A Pilot Study on Perception and Rappresentation of Kindness at school in primary school children
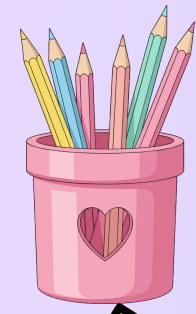
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Introduction

Social and emotional skills are essential for regulating emotions, building positive social relationships, and coping adaptively with everyday challenges (Grady & Nag, 2024). Kindness emerges as a central component; it encompasses acts of care, empathy, and respect toward oneself, others, and the environment (Malti, 2021). Much of existing definitions of Kindness reflect adult perspective, without considering children's ponit of view. As a result, existing operationalization of Kindness do not fully capture the multifaceted meanings that characterize children's perceptions of and experiences with Kindness (Binfet & Gaertner, 2015; Binfet & Passmore, 2019). To address this gap we explored how Kindness is graphically depicted and conceptualized within primary school contexts.

Objective

The present study aims to investigate how primary school children represent Kindness within the school context. In particular, the study seeks to evaluate the applicability, in the Italian context, of the coding system developed by Binfet and Gaertner (2015) for analyzing graphic representations of Kindness. Furthermore, the study intends to explore potential gender differences in the use of categories to represent given and received Kindness, in order to gain a better understanding of how children express and interpret Kindness.
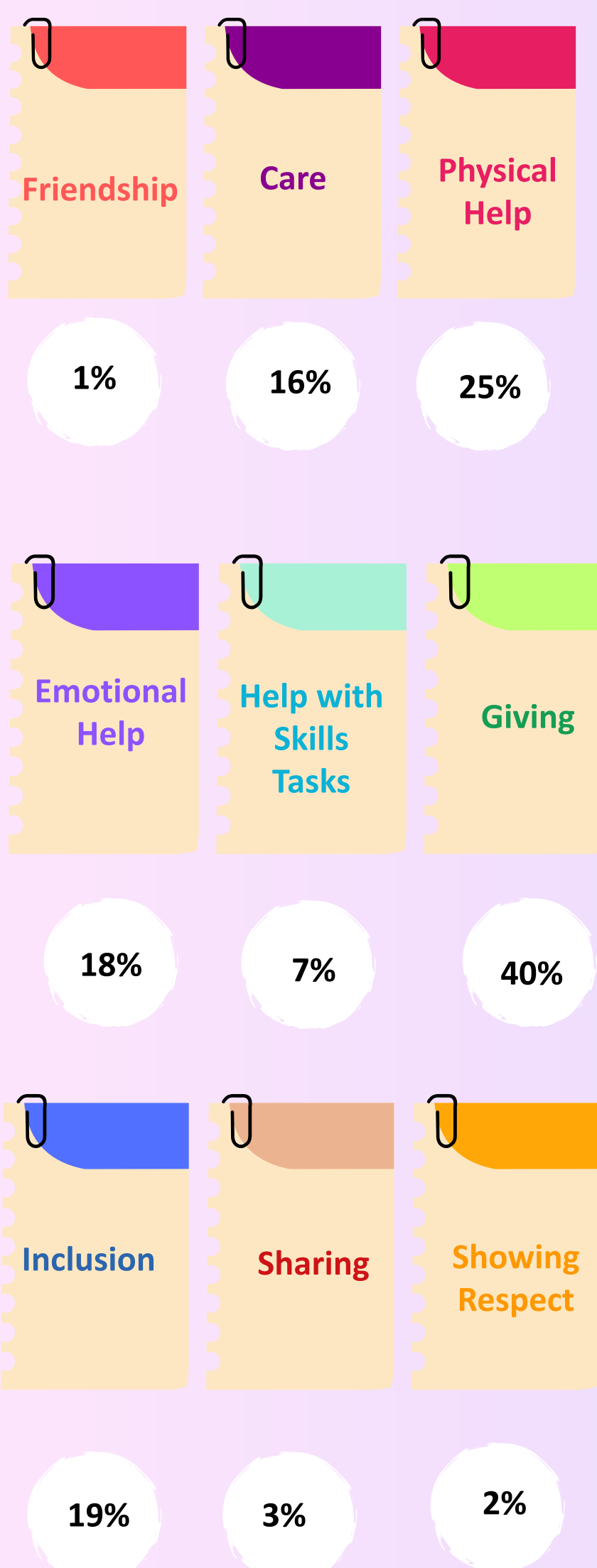
Method:

A total of 246 children (118 boys and 128 girls) from the third to fifth grades of a primary school in the province of Lucca (M = 119.17 months, SD = 10.72) participated in the study. They were asked to draw themselves after giving or receiving an act of Kindness at school and to provide a brief description of the drawing. The drawings were coded thematically using the categories proposed by Binfet and Gaertner (2015). Descriptive analyses examined the frequency and distribution of each category for both given and received Kindness, and chi-square tests were used to assess gender differences in their representations.
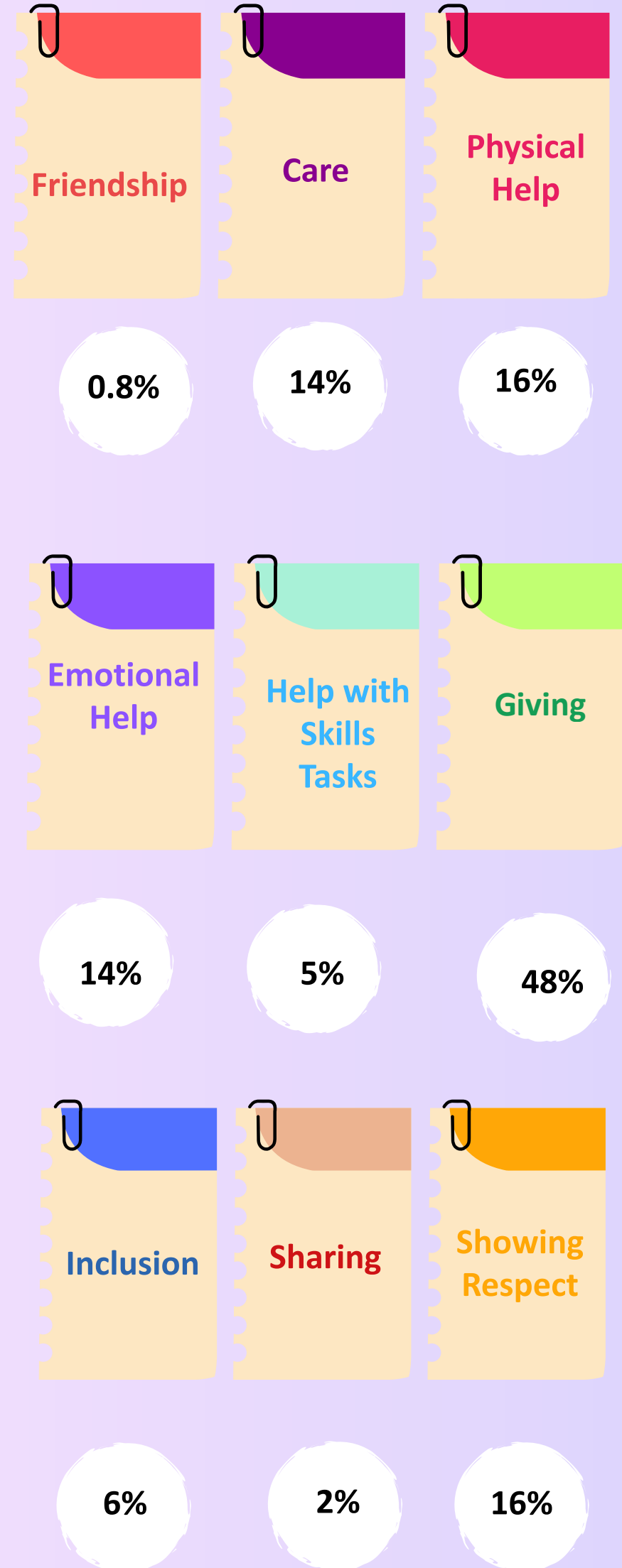
Results

Analysis of the graphic representations confirmed the existence nine main categories through which students conceptualize kindness in the school context.

Given Kindness

Friendship	Care	Physical Help
1%	16%	25%

Emotional Help	Help with Skills Tasks	Giving
18%	7%	40%

Inclusion	Sharing	Showing Respect
19%	3%	2%

Received Kindness

Friendship	Care	Physical Help
0.8%	14%	16%

Emotional Help	Help with Skills Tasks	Giving
14%	5%	48%

Inclusion	Sharing	Showing Respect
6%	2%	16%

Girls use the emotional help category to represent
- given Kindness χ^2 (1)= 10.045**, df=1, p=.002 η^2 = .204
- received Kindness χ^2 (1)= 4.504**, df=1, p =.034, η^2=.137

significantly more often than boys.

Gender differences in the representation of the categories of given and received Kindness

Discussion

The 9-category coding system developed by Binfet & Gaertner (2015) was confirmed as adaptable.

The study introduced a clear differentiation between given Kindness and received Kindness.

New category Help with Skills-Tasks emerged from the Italian sample.

The category Giving was the most commonly depicted form of kindness, both for given Kindness and received Kindness.

Children emphasized Physical Help and Emotional Help when representing given Kindness.

The category Care appeared more often in depictions of given Kindness.

Help with Skills-Tasks and Inclusion were also more frequently associated with given Kindness.

The category Showing Respect was more frequently used to illustrate received Kindness.

Girls may not only experience Emotional Kindness more frequently, but they may also be more inclined to practice it.

Gender differences align with the literature on emotional socialization.

Future Prospects

Examine how representations of Kindness change across development and how they influence socio-emotional skills and well-being.
Investigate how social norms and cultural expectations contribute to gender differences in representations of Kindness.
Use children's graphic representations of Kindness as a tool to understand how they perceive Kindness at school.

References

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