Changing children's attitudes towards refugees
with a teacher-lead imagined contact intervention

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INTRODUCTION

Imagined contact hypothesis assumes that even just imagining a pleasant contact with an outgroup member can improve intergroup attitudes (Crisp & Turner, 2009), and research suggests that interventions based on imagined contact could be useful in the preparation of host-society children for intergroup contact with refugee children (Smith & Minescu, 2022). However, even though the success of this intervention depends on the quality of imagined contact situations (Miles & Crisp, 2014), little is known about participant's experience during imagining contact, especially when it comes to children. Therefore, the aim of this study was to examine the change in children's attitudes towards refugees after an imagined contact intervention, as well as to explore the relationship between the children's experiences during the imagined contact activities and the observed changes in their attitudes.

We have conducted a four-sessions-long imagined contact intervention, with each session consisting of four steps (in line with Vezzali et al., 2012):
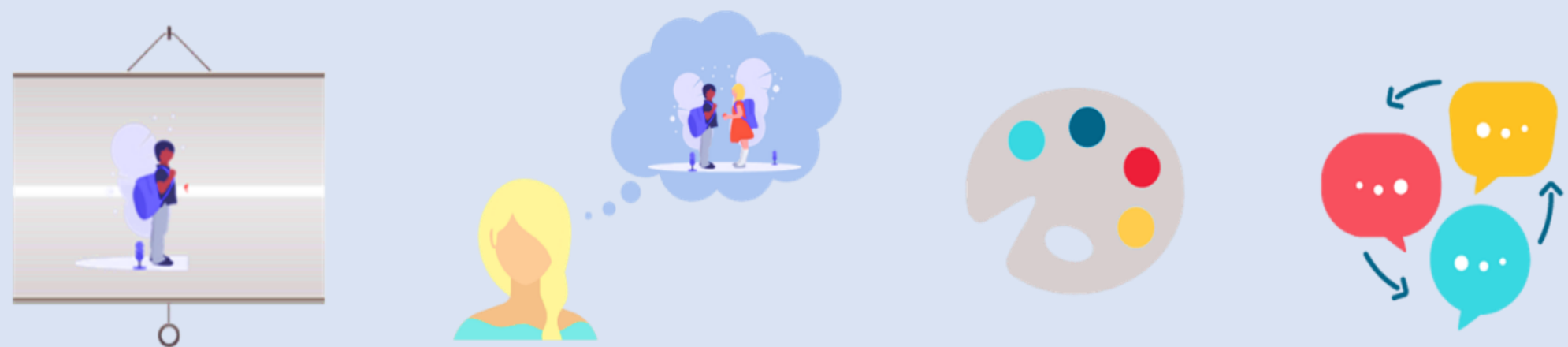
1. Children are informed about their task, as well as who they will be imagining.
2. The teacher reads a scenario describing how contact with a refugee child began, and children imagine the contact on their own. Scenarios differed from session to session.
3. Children participate in some form of individual reinforcement of imagined contact effects – writing a description or drawing the imagined encounter.
4. Children take part in the class-level discussion aimed at reinforcing the effects of imagined contact.

METHODS

A total of 1544 children from seven Croatian primary schools, which were not attended by refugee children at the time, participated in the study. They were divided into an intervention group (N_i = 827), which participated in four sessions of imagined contact activities, and a comparison group (N_c = 717). Children from 7 to 15 years took part in the study, with an average age of M = 10.7 (SD = 2.0). They filled out a questionnaire at the baseline and two post-tests.

INTERVENTION GROUP

| Pre-test | Intervention | Post-test 1 | Post-test 2 |

| Pre-test | | Post-test 1 | Post-test 2 |

COMPARISON GROUP
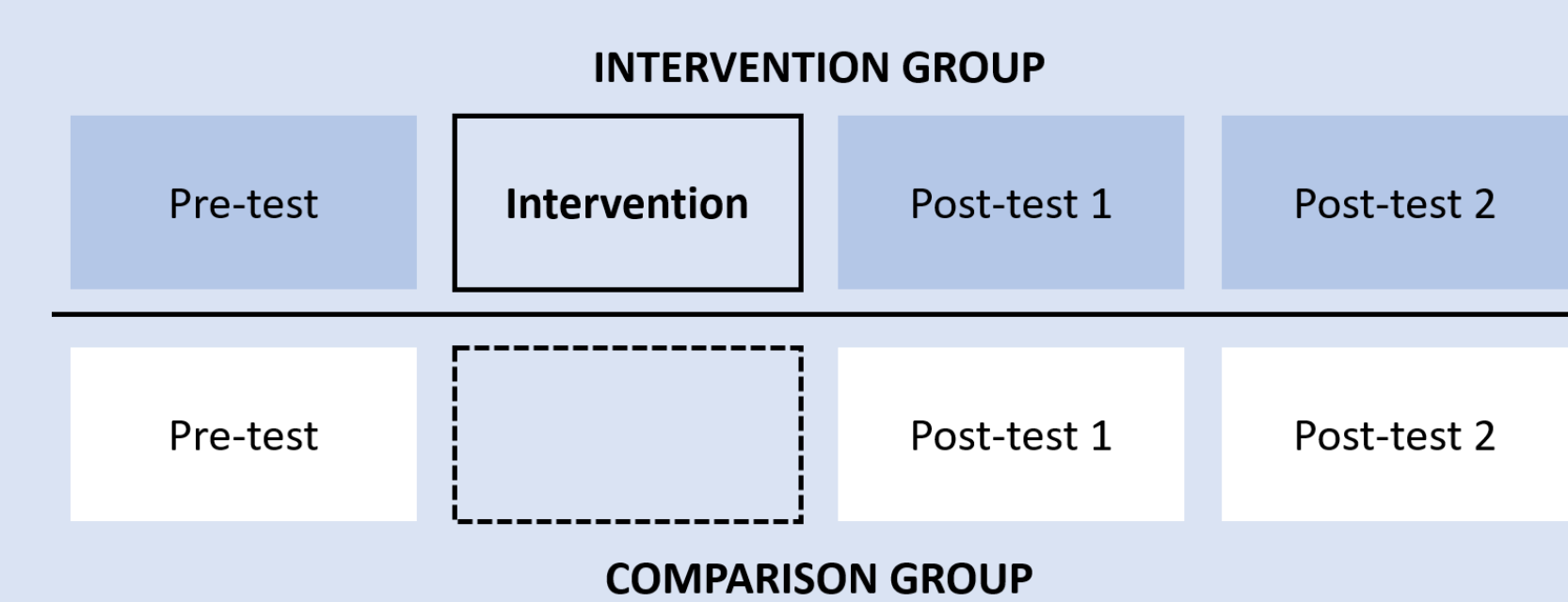
All participants completed an attitude thermometer measure, indicating their opinion on refugees on a scale from 0 to 10. They also completed a measure assessing positive and negative stereotypes, rating positive (polite, tidy and friendly) and negative traits (lazy, unkind, mean) on a scale from 1 to 5. In addition, children in the intervention group responded to questions regarding their experiences during the imagined contact activities in all four sessions. They rated how easy it was to imagine the encounter, the positivity and level of detail in their imagination, and how much they enjoyed the task. These items were also rated on a scale from 1 to 5, and the ratings were averaged across sessions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INTERVENTION

To address the issue of multivariate non-normality, we employed the robust maximum likelihood method of estimation for all analyses. Additionally, clustered standard errors were used to account for the structure of the data (children nested in classes), and full-information maximum likelihood to handle missing data. Latent factor of attitudes achieved scalar invariance.

A multigroup latent change score (LCS) model was constructed to capture the changes between baseline and the first post-test, as well as between baseline and the second post-test. The model fit the data well ($\chi^2(363)$ = 550.41, p < .001, CFI = .981, RMSEA = .030 [.024 − .036], SRMR = .040). By constraining the intercepts of change to be equal across groups, we found that the intervention group exhibited a significantly larger positive change in attitudes between baseline and the first post-test compared to the comparison group ($\Delta\chi^2(1)$ = 5.96, p = .015). However, there was no significant difference in change between baseline and the second post-test ($\Delta\chi^2(1)$ = 2.33, p = .127).
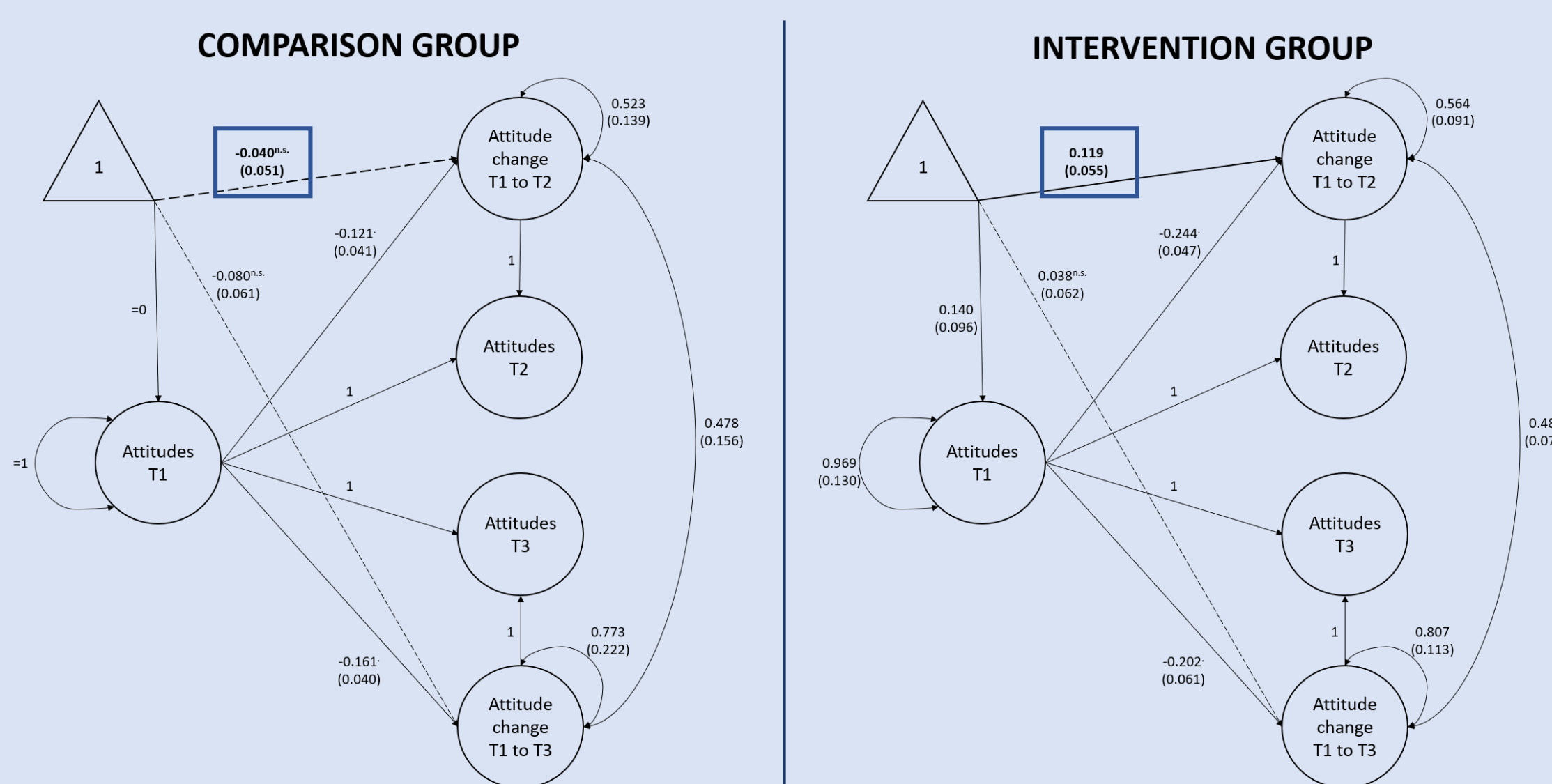

Figure 1. Multigroup LCS model illustrating the change in intergroup attitudes between the intervention and comparison groups. Unstandardized parameters are presented, with non-significant paths depicted by dashed arrows. Standard errors are indicated within brackets, and parameters that differ between groups are framed in blue.

THE ROLE OF CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES WHILE IMAGINING CONTACT

To evaluate the impact of children's perception of the ease of imagining meeting a refugee child, positivity of the imagined encounter, level of detail, and enjoyment of the task, we used a latent change score model specifically within the intervention group. We incorporated the four aforementioned variables as time-invariant predictors of the initial level of attitudes (at baseline) and as predictors of two change scores.

The final model ($\chi^2(246)$ = 388.29, p < .001, CFI = .976, RMSEA = .030 [.024 − .036], SRMR = .036) revealed that changes in attitudes can be predicted by the average ratings of positivity in imagined scenarios and the level of enjoyment in participating in the intervention, both in the short-term and in the long-term. These predictions are illustrated in Figure 2. After the intervention, the attitudes of children who rated their imagined contact more positively and those who enjoyed the task more showed an increase. Furthermore, children who exhibited a more positive attitude at baseline were more likely to envision more positive contact situations during the intervention (β = .393, p < .001).
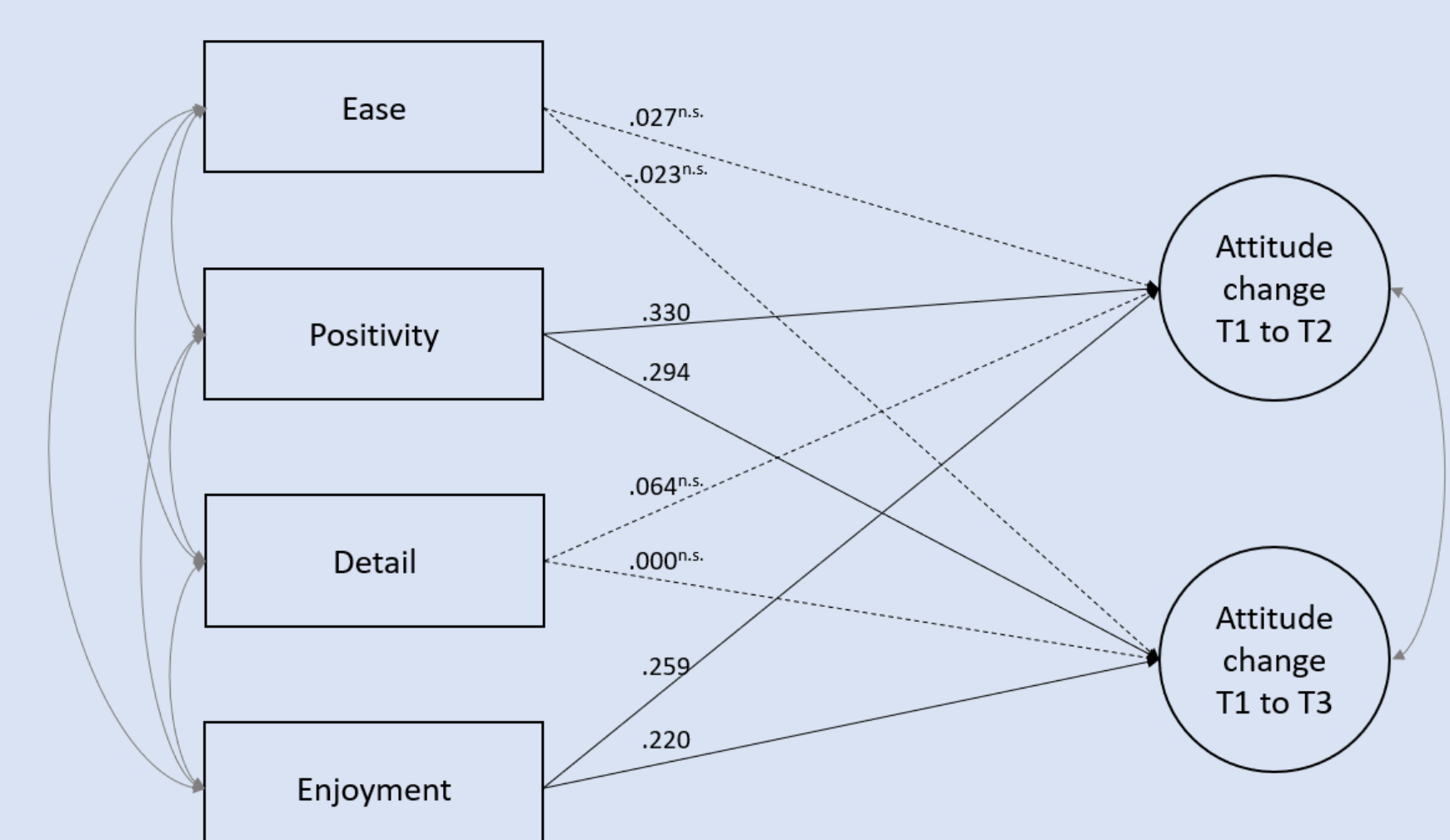

Figure 2. Simplified structural model illustrating prediction of latent changes in attitudes by the ease of imagining, positivity of imagined encounters, level of detail and children's enjoyment in the imagination activities. Standardized parameters are presented, with non-significant paths depicted by dashed arrows.

CONCLUSION

This study provides evidence supporting the effectiveness of imagined contact interventions in enhancing the attitudes of host-society children towards their refugee peers, particularly in the short-term. Moreover, the findings highlight the importance of cultivating positivity of the imagined scenarios and designing engaging activities to maximize intervention impact. These characteristics appear to be important for both short- and long-term effects.

References:
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