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Random App of Kindness: Evaluating the Potential of a Smartphone Intervention to Impact Adolescents' Empathy, Prosocial Behavior, and Aggression

Sara Konrath^{1, 2}, Alison Jane Martingano³, Richard M. Tolman⁴, Matthew Winslow⁵, and Brad J. Bushman⁶

¹ Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, Indiana University

² Research Center for Group Dynamics, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan

³ Psychology Department, University of Wisconsin, Green Bay

⁴ School of Social Work, University of Michigan

⁵ Psychology Department, Eastern Kentucky University

⁶ School of Communication, The Ohio State University

Videogames, including smartphone app games, can be effective teachers. Meta-analytic reviews find that prosocial media can increase empathy and prosocial behavior. We developed a prosocial smartphone app game, Random App of Kindness (RAKi), using theoretically informed empathy-building practices, in the hopes of increasing empathy and prosocial behavior, and decreasing aggressive behaviors. RAKi includes nine mini-games that take only seconds to play (e.g., recognizing emotions, caring for a crying baby, petting a sad dog). We randomly assigned 106 preteens and teens aged 10–17 (and their parents) to play RAKi or a control app for 2 months. We assessed baseline and postintervention scores on empathy, prosocial behavior, and aggression-related outcomes in the laboratory. Participants who played RAKi (compared to a control app) felt more compassion for someone in need, behaved in empathic ways while interacting with a stranger, were less likely to endorse physical aggression, and behaved less aggressively toward a peer (if they started with lower trait empathy). However, RAKi did not significantly influence participants' trait empathy levels. Media can be used for good or ill. RAKi appears to accomplish a number of positive outcomes after only 2 months of gameplay.

Public Policy Relevance Statement

We created and tested an empathy-building app called Random App of Kindness. We found that playing the app for 2 months increased participants' (age 10–17) empathy and reduced their aggressiveness,