

What Mister Rogers can teach us about teaching

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Courtesy of Fred Rogers/Fred Rogers Productions

Through his television program, Fred Rogers supported children’s emotional well-being. Teachers must provide that same care to children in their classrooms.

Fred Rogers was never a teacher in the traditional sense — he did not work in a classroom or school — but he nonetheless educated generations of children. Affectionately known to millions of people as America’s favorite neighbor, he was the host of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, which aired on public television from 1968 to 2001. Geared toward preschoolers, the show featured songs, conversations with friends of all ages, visits to interesting places, and stories of the puppets who populated the Neighborhood of Make Believe.

Mister Rogers’ positive influence on children is widely acknowledged, but how many of us have considered the influence he can have on us as adults, particularly as educators? What, exactly, can Fred Rogers teach us about teaching and caring for children?

Won’t you be my neighbor?

At the beginning of each episode of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, Rogers would enter the set through the door of his *Neighborhood* home, take off his coat, replace it with a cardigan, and change his shoes while singing the show’s theme, “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” As the song suggests, he aimed to form a specific kind of relationship with the children who watched his program — not to be their friend, exactly, and certainly not to be their parent, but to be a kind, caring, trusted member of their *community*. And that sense of neighborliness is sorely missing from many schools today.

Teachers have many roles: instructor, advocate, mentor, nurse, social worker, authority figure . . . the list could go on. Perhaps our most crucial role, though, is one for which we have no word (at least not in English), that of the person whose mission is to build relationships. Not only must we form and maintain an individual connection with every child we teach, but we must create a safe and comfortable environment in which children can form connections with one another.

Above all else, that requires trust. As Stephen Brookfield (2000) puts it, “Trust between teachers and students is the affective glue that binds educational relationships together” (p. 162). When we experience fear, the amygdala goes into action and triggers other systems in the brain to release stress hormones that interfere with learning — including cortisol, which puts all learning on hold for about 20 minutes, and which can remain in the body for up to three hours. However, when we interact with those we trust, our brains release oxytocin, a bonding hormone, which prevents the release of cortisol and other stress hormones (Hammond, 2015).

Unfortunately, when students are in the midst of a full-blown cortisol storm, they rarely make it obvious, flashing a signal that their stress hormones have kicked in and they’ve stopped paying attention to whatever we’re trying to teach them. Because daily life in the classroom is so busy and hectic, we can easily become oblivious to the small, seemingly inconsequential, interactions — when we inadvertently put a student on the spot, when one child makes a nasty remark to another — that trigger moments of panic in students and diminish their trust in us and in their peers.

We should certainly strive to become more observant in the classroom, doing our best to watch our own behavior and look out for subtle digs and microaggressions among students. Perhaps, though, the most important thing we can do to build trust within the classroom is to show vulnerability, allowing children to see us (and to realize that we see ourselves) as imperfect human beings (Hammond, 2015), whether by telling personal stories about our own awkward years, showing off a new skill that we haven’t mastered yet, or pointing out the strange habits or phobias we happen to share with individual students.

The 2019 movie *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* beautifully illustrates Fred Rogers’ own willingness to show his vulnerability. While filming a scene for the children’s program, Rogers (played in the movie by Tom Hanks) struggles to assemble a tent, but rather than reshoot the scene, he tells the show’s crew that the take is good. Later that day, while discussing the scene during an interview, Rogers explains, “Well, children need to know that even when adults make plans, sometimes they don’t turn out the way we hoped” (Heller, 2019). Indeed, when Rogers made mistakes during filming, he often included them in the final version of the show. He also made a point of displaying vulnerability through the characters that he voiced, especially the puppet Daniel Tiger, who often expressed the same fears that Rogers experienced as a child.

Fred Rogers dedicated his life to the mission of building trusting relationships with and among children. And he took this work very seriously, studying under the child development experts Benjamin Spock, Erik Erikson, and Margaret McFarland, and using their research findings to inform his show. He understood that healthy relationships don’t appear magically; they take a great deal of thought and effort. As he put it, “Mutual caring relationships require kindness and patience, tolerance, optimism, joy in the other’s achievements, confidence in oneself, and the ability to give without undue thought of gain” (King, 2013). As teachers, too, we must strive to understand the significance of the relationships we create in the classroom and put forth the effort to develop caring relationships with each of our students.

It’s you I like

Fred Rogers genuinely valued and respected children, and he conveyed this to each and every child through the television screen. Whether voicing the beloved Daniel Tiger puppet or speaking, as himself, in a deliberately calm yet purposeful manner, he aimed to communicate what he referred to as “an expression of care” to every child who participated in or watched his show (King, 2018, p. 174). One of the most powerful and heartfelt moments in all of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* occurred in 1981, when Rogers invited 10-year-old Jeff Erlanger to appear on the program. On the show, Erlanger appears in his wheelchair and explains the details of his spinal injury as Rogers kneels down, looks at him intently, and listens as he tells his story. At the end of their conversation, Rogers and Erlanger sing, “It’s You I Like” together, followed by Rogers stating, “It’s you I like, Jeff” (King, 2018). But while that episode became particularly well-known and widely celebrated, the interaction wasn’t unique. Rogers showed precisely the same kind of attentiveness and respect to every child he interacted with.

In an era when students’ behavior, needs, and achievements have come to be viewed as “data,” to be collected and reported by subgroup, we can easily forget to *see* and *attend* to the actual children in front of us. Rogers reminds us that “Children aren’t empty vessels into which teachers simply pour facts. Children come to the classroom with feelings, concerns, anxieties, and joys”

(Education World, 2003). As teachers, we must acknowledge that every child brings something of value to the classroom, and we must clearly demonstrate that feeling so that each child can see it. Children who do not feel accepted and valued or feel they are flawed in some way can feel shame, a sense of unworthiness, and disconnection from others.

When schools focus on comparative performance and the pursuit of perfection, children become especially vulnerable to what Ann Monroe (2009) has termed “school-induced shame,” referring to any experience of shame triggered by the actions and attitudes of teachers and peers, teaching strategies, or the design of the school system itself. These experiences often go unnoticed by parents or the public, yet the researcher Brené Brown (2018) found that when she interviewed random American adults about their childhoods, 85% of them could recall at least one incident when they felt intense shame at school, an experience that, for many, altered how they perceived themselves as learners.

Of course, we can take concrete steps to minimize these experiences by, for example, putting students into heterogeneous groups (such that no group is identified as “the low-track kids”), discussing students’ misbehavior with them privately, and intervening at the first sign of bullying (Monroe, 2009). So, too, can we embrace a culturally responsive pedagogy, which Zaretta Hammond (2015) defines as:

an educator’s ability to recognize students’ cultural displays of learning and meaning making and respond positively and constructively with teaching moves that use cultural knowledge as a scaffold to connect what the student knows with new concepts in order to promote effective information processing. (p. 15)

To develop a culturally responsive pedagogy, we must recognize our own biases, develop an inclusive curriculum, and value the different modes of teaching and learning that exist in students’ communities. By creating an environment that respects cultural diversity and affirms each student’s unique personhood, teachers are, in effect, telling students, “I care about you” (Hammond, 2015).

As teachers, we have a responsibility to show precisely the same level of attention to and care for every child, just as Fred Rogers did throughout every episode of his show. “Do you remember your favorite teachers?” he asked, in a 2003 interview with *Education World*. “They were probably the ones who wanted to learn your name; who had a warm smile; who made you feel that they were glad to be there to help you learn. No matter how old or young we are, we learn best from people who care about us.”

What do you do with the mad that you feel?

On May 1, 1969, Fred Rogers appeared before a congressional subcommittee to advocate for public television and, in particular, to persuade Congress not to cut the \$20-million budget for PBS. Rogers explained that he had spent his life trying to understand the inner needs of children and that his program sought to address and honor children’s real feelings about such experiences as having brothers and sisters and getting a haircut. He ended his testimony by reciting the lyrics of one of the program’s songs, “What Do You Do with the Mad That You Feel?” The song’s title, he explained, came straight from the mind of a child, and the song demonstrated to children that they each have the power to control what they do in response to their feelings. At the end of Rogers’ testimony, the subcommittee’s chairman, Sen. John Pastore (D-RI), uttered the now-famous remark, “I think it’s wonderful. I think it’s wonderful. Looks like you just earned the twenty million dollars” (King, 2018, p. 175). Through Rogers’ powerful words, Pastore saw what some educators too often forget: Children’s feelings and needs are critically important.

Through his television show, Rogers helped children to better understand their own feelings and needs. We must continue this effort in our schools and classrooms by empowering children to take control of not only their own learning but also their feelings and needs. Rogers once stated, “Anything that is human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary” (Kris, 2018). We must demonstrate through our classroom practices and our interactions with our students, no matter how young or old they are, that their own feelings are mentionable and manageable.

We must also remember that our role as teachers is not to control children but to acknowledge their feelings and help them practice self-control. Instead of directing harsh language toward them or employing punitive discipline, we should actively practice nonviolent communication, which Marshall Rosenberg (2015) defines as language that helps people see the beauty in others without diminishing the beauty they see in themselves. By implementing nonviolent communication into our everyday thinking and practice, we can motivate children by acknowledging their feelings and needs.

Punitive discipline, including corporal punishment, fails to consider children's feelings or needs, yet remains an unfortunate reality in many of our nation's schools. As educators, we must work to implement more positive approaches to managing student behavior, such as conscious discipline, "a comprehensive, multidisciplinary self-regulation program that integrates social-emotional learning, school culture, and discipline" (Bailey, 2014, p. 12). Such approaches help educators and students develop and use their emotional intelligence to create a school culture that stresses safety, connection, and problem solving.

It's such a good feeling

To conclude each episode of his show, Fred Rogers would sing, "It's Such a Good Feeling," leaving his viewers with a supportive message to carry with them until tuning into the program the next day. Children come to school with a feeling of excitement and anticipation, but, for many students, that good feeling does not last. Instead, it is replaced by the stress of having to perform and the fear of not being good enough.

Beginning at the elementary level, children are expected to master the same standards and skills and perform successfully on standardized assessments that do not take into account their unique development. Although children follow somewhat predictable developmental stages, each child's development follows a different path and occurs at a different rate (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). For this reason, we must not continue to take a one-size-fits-all approach to education. Yet, the pressure teachers often feel for students to perform well on standardized tests leads to "drill and kill" instruction that takes the joy out of learning.

Roughly 6% of students between the ages of 16 and 24 drop out of school, half of them around the 11th or 12th grade (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Clearly, many of our classrooms fail to create the sense of belonging, connection, and personal identity that children need (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018), and which they continue to need well past the 5th or 6th grade.

How can schools ensure that children carry a good feeling with them throughout their education? We must acknowledge that children develop at different rates. We must design instruction that meets the needs of each individual learner rather than teaching to a test. We must create caring and supportive environments that strengthen students' social and emotional skills. Like Fred Rogers, educators must value and accept the unique qualities of each child.

In a brief video released shortly before his death in 2003, Rogers addressed the grown-up children, now adults, who grew up watching his program, telling them, "I'm so grateful to you for helping the children in your life to know you'll do everything you can to keep them safe. And to help them express their feelings in ways that will bring healing in many different neighborhoods" (King, 2018, p. 352). Not all of us have a personal connection to Rogers or his show, but we all have a responsibility to care for all children just as he did, and to ensure the children in our classrooms know that we like them just as they are.

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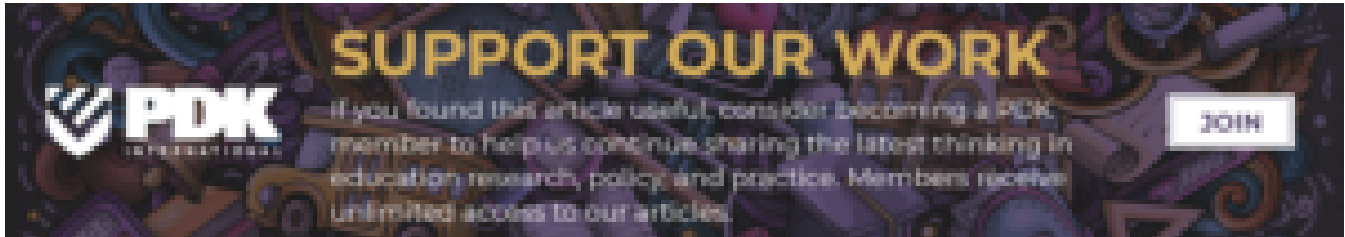
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