



What We Can Continue to Learn from Fred Rogers



The Power of Listening



I can hardly believe it myself, but October marks my 50th year working with Fred Rogers and his company! Since this newsletter is about “What we can continue to learn from Fred,” I’ve been thinking about some things I’ve learned from him. And I wanted to share with you one of the most important things he taught me – and that’s about “listening.”

Fred was an extraordinary listener. Over the years I had the opportunity to watch him with others -- children and adults, guests on the program...in the studio...in the office. It was obvious that he wanted to connect with people, and he worked hard to do that. He was so “other-oriented” even with reporters, that he was more interested in listening to their story than in telling his. They often mentioned that they came away knowing more about their own lives because of his insightful questions.

One of my favorite *Neighborhood* examples of “listening” is this treasured visit with Jeff Erlanger, the boy in the wheelchair. This was an authentic conversation between two people, unscripted and unrehearsed. Fred had met Jeff only briefly a few years before at a PBS station in Wisconsin. Watch and listen for Fred’s listening skills -- for the many ways Fred lets Jeff know, “I care about you.”



Here are some of the things I learned from Fred about “listening” as I watched him with Jeff Erlanger and with so many others:

Asking questions

Questions are such a powerful way to say, “I care about what you have to say, and I want to know more about you.” Questions open the door for someone to share their thoughts and feelings with us. And isn’t that what helps us connect with someone, when we learn more about what they’re thinking and feeling? Whether we agree with them or not, at least we gain more understanding of what’s behind their concerns.

I’ve learned something else from one of Fred’s friends and colleagues, Steve Woods, who spent many years as a sensitive and caring grief counselor. Steve said that after someone has answered our question, it helps to say, “Tell me

more.” I really do feel that advice helped me have much more open conversations, even with my grandchildren.

Really listening

In Fred’s conversation with Jeff, he showed us what it looks like to really listen. It was obvious that he was listening with more than his ears. There was so much in his body language, as he leaned forward, sat at Jeff’s eye level and never took his eyes off Jeff.

This was a friendly visit, but even in difficult situations, haven’t you found that most of the time by just listening, you’re helping someone? We all want to know someone cares and that our ideas, thoughts, and feelings are heard. Fred also said, “Whatever is mentionable can be more manageable.” In fact, you don’t have to offer suggestions or solutions. Just by listening to someone, you’re offering affirmation and validating feelings. And, with encouragement to talk more about their situation, people often find their own ways to cope.

Waiting through the silence

Did you notice how much silent time there was after some of Fred’s questions to Jeff? That’s another part of listening that we can learn from Fred – becoming comfortable with the silence so we can give someone time to think, or to let that person know that we’re okay with being together in the quiet, without any words at all. Fred helped us realize that, in fact, silence can be comforting.

We’re all interacting with so many people, children and adults, with so many needs, concerns and feelings. And it’s great to be reminded by Fred that *how we listen* is more important than *what we say*. And when we let children – and adults – know that we really do care about who they are, they’ll be more likely to feel a closer connection with us. And that’s how relationships grow.

Thank you for being our neighbor,



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Timeless Wisdom from Fred Rogers



"More and more I've come to understand that listening is one of the most important things we can do for one another. Whether the other be an adult or a child, our engagement in listening to who that person is can often be our greatest gift. Whether that person is speaking or playing or dancing, building or singing or painting, if we care, we can listen."

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