

The Kindness Machine

Christina Dankert

Chad Dankert, Illustrator

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The Kindness Machine is an optimistic picture book that encourages everyday kindness in a creative manner.

In Christina Dankert's enthusiastic picture book *The Kindness Machine*, an enterprising second-grade teacher shows his students how to practice kindness.

When cheerful Mr. Wilson invents and unveils the Kindness Machine, he prompts curious responses. He encourages the children to take turns pressing its different buttons, each of which displays a positive, actionable concept, including Smile, Say It (about paying sincere compliments), Love Yourself (about patience and motivational self-talk), Invite and Include, and Be a Chef (which combines the others).

Cartoon illustrations make this socially-minded concept fun: the machine is a mixture of a computer monitor and gadgetry, replete with "levers all over and springs." The appealing palette uses pink, yellow, blue, and green to depict a bright classroom filled with diverse students whose faces express their anticipation well.

But Mr. Wilson's too-extensive explanations make the book unsubtle and uninviting; the audience is told what to think rather than being encouraged toward coming up with their own definitions and examples. This direction pervades in Mr. Wilson's classroom too: one student discusses what's going on in passive form while their classmates are reduced to mere observers. The students seem most themselves when they're engaged in background role-playing during Mr. Wilson's lecture.

The prose is focused on being instructional; it reinforces its lessons via repetition. Its familiar phrasing (smiles are "contagious" and children are "wide-eyed," for example) feels extraneous to what the pictures reveal on their own. Nonetheless, the tale works toward an empowering conclusion in which Mr. Wilson's students view themselves as superheroes empowered with kindness. Helpful questions for discussion with adults ("Why is it important to include others?" and "Who can you give a compliment to?") round out the text.

Expressing kindness does not require much, as a teacher reveals to his students in the encouraging picture book *The Kindness Machine*.

KAREN RIGBY (November 18, 2022)

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