

What We Can Continue to Learn from Fred Rogers



Two Ears



Now that the school year has started -- or is about to start, and you're trying to get to know a new group of children, I thought you might appreciate a quote that I heard in an early childhood workshop: "We all have one mouth and two ears. Why don't we use them in that proportion!"

That quote reminds me of a story that Fred used to tell about his early work with children as part of his graduate studies in child development. He said that the more comfortable he became with himself and with the children, the more he realized that the most important thing is to LISTEN."

Fred became a remarkable listener. But he didn't come to those listening skills by magic or by intuition. He learned how to listen, guided by his mentors in his graduate studies in child development. They helped him use his eyes and especially

his ears to learn what's important to young children. That's how we find out what children think is funny...what worries them...what interests them...how they interpret the world around them. I truly believe that Fred's ability to communicate effectively through the camera lens grew out of his ability to listen to children in those real conversations.

Here's a video that can help us learn about Fred's listening skills. He was asking first-graders to talk about their experiences for a *Neighborhood* episode about Starting School. While you're watching the children, try to focus on what Fred does, as a listener, to help them share their thoughts and feelings with him.



Here are some more helpful hints about listening:

Reflect on our own feelings

Think about how it feels when people really listen to you, when they look at you, ask questions and encourage you to tell more. Doesn't it feel good when you know someone wants to hear about your thoughts or feelings or your story? Those are the

same positive feelings you give children when you listen to them.

Make one-on-one time

In the midst of all that goes on in a classroom, it can be hard to stop and listen to a child who has something to tell you. It may even take a while for a child to put into words what he or she is thinking or feeling. If there is another teacher who can help with the classroom, you may be able to move off to the side and give one-on-one attention to a child. Sometimes that takes just a few minutes. But think of how important those minutes are, when you set aside time to listen and find out about something that matters to a child. Minutes like that strengthen relationships.

Be at a child's level

I worry that most of the time children talk with us, they are looking at our knees! Or they have to strain their necks to look up at us, because we loom so high overhead. It's so important to get on a child's eye level, by getting down or sitting on a low chair. That gives a clear message to a child that "I am here for you and ready to listen."

Be open to whatever a child says

Sometimes children say things that you didn't expect, like the child on the video who told Fred that "school was boring." Did you notice that Fred allowed the boy the right to his feelings? He repeated it, leaving room for the boy to add more. At times like that, it's especially important to keep in mind the techniques of "active listening," like restating, clarifying, encouraging the child to say more, waiting for a response.

I thought it was even more interesting that Fred didn't edit that boy's statement out of the video. He left that in, so others can hear there are lots of ways to feel about the first day of school, even ways we may not want to hear. When a child says things that might upset or concern you, I hope you will think of it as a gift because it means that child trusts you enough to be honest about his or her thoughts and feelings.

It's especially important at the beginning of the school year to focus on listening skills because your ears are such a powerful tool for building relationships. Children will trust you more and more when they see that you care about *what*

they say because that means you care about *them*. And that's what makes them want to learn from you -- now and all through the year.

Thank you for being our neighbor,



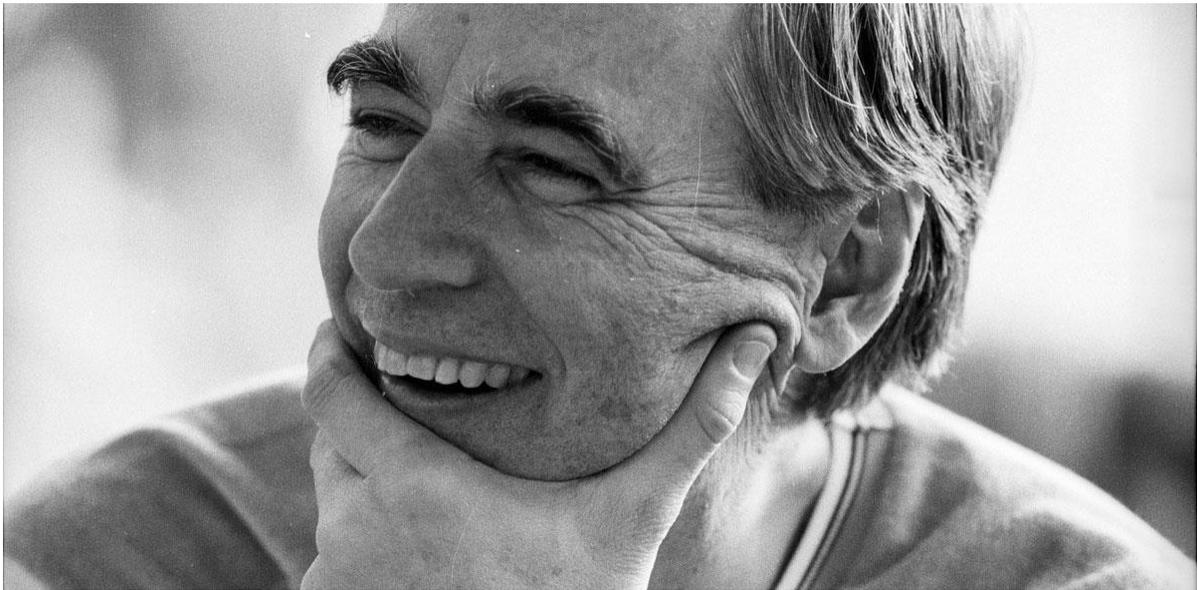
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Timeless Wisdom from Fred Rogers



"More and more I have come to understand that listening is one of the most important things we can do for one another. Whether the other is an adult or a child, our engagement in listening to who that person is can often be our greatest gift to that person."

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