

What We Can Continue to Learn from Fred Rogers



Getting to Know the Families



Last month I gave you some helpful hints for “getting to know” the children at the beginning of the school year. But I hear over and over again that it’s even more challenging to get to know their families. (I usually write about “parents,” but there are so many grandparents or other relatives raising young children today that I think it’s important to be inclusive.)

I have also heard that some families just seem unapproachable. I have a hunch those are the ones whose children are a little more challenging, and you feel you really need to talk with them about their children’s behavior. I wonder if maybe the reason they have their defenses up is that they continue to hear negative things about their child. Can you imagine how it feels to hear day after day that your child wouldn’t listen, bit or hit someone today?

When families are told that there has been a behavior problem with their child, they hear “I have a bad child.” But a more devastating message they hear is “I’m a bad parent.” If I felt the teacher thought I was a “bad” parent, I’d probably do my best, too, to avoid any conversation with her.

I thought you might like to hear from some caregivers who are working on ways to build relationships with families whose children have challenging behaviors -- and from some parents. This video was from a professional development workshop we produced a few years ago.



Here are some helpful hints about building a positive relationship with families that I learned from Fred Rogers:

Starting with empathy.

So many people are struggling just to make ends meet. Fred once said, “Many mothers feel severely pressured these days. They often feel like they’re falling short in one part, if not several parts of their lives.”

Making families feel welcome.

Find ways to make families feel welcome, even in those short moments that they’re in your room, at the beginning and end of the day. It might help to remember people who have made you feel welcome somewhere. Maybe it was

something in their face, their body language, or tone of voice said, “It’s good to see you.” You have your own ways of reaching out to someone. Remember, too, that person may have already have had a rough day. You know how much a kind word helps you on days like that.

Look for positives

Keep your eyes and ears open for something positive their child is doing. Then you’ll be able to tell the family something that makes them feel good about their child -- and their parenting. It might be hard to find something good, but I think that if you focus on that child and really look for a positive moment, I’ll bet you’ll find something. And noticing the positives can help you connect better with the child, too.

Think about what not to say

That doesn’t mean we ignore a problem in the classroom or family child care home. But a teacher told me how she learned what’s helpful to say and what isn’t. Just after she discussed a problem with a mother, she overheard her say to her son, “You’re really going to get it when you get home!” The teacher realized that it would be better if, for now, she just focused on telling that mother about the positives -- and work on building their relationship. In the meantime, she’d continue to work with the child on the behaviors that arose in the child care setting. After all, that’s where the problems happened.

Relationship-building isn’t always smooth. And it does take time. But when “building a relationship” becomes your goal -- rather than the goal of having the family work on “correcting a child’s problem,” you may be surprised to find that it’s easier to connect with these families than you thought.

Thank you for being our neighbor,



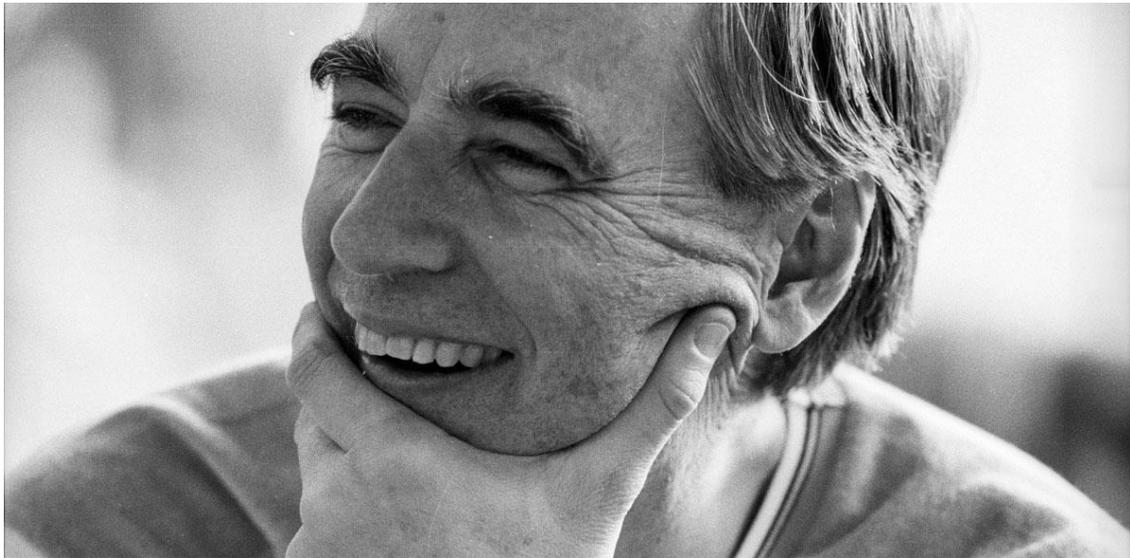
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Timeless Wisdom from Fred Rogers



"In the partnership between parent and childcare provider, both partners need to understand that there may be mixed feelings in the relationship—love and the need to be loved, guilt, anger, competition, trust and mistrust. The more these feelings can be talked about, the more manageable they can become, and of course, the healthier the partnership will be."

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