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What We Can Continue to Learn from Fred Rogers



Teaching in These Challenging Times



I wonder if you've seen the quote that's going around these days, "*Fred Rogers was the greatest teacher of all time...and he did it all virtually.*" Well, it is a beautiful tribute to Fred, but I'd like to add a bit more caution and context to it.

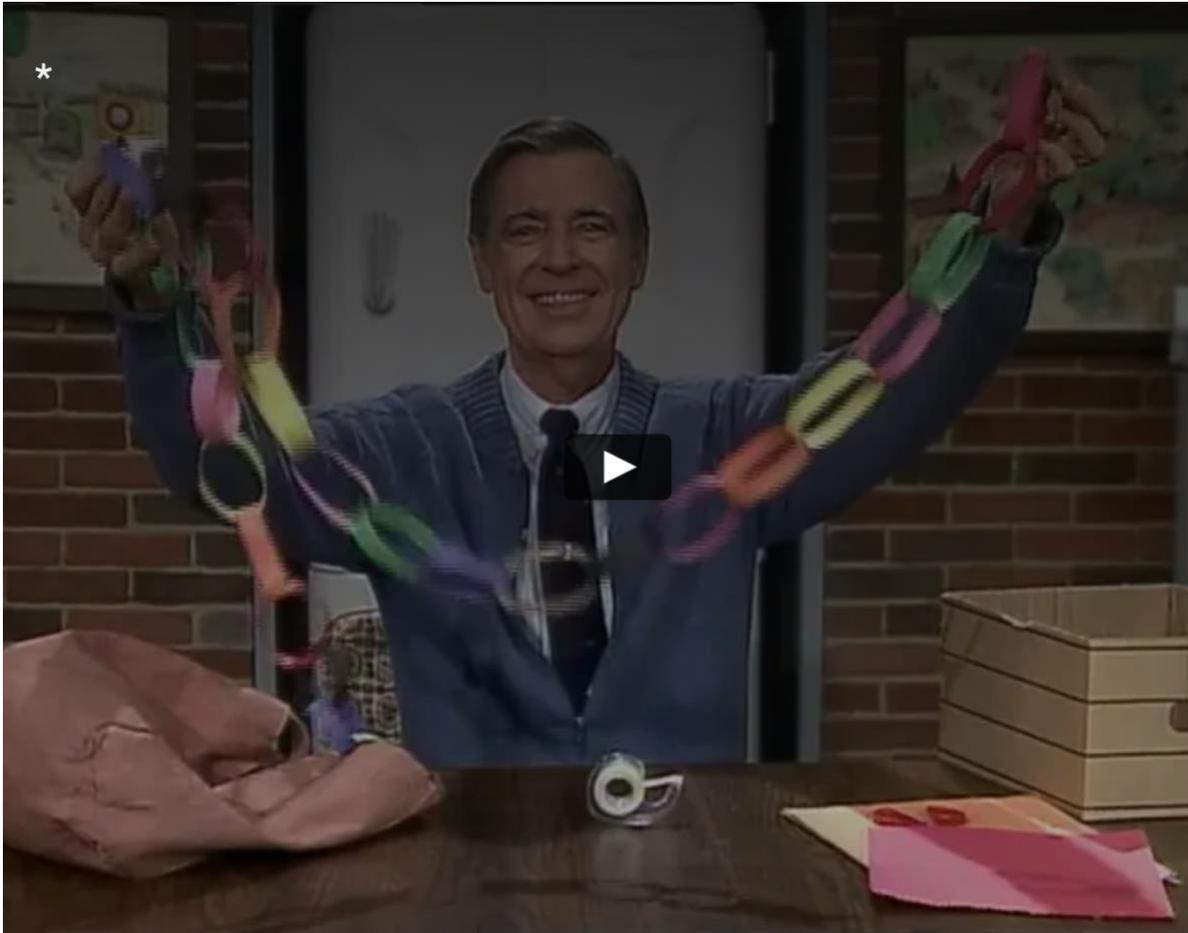
What Fred was doing for a half-hour television program is very different from what teachers are expected to do with virtual learning. He certainly had a much bigger budget, staff, consultants and time to develop each script. I think Fred would also appreciate that many of you aren't

comfortable in front of the camera. He was much happier behind the scenes working the puppets in *Make-Believe*.

What's required today of teachers is incredibly challenging. For in-person, you have to set up a situation for young learners with physical distancing, rules that limit touching playthings or playing together, masks that block out a smile or the quiet voice of a shy child....or the requirement to spend several hours in front of a screen – with all the distractions at home!

Fred always said, "It's through relationships that we grow best and learn best." How challenging it can be to build a relationship with those limitations. And bravo to you for rising to the occasion, tough as it may be.

Whether you're working with children in-person or virtually, there are some things we can learn from Fred that helped build the relationship with his young viewers. While you're watching the video, look for *how* he did things as much as *what* he did. Part of the reason I chose this video from the week about Learning was that I thought you may want to share it with families to spark some creative ideas with construction paper.



Here are some things we can learn from Fred about relationship-building, whether you're helping children learn in-person or virtually:

The power of rituals and routines

For almost four decades, the Neighborhood visits began in the very same way with a consistent routine. Fred knew that predictability creates a sense of security and helps to build trust. I was reminded of that when I heard that from teachers who, when they had to shift from in-person to on-screen, kept the same welcoming song and rituals. It was like an anchor that helped children stay steady in the rocky waves.

The power of non-verbal communication

In so many non-verbal ways, Fred made us feel welcome and ready to learn from him -- with his eyes, the caring tone of his voice, his body language, even the way

he handled things he was showing us. Turn off the volume of the video, and you can really feel that relationship-building grows more from *how* we say things than *what* we say. You might take for granted those seemingly insignificant bits of behavior, but they speak loud and clear to children, especially the young ones who aren't yet very verbal. Through your eyes, your voice, and your body language – whether you're using a face mask or a screen, you're sending powerful messages of “I care about you” and “I'm glad you're with us today.”

The power of “getting to know you”

I heard from a kindergarten teacher with a virtual class who found one way to get to know the students. She gave them an “assignment” of something to show at the next “meeting.” One day it was, “Draw a picture of your family to show us.” Another day after reading “Billy Goats Gruff” she asked, “Can you make a bridge out of things you have at home and show it to us?” Or “Tomorrow, show or tell us something that makes you happy.”

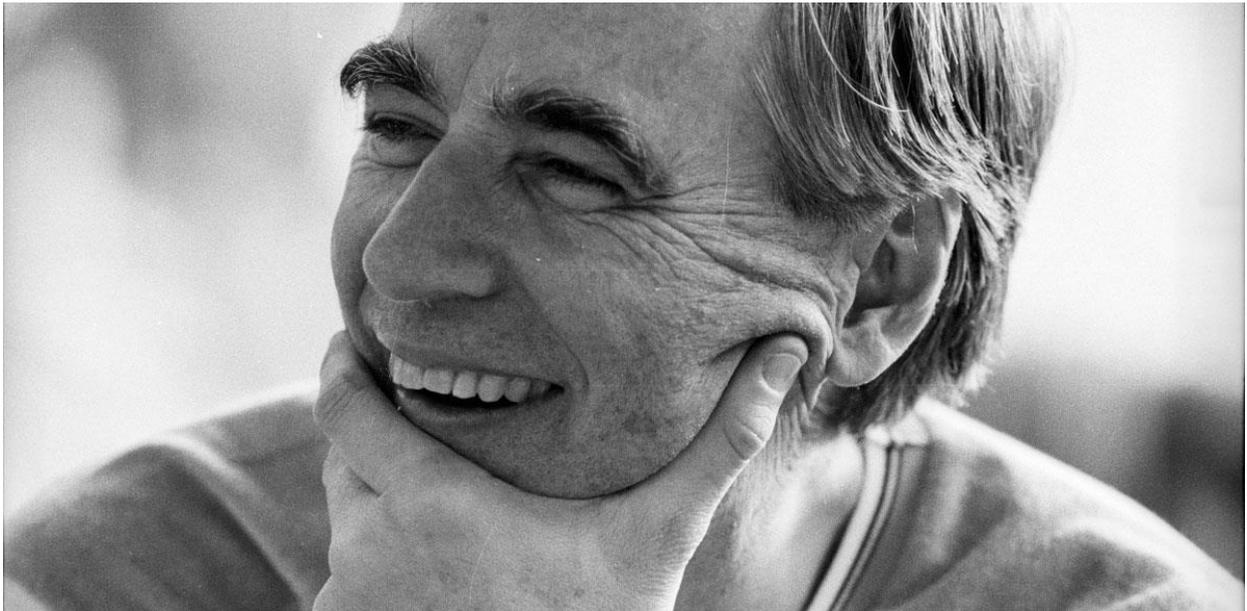
Not only did that give her a chance to know the children's interests and ideas, but it also gave her the opportunity to show the children how much she enjoyed learning about them. You have lots of ways to let children know “Your ideas matter.” That's a big advantage you have over Mister Rogers, whether you're in-person or on-screen, you can relate to the individual children. On the video, at the end of reading the book “A Piece of Red Paper,” Mister Rogers could only ask, “I wonder what you would make?” But you can really listen to what they're thinking and feeling. That's real interaction, even when it's virtual.

All of us here at The Fred Rogers Center wish you well in this unique time in our world. We hope you will stay safe and healthy. And we hope you realize that whether you're teaching in-person or virtually, under these challenging circumstances, you're helping children learn something really important – that we human beings are resilient, adaptive and creative.

Hedda

Hedda Sharapan
M.S. Child Development
PNC Grow Up Great Senior Fellow

Timeless Wisdom from Fred Rogers



“When we listen – really listen – to children’s ideas, concerns, and feelings, we’re showing them that their words and ideas matter. More importantly, we’re showing that they themselves matter to us. When children feel good about who they are, they’re likely to be eager learners both inside and outside the classroom.”

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Saint Vincent College
300 Fraser Purchase Road
Latrobe, Pennsylvania 15650-2690

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