and shared some of their thoughts back to the wider group at each stage.

Identifying and Breaking Barriers

To begin thinking about new ideas that could encourage kindness in their communities, the young people then spent some time identifying the barriers to kindness; what prevents kindness from taking place. These barriers were written on paper bricks and used to build a wall. After surveying the wall they had built, the participants came up with some ideas to crack the bricks and dismantle the barriers they had identified.

Concept Development

Once ideas had been generated and written up on the wall, the young people were able to vote for their favourite ideas or those which they thought would have the most impact on kindness. Working in their small groups the young people chose an idea to develop, describing it in more detail and explaining why it was needed, how it could be implemented, and the who, what and where of the idea in action. These concepts could be used to form concrete actions to encourage kind behaviour in different environments.

Outputs

What is kindness?

The young people identified a range of actions and ideas that could be considered kind, and from these, six main aspects of kindness in practice arose:

- Being respectful, usually demonstrated in action by politeness and good manners
- Being nice to others, for example, complimenting people or gift-giving
- Helping those in need, as well as the environment and animals, such as by donating to charity
- Adopting principles of equality, demonstrated by understanding and accepting other people
- Being altruistic and thoughtful towards others, a result of being empathetic and sympathetic
- Volunteering in the local community or with a charity

Hearing what actions young people think of when considering kindness can inspire practical ways of thinking about how to make social environments kinder.

Who is kind?

Different types of people were identified as demonstrating kindness, and these can be grouped into three common types with potentially differing motives for their behaviour:

- Loved ones – friends and family (except some siblings)
- Cultural exemplars (real of fictional) – e.g. the Pope, Santa Claus, other public figures
- Employees - those who are kind as part of their job or who go above and beyond their role (e.g. canteen staff, charity workers, shopkeepers, librarians, GP surgery staff, mechanics, cabin crew)

Two factors which might affect whether people unknown to an individual are kind were also raised by the young people:

- Age - older people were perceived as more likely to be kind
- Location - people who don't live in big cities were thought to be kinder

Factors affecting kindness

The young people described a wide range of individual, social and material factors which might affect whether someone is kind or not.

Individual

Having personal past experience of kindness was raised in a number of different ways, and the young people suggested that this experience was fundamental in learning how to be kind yourself. They picked up on family background as having a significant impact - whether you were raised with people who modelled kindness and had people who believed in you who demonstrated kindness. Those who did not experience a lot of kindness at home may not be familiar with what kindness looks like or how to enact it.

A person's mental state was another individual factor picked up by many of the young people, with negative mindsets, bad moods, poor mental health, social anxiety, tiredness, stress and worry, social isolation, and distractedness all raised as things which could cause a person to be less kind. In addition, the poor emotional and mental wellbeing associated with interpersonal arguments, jealousy and falling out with friends were also likely to have an effect on kindness.

In contrast, a range of personal attributes which would make someone more likely to be kind were identified, including having a strong moral compass, being altruistic, thinking before you act, and having personal values or spiritual and religious beliefs which emphasise kindness.

Finally, laziness and apathy, as well as not having anything to do, were picked up on by the young people as encouraging people towards unkind behaviour, suggesting that proactive and occupied people are more likely to be kind.

Social

The social factors identified by young people are focussed on the social consequences of kindness and the kind of social environment that encourages or discourages kindness. While felt most intensely by those at school, all the young people involved picked up on the idea that being kind is not seen as “cool”, and this was a large factor in influencing behaviour. Those young people who were kind were at risk of being laughed at, seen as a “teacher’s pet”, being bullied, and alienating peers. Those who were unkind, on the other hand, did so to impress others and make them laugh, to secure popularity, and to conform to peer pressure and not stand out from the crowd.

"If you're 'well known' you could do things and get away with things because you're well known and hurt people by this because of popularity."

As well as peers, other figures had an impact on the young people's social environments. For those in school, teachers and school administrators were sometimes felt to be unkind, both in personal interactions with young people but also in the ways in which pupils perceived themselves as being treated unfairly by the school. One example highlighted by some of the young people was that their school released different year groups for lunch break at different times, meaning that one particular year group always got first access to the most popular food in the school canteen. This systematic unfairness was felt keenly by the young people and created a social environment which undermined equality and respect – two of the key factors which young people identified as exemplifying kindness.

"[The] difference in locker sizes is unfair and [we have] no choice in [the] location."

The relationship with teachers is particularly complex, with many noting examples of teachers being kind and supportive even though the less frequent negative interactions were more prevalent in their recollections. The young people also recognised that there was a difference between some teachers who were unkind intentionally, and some teachers who were unkind through a lack of appropriate training, especially in the case of guidance teachers.

Outside of the school, a lack of community and not knowing other people were cited by young people as being likely to discourage kindness. On the flip side, watching others be kind encouraged kindness, with one young person noting that kindness was "contagious". In this respect, celebrities and public figures were thought to have the ability to model and promote kindness in a way that would inspire others.

Material

The young people identified a range of different material factors which might affect kindness, such as the physical environment that they spent time in being able to affect mood and wellbeing. The groups suggested that positive environments can make people feel safe and comfortable, and that such an environment would be clean, have colour or art on walls, have enough space for everyone, have comfy seating, and have areas designed to encourage calmness. In addition, the young people identified ideas for whimsical or fun aspects to the environment which would encourage playful interaction, and thought having animals around would positively influence someone's mood.

"If a situation is set up to minimise human interaction then there will be less kindness."

The way that day-to-day life is structured and governed can also make people less likely to be kind, with a "9-to-5" culture making people feel rushed and therefore have less time for other people. Technological advances were perceived to sometimes reduce human-to-human contact and therefore provide fewer opportunities for kindness, and social media was identified by many young people as something which enabled unkindness, making it easier to be unkind to people with fewer repercussions. In addition, a cultural emphasis on competitiveness would encourage people to be less altruistic, and some young people talked about the stress of school work, exams and deadlines as a particular example of how systems could create conditions for unkindness.

"[Being] under pressure to finish something in an allocated time can be difficult."

Some of the young people at school proposed that school uniforms could impact their inclination to be kind by affecting the way that people felt about themselves. The young people thought that wearing uniforms could make you feel like you are not presenting yourself to the world in the way you would like, could make you uncomfortable, and could make other people treat you in a certain way, and that these feelings would make you less likely to act kindly towards others.

For a number of young people, hunger and access to food was a contributing factor, with hunger making people less likely to be kind. Others identified external elements such as the weather, with bad weather sometimes putting people in a bad mood. Finally, some of the young people picked up on prejudice as an important way that people could be made to feel bad about themselves, and therefore unwilling to be kind to others, linking back in with the ideas of equality and respect that were highlighted earlier.

How can we encourage people to be kinder?

After identifying a whole range of barriers which could make people less likely to be kind, the young people came up with a number of ideas to try and change these barriers and encourage kindness. These are grouped below into two areas.

Positive interventions

Positive interventions covers any kind of action which can be done at an interpersonal level, and may require some kind of teaching and learning.

The first of these is about changing the social environment around factors that affect kindness, such as encouraging people to talk about issues affecting them with peers or trusted individuals, supporting parents and teachers to be more empathic and kind to young people when they are under pressure at school, and getting influencers (whether public figures or older young people) to be good role models in demonstrating and campaigning for kindness.

> *Key concept: 2019 is the Year of Kindness*
>
> *What: Kindness campaign – online & offline (social media, posters, TV programme demonstrating ways to be kind).*
>
> *Who: Aimed at everyone, but especially focussed on young people. We are the future!*
>
> *Where: All over Scotland, social media, taught within schools.*
>
> *How: Get key influencers on board, social media promotion, kindness podcast, TV programme, workshops, community groups, school teaching (influencing curriculum), new charities, in the classroom – school/college/university – initiatives to be kinder.*

The second is to do with giving people the tools to communicate more effectively with each other, for example teaching young people how to resolve conflict with friends and forgive each other, productive ways to stand up for themselves, and how to deal with stress. Education can also extend to parents and other adults, helping people to be more aware of kindness, their behaviour, and how to be kinder.

The third intervention is to encourage community involvement and connectedness, whether through volunteering in the community, helping in care homes, or participating in clubs or workshops. In addition, community building should make more effort to include those with disabilities or other additional needs.

Changing the fundamentals

Changing the fundamentals is about adapting some of the structures, guidelines and physical objects that govern everyday behaviour and interactions in ways that support kindness and encourage kind habits.

The first of these is to "write the rules" with kindness in mind, incorporating positive human interaction into processes and thinking about whether structures reflect the value of kindness and reduce some of the barriers to kindness. Within the school environment, these ideas include assigning less homework, removing the requirement for school uniform, having the school canteen open all day, and building more time into the school day so people feel less rushed.

> *Key concept: No school uniform*
>
> *What: To come to school in whatever we decide.*
>
> *Why: To express ourselves and make us happy, because pupils feel uncomfortable with what they are wearing in certain situations and we don't think we should have to sit behind a desk for seven hours in uncomfortable clothes.*
>
> *How: Make sure that all pupils are comfortable with the dress code, then enforce it!*

The second fundamental change is about the rewards and punishments in place socially to influence kind behaviour, and includes ideas for Local Authorities to reward public acts of kindness, and for schools especially to be stricter about bullying and unkindness so that those who act this way are punished appropriately.

Conclusion

Young people have a wide range of ideas about what kindness is, what gets in the way of people being kind, and what can be done to encourage more kindness in their communities and the spaces they inhabit. Many young people may struggle to identify how to be kind, or find that their mental and emotional wellbeing prevents them from being as kind as they otherwise might, but they also have new ideas about how to educate and support people to feel better and be kinder.

The social stigma of kindness can be particularly strong for young people who struggle with managing peer pressure and maintaining social status. The young people talked about ways in which the adults in their environments could lead the way and start changing attitudes to kindness by changing systems and physical spaces, as well as acting as role models for kindness.

Young people know as well as anyone that being kind can be a struggle when individual, social and material factors are against you, but their ideas to change this can be used to tackle some of these factors for the benefit of everyone. Making it easier to be kind can involve small steps, such as increasing access to volunteering in the community, making schedules less hectic, or introducing a school cat, but must also be supported by structures, spaces and rules that prioritise kindness and human connection.

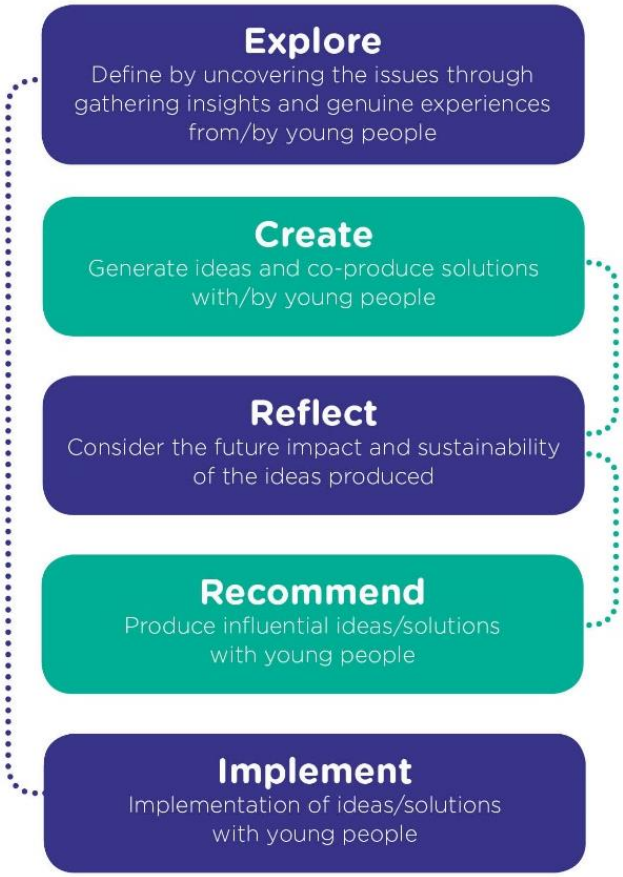
APPENDIX A

Co-design Approach

Young Scot has extensive experience in engaging with Scotland's young people to seek their views and input in the development of the services they use. Young people have a significant role to play in encouraging organisations and communities to adopt a more collaborative culture, focusing resources to effectively meet the needs of individuals and communities.

Our co-design service involves young people systematically creating, designing and delivering solutions in collaboration with organisations. Young people are involved much earlier in decision making process through a highly participative approach developing informed insights, ideas, recommendations and solutions for policy and practice.

Supporting people to co-design ideas has been shown to have a radical impact on service innovation. We know using a co-design approach enables a more distributed, decentralised approach to innovation that supports Scotland's ambitions to cede power and responsibility directly to young people.



This approach ties into key policy areas including:

- United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child
- Public Service Reform/Christie Commission
- Community Empowerment Act
- Getting It Right for Every Child

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