What We Can Continue to Learn from Fred Rogers

Strengthening Social Skills

“Kindergarten Social Skills Hold Key to Success.” That was the headline for a recent USA Today article about a 20-year study published in the American Journal of Public Health which followed more than 750 children. The researchers found that kindergarteners with the highest scores on “social competence” were more likely to graduate high school on time, earn a college degree and hold full-time jobs.

Think about all the time and energy you spend helping infants, toddlers, or preschoolers develop social skills. You’re building the foundation for their future success in school and in life!

What is “social competence”? It’s not just about getting along with others. It’s more about being able to deal with the tough times in relationships, which could include conflicts, frustration, jealousy and disappointment. Working on relationships involves skills like problem-solving, self-control, self-regulation, communication, and seeing things from another perspective. Those are the very same “tools” that help children learn the academics.

Fred knew how important social skills are for learning. He often talked and sang and crafted Make-Believe stories about dealing with the tough times, like jealousy, being forgotten by a friend or annoyed by something a friend did or said. After those Make-Believe stories Fred gave a clear explanation of how the characters worked on resolving their conflict.

Listen to the way Fred talked about the ups and downs of friendship -- at the beginning of the video and after he cleans up at the sand table.

Here are some ways to help children strengthen social skills:

- Let children know there can be difficult times even when people care about each other.

Timeless Wisdom from Fred Rogers

"One of life’s greatest joys is the comfortable give and take of a good friendship. It’s a wonderful feeling not only to have a friend, but to know how to be a friend yourself."

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Children tend to see things in absolutes -- either you are my friend or you aren’t. As Fred said in the video, “Some people think that friends are always happy and always having fun. Well, that's not true. Friends often have hard times and sad times.”

- Help children talk and listen as they tell each other how they feel about what happened. Some teachers have children sit across from each other and take turns talking and listening, with rules like “Don’t interrupt!” or “Now repeat what the other child said” -- to insure hearing the other’s perspective.

- Think about your role as a “mediator,” not a referee (not judging or blaming). Encourage children to brainstorm ways to settle their differences. Help them try to find a workable solution.

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It can be frustrating when you feel you spend most of your time and energy helping children deal with conflicts. Isn’t it good to hear about research that confirms how important that work is! In fact, according to this new research, the work you do to strengthen social skills may be some of the most important learning that happens through your care.

Thank you for being our neighbor,

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