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# Won't you be my neighbor? The wisdom of Fred Rogers

*By Connie Green*

**T**hirty years ago, when I was a young mother—poor, pregnant, and generally not feeling too good about myself—I often watched “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” with my 2-year-old, Christy. Mister Rogers would look me straight in the eye and tell me that I was special, that he liked me just the way I was. I might have started the half hour feeling sad and sorry for myself, but by the time the trolley chugged back from the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, I was smiling. I think Christy enjoyed the show, too.

As an early childhood educator, I have long admired Rogers’ work with young children, families, and teachers. He was one of the first public figures to communicate to families the importance of emotional development and the need for adults to listen to children’s feelings.

He influenced my teaching by modeling ways to slow down and talk with children about their concerns and the issues they face as they grow. From Mister Rogers, I learned about the importance of fostering self-esteem, accepting individual differences, and sharing the beauty of the world in ways preschoolers can understand.

## **Someone special to America**

Fred Rogers is an American hero. One of his sweaters, knitted by his mother, hangs in the Smithsonian Institution. He received every major award in television for which he was eligible, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the

Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Academy of Television Art and Sciences, and induction into the Television Hall of Fame.

His well-loved children’s program, “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood,” is the longest-running show on public television. Rogers also received more than 40 honorary doctorates from colleges and universities.

But it was not the “fancy outsides” of life that nourished Rogers’ soul; it was the giving to and receiving from others, and sharing the power of love and acceptance that gave his life meaning. He helped children and adults know that the essence of character development is “knowing that we can be trusted, that we never have to fear the truth, that the bedrock of our very being is good stuff” (Laskas 1996).

Rogers was a composer, lyricist, writer, minister, psychologist, puppeteer, producer, reluctant celebrity, and America’s favorite neighbor (Barish 2004). According to those who knew him, he was the same offstage as on, a soft-spoken, genuinely great guy.

Though he died Feb. 27, 2003, his shows continue to air, influencing the lives of millions of children and their families. I believe his greatest contribution was illuminating for children and families the significance of affective development and the power of human relationships.

Most children watch network television cartoons and commercials for several hours a day. They contain many underlying messages: You can have a satisfying life only by acquiring lots of stuff. Physical force gives power. Violence and sarcasm are funny.



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As human beings, our job is to help people realize how rare and valuable each one of us really is, that each of us has something that no one else has—or ever will have—something inside that is unique to all time. It's our job to encourage each other to discover that uniqueness and to provide ways of developing its expression.

—Fred Rogers

In contrast, “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” offers messages of love, acceptance, cooperation, and living in community. He shares the beauty of the natural world, the wonder of the mechanical world, and the importance of imagination.

## **Sickly in his early years**

Fred McFeely Rogers was born in 1928 into a wealthy family in a small town near Pittsburgh. Rogers was an overweight and sickly child, spending one summer entirely indoors in an air-conditioned bedroom because of asthma. His school years were disrupted by three-month winter trips to Florida until he entered high school. Growing up, Rogers found that he could work through life’s traumas with puppets and music (Laskas 1996).

He studied musical composition at Rollins College in Florida and had been accepted into a Presbyterian seminary after graduation. But during his senior year, in 1951, he saw television for the first time in his parents’ home. “And I just hated it,” he said. “I looked at those people on television throwing pies into each other’s faces. And I thought: I’m just going to go into television! And everyone was so flabbergasted. Because literally, I was supposed to start seminary in September” (Laskas 1996).

After graduation Rogers moved to New York and got a job at NBC, working his way up to floor director in two years. In 1953 he returned to Pittsburgh and got a job with WQED, the nation’s first community-supported public television station. He helped develop a show called “The Children’s Corner” with Josie Carey. Rogers brought his own puppets to use on the show—Daniel Striped Tiger, King Friday the 13th, X the Owl, and Henrietta Pussycat, precursors to the puppets still seen on the “Neighborhood” show.

During this period Rogers attended seminary and began studying child development. He consulted with child psychologist Margaret McFarland almost daily until her death in 1987. She once said that Rogers was more in touch with his own childhood than anyone she had ever known. Rogers also sought advice from notable early childhood educators such as Benjamin Spock, Erik Erickson, T. Berry Brazelton, and Vivian Paley. In 1963 he was ordained a Presbyterian minister with the special charge of ministering to children and families through television.

Rogers married his college sweetheart, Joanne, in 1952, and they had two sons. He kept his family life private from his television friends but would answer children’s questions about his personal life when they wrote to him. However, he often talked about his own childhood, showed photographs of himself as a child, and recounted feelings and doubts he had growing up.

## **The “Neighborhood” show**

The earliest prototype of his own show was called “Misterogers,” a 15-minute production resembling the make-believe segment of the later show. In 1967 the Sears-Roebuck Foundation agreed to provide funding for “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” and made it available to public television stations nationally. By the 1990s it was aired on 290 stations and watched by more than eight million people weekly.

“Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” follows a pattern and a leisurely pace, reassuring for the target audience of 3- to 6-year-olds. The show begins with a view of a comfortable little town, devoid of traffic except for a red trolley. As the music builds to a crescendo, the camera zooms in on a little brown house. Suddenly we seem to be inside the house with a traffic light blinking.

The camera moves across a familiar room, past a closet, and to a door that opens to a smiling Mister Rogers, who enters grandly. He sings “It’s a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood,” while removing his jacket and selecting a comfortable sweater from a closet that holds only sweaters. The change from jacket and dress shoes to sweater and sneakers are important transitions, signaling to children that Mister Rogers has a grown-up life somewhere, but that he has set aside this time to talk to them. He is inviting them into a “safe, familiar, and caring world” (Townley 1996).

Mister Rogers looks directly into the camera and speaks to his child audience about the topic of the day. (At this point in the show, many children believe that Mister Rogers is speaking directly to them.) Mr. McFeely, “speedy delivery,” often brings a package pertaining in some way to the topic of the day, an interesting videotape, or an invitation to visit a fascinating person or place.

Mister Rogers might visit a pretzel or toothbrush factory to show children how objects relevant to



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You know how different we all are. But I think that's what helps us to be friends—because we are so different.

I can't be exactly like Elsie Neil or Chef Brockett or Bob Trow or any of my other friends.

That's why I need them to be my friends—because we are so different. It is the same way with you. I can't be you.

That's why I need you for my friend.

—Fred Rogers

their lives are made. Other times he might call on a Hindu dancer, an artist in her studio, an opera company, or cellist Yo-Yo Ma, a frequent guest.

Returning to his television house, Mister Rogers suggests something to pretend that day related to the documentary segment. By explaining what they are going to make believe, Rogers conveys the message that children are in control of their imaginary play. The trolley signals the transition from the real world to the imaginary world.

If Mister Rogers visits a dentist at the beginning of the show, one of the puppets in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe might express fear of dentists. Lady Aberline, a human character in make-believe, would listen and explain what really happens at the dentist's office. The make-believe portion of the show

subtly deals with children's complex feelings and the challenges of learning and growing.

The trolley rolls back through a tunnel and returns to Rogers' television house. After a few relaxed comments, there is another transitional song. Mister Rogers sings "It's such a good feeling" as he changes back into jacket and dress shoes and leaves through the door he entered 30 minutes earlier. He waves goodbye, reassuring children that he will see them "next time."

### **Mister Rogers' message**

"Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" was planned in weekly segments around themes such as "the mad you feel," "understanding divorce," "going to school," "the environment," "kindness," and "conflict." Events in

the Neighborhood sometimes added unexpected, but meaningful, lessons to the show. When one of the fish in his tank died, Mister Rogers had the cameras zoom in and took the opportunity to explain the process of death to his young audience.

Mister Rogers believed in being honest with children in as simple terms as possible. He demystified the mechanical trolley and video games by demonstrating their inner workings and on more than one occasion showed the studio where the program was filmed. On a day when he had a bandaged hand, a puppet character said she was afraid of having a bandage. Lady Aberline attached and removed a bandage from her hand and face, explaining that she was still the same underneath and that her skin did not go away when she wore a bandage.

Rogers' message of acceptance included appreciation of self and others. He believed the body was inseparable from the real person, as exemplified in the songs "Your Body's Fancy and So Is Mine" and "Everything Grows Together."

This concept is important to toddlers and preschoolers who are mastering control of their bodies and their emotions and finding delight in their growing capabilities. They are learning to say what they think and feel, to control the urge to hit or bite, and to master walking, running, climbing and riding a bike.

Sometimes parents would write to Mister Rogers on behalf of their young children, sharing the child's joy in developing new abilities such as drawing or riding a bike, mastering fears, or learning to use the toilet. One 4-year-old simply wrote, "Dear Mister Rogers, I don't wet the bed anymore" (Rogers 1996).

Mister Rogers does not so much tell his viewers how to live as he raises questions about "what it might mean to have a full and abundant life" (Guy 1996). He doesn't force his answers on children but rather offers his own insights and leaves the decisions to the audience.

Once Daniel Striped Tiger, the most timid and vulnerable of the puppets, questioned whether he might be some kind of mistake because he was tame and shy and did not look like other tigers. On a similar occasion when another puppet character doubts her importance, Rogers tells her, "We need you to be who you are." This may be not only a human affirmation but also a recognition of the holy within each of us (Guy 1996).

In Mister Rogers' world, the true heroes are those who express misgivings and self-doubt, those who

are not afraid to be vulnerable. That is seen as a sign of growth, of learning about ourselves. Power comes from having the ability to love and be loved, to build relationships with others, to cooperate and live in community (Wehmiller 1996).

The challenge of self-acceptance is enlarged on the Neighborhood to include the acceptance of others. Rogers emphasizes how important it is to have neighbors who are different from oneself.

You know how different we all are. But I think that's what helps us to be friends—because we are so different. I can't be exactly like Elsie Neil or Chef Brockett or Bob Trow or any of my other friends. That's why I need them to be my friends—because we are so different. It is the same way with you. I can't be you. That's why I need you for my friend (Wehmiller 1996).

Sometimes children, especially those with disabilities, were invited to visit the studio. One morning, 11-year-old Brian and his mother arrived at the studio from Texas. Brian had Williams Syndrome, which causes heart problems and cognitive delays. He greeted his television friend by asking, "I am special, aren't I, Mister Rogers?"

Rogers responded, "Yes, you are." Together they sang the song "You are my friend, you are special..." with Rogers' arm gently around Brian. Rogers talked with Brian and showed him around the studio until a producer urged a beginning of the workday. After agreeing that they would probably not see one another in person again, Mister Rogers assured the boy that they could still be television friends. Before Brian departed, Rogers looked him in the eye and told him. "You blessed my space today, Brian" (Laskas 1996). Throughout his career, Rogers demonstrated unconditional acceptance of others, whether on or off the camera.

Mister Rogers also helped children understand that other people have needs like our own that should be respected. Through his work, he "proclaimed an ethic of challenge and responsibility" (Guy 1996). Mister Rogers shared his expertise as a puppeteer and musician with children in his audience and introduced them to many talented people, such as jazz pianist Ellis Marsalis and children's musician Ella Jenkins.

When he showed something that humans can do—make candles or knit sweaters—he suggested

that children can learn to create these things, too, but not without hard work and growth. The lyrics from the song “You Can Do It” represents this belief:

You can make believe it happens or pretend that something's true.  
You can wish or hope or contemplate a thing you'd like to do.  
But until you start to do it, you will never see it through  
'cause the make-believe pretending just won't do it for you.  
You've got to do it.  
Ev'ry little bit you've got to do it, do it, do it, do it.  
And when you're through, you can know who did it, for you did it, you did it , you did it (Rogers 1969).

One important gift that early childhood teachers can give to young children is their passion for what they love to do, whether that is sewing, woodwork, art, or playing an instrument. By loving what you do in the midst of children, you are showing them healthy ways of expressing their feelings and making a contribution to the world. It is the kind of gift we can give children that will last forever. “It's the spirit that gives that kind of gift its wings” (Rogers 1994).

Today I am a grandmother and teacher educator. When I happen to be home at 11:30 on a weekday, I watch my all-time favorite television program, “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood.” In my personal and professional life, I encounter people of many ages, cultures, belief systems, and economic backgrounds.

I have found that the wisdom of Fred Rogers can be an ideal I aspire to in my relationship with myself and others. One of my favorite quotations from Mister Rogers that applies to our work with children and adults can be found in *The World According to Mister Rogers*.

As human beings, our job is to help people realize how rare and valuable each one of us really is, that each of us has something that no one else has—or ever will have—something inside that is unique to all time. It's our job to encourage each other to discover that uniqueness and to provide ways of developing its expression (Rogers 2003).

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## About the author

Connie Green is a professor in the Department of Language, Reading, and Exceptionalities and the birth through kindergarten program at Appalachian State University in Boone, N.C. This year she is teaching prekindergarten in a public school in rural Appalachia.