

What We Can Continue to Learn from Fred Rogers



Little Children -- Big Words



The other day I heard a child singing “Row, row, row your boat,” and I couldn’t help thinking of the delightful version of that song that Fred wrote for King Friday –

Propel, propel, propel your craft...

Gently down liquid solution.

Ecstatically, ecstatically, ecstatically, ecstatically,

Existence is but an illusion!

Fred loved introducing his viewers to “big” words. Yes, he did speak in simple and clear language that could be easily understood by his young viewers, but at the same time, he knew how important it is to enrich their vocabulary. Fred didn’t “dumb down” the language. He raised it up.

By passing along a love of words to children, Fred was giving them a real boost for their literacy skills. Research shows that children with a large vocabulary are more fluent readers. Later on, when they're learning to read and come across a complex word, they'll be more able to sound it out if they've heard that word before.

Watch this *Neighborhood* video and see how thoughtfully Fred introduced a “big word” to his young viewers.



On that video Fred gave children a number of ways to learn what “soporific” means. He gave a simple explanation and gave examples, using the new word a few times. Here are some ideas that may help when you’re introducing “big” words to children:

Think of words that are fun to say

I remember a teacher using the word “scrumptious” when she was pretending to taste a child’s make-believe cupcake. She explained to the child, “That means especially delicious.” I think from just the way she said it, with the tone of her voice, the look on her face, and her other non-verbal cues, the child understood. Another fun word for children is “humongous,” meaning “bigger than big.” When you have fun saying those kinds of words, the children are more likely to use them, too.

Stretch children's emotional vocabulary

We all talk about helping children “use their words” to tell us how they feel. So let's go beyond “mad, sad, and happy” and tell them about more descriptive words like “frustrated,” “disappointed,” “worried” or “annoyed.” Then give the children examples of times when they might feel like that, so they'll understand these words and be more likely to use them to express their feelings in the future. Then you and the other grownups in their lives will know more about what they're feeling and how to help.

Introduce specific names for things

We've all known young children who can tell us the specific names of dinosaurs and heavy equipment. That takes a lot of different skills -- observing carefully, noticing differences, and the ability to remember complex words.

Think about opportunities you have to introduce children to the specific names for things in their environment, like flowers in a garden (marigolds, zinnias, begonias) or trees in the playground (oak, maple, pine, sycamore). I've always thought that whether we're children or adults, there's a wonderful sense of pride and mastery from being able to name things in the world around us.

Expose children to new words in books

In her NAEYC keynote one year, the children's author Mem Fox suggested that we don't interrupt a story with definitions the first few times we read it. Let's help children enjoy the rhythm and the rich language before “dissecting” it.

She also told us about an experience she had when reading a book to her grandson. After several readings, she decided to substitute a simpler word for a more complex one that she was sure he couldn't understand. Instead of helping him, it upset him! He told her she wasn't reading it right and insisted on the original “big” word! He had probably understood it all along, just from her tone and the context.

When you think about it, children benefit in lots of wonderful ways when you expose them to new words. You'll be giving them important tools for all kinds of skills -- communication, literacy, science, social and emotional development -- and a love of words that can last a lifetime.

Thank you for being our neighbor,



Hedda Sharapan

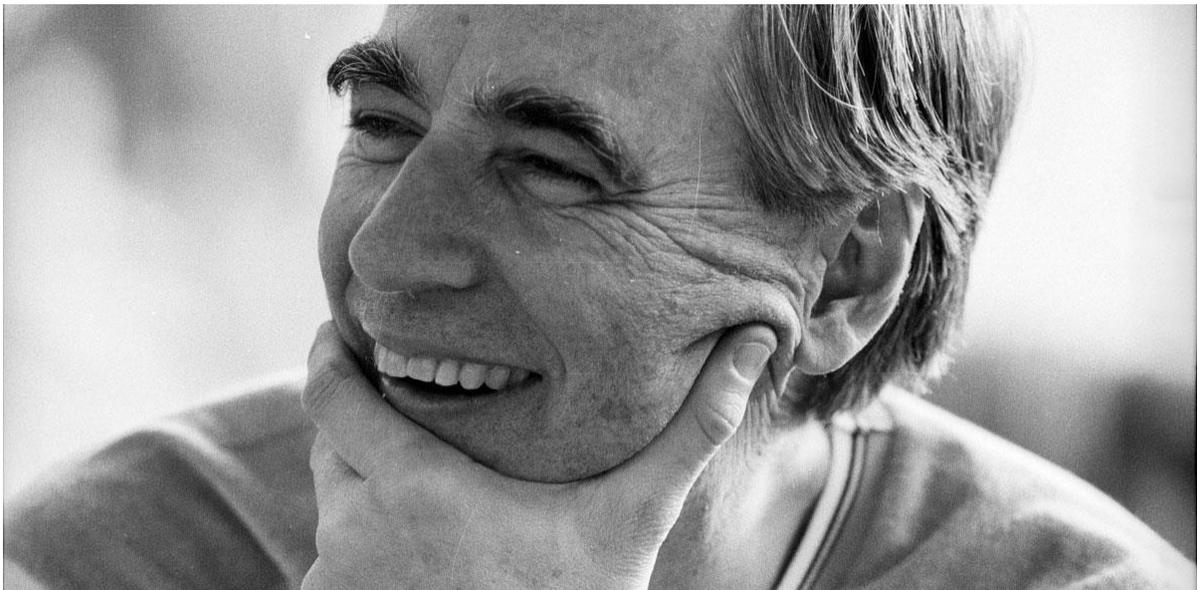
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P.S. I hope you have a chance to see the documentary about Fred Rogers, “[Won't You Be My Neighbor?](#)” It’s playing in movie theaters across the country and has had rave reviews everywhere. It’ll give you a deeper appreciation for Fred and his approach to childhood, his work and to life -- and another way to “continue to learn” from him.

Timeless Wisdom from Fred Rogers



"Learning about language begins long before kindergarten -- when we talk and sing with children, when we tell them the names for things around us... when we help them see that reading helps us in our everyday lives."

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