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## What We Can Continue to Learn from Fred Rogers

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Photo courtesy of Chase Granger.

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### The Power of Puppet Play – It's not just Make-Believe

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The new Mister Rogers sculpture that was recently unveiled at Rollins College is a remarkably fit tribute to Fred. I was delighted to see that the sculptor Paul Day decided to depict Fred with his Daniel puppet talking with children. He really understood that the essence of Fred's work was about communicating with children and how much Fred learned about that with his puppets.

Fred was always enamored with puppets. He built on that interest in his first TV production "The Children's Corner" that ran from 1954-1962. Working behind the scenes, he gave life to puppet Daniel Striped Tiger, then King Friday, X and Henrietta, Lady Elaine and others. A few years later, when he was doing graduate studies in Child Development, he turned to those puppets as a natural tool when he was working directly with small groups of children.

Fred saw how children seem to trust puppets, maybe because they're childlike and non-threatening. At a safe distance, an arm's length away from the puppeteer, children tend to confide in a puppet, saying things they might not tell an adult. Through those conversations and with the guidance of his mentors, Fred developed his listening skills so he could better understand what was important to children. What did they think was funny, or sad or scary?

Here's a great video from some of Fred's early work with children and puppets. Watch the faces of the children as they talk with King Friday XIII on Fred's hand. They're so focused on the puppet, it's as if Fred (the puppeteer) is invisible. Listen to what they tell the puppet and the thoughtful way Fred uses the puppet to respond. You can see for yourself the power of puppets.

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Here are some things that can help with puppet play:

### **Introducing puppets**

- 1) Talk **to** the puppet. Start by talking **to** the puppet, telling it about something that happened that day.
- 2) Talk **for** the puppet. Ask the puppet a question, then talk **for** the puppet answering you. Create a conversation between yourself and the puppet.
- 3) Talk **with** the children. When you feel the children are ready, turn the puppet to the children and have it talk **with** them.

It's a good idea to model these steps for several days before offering children puppets for them to use themselves.

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### **Using puppets for social stories**

I know teachers who use a puppet when they want to talk with children about behavior situations, about empathy, or making better choices. For example, you could have a puppet on your hand tell you, “I’m mad today.” You could ask why and have the puppet answer something like, “Because somebody knocked down my blocks,” or “I wanted to be first in line.” You could then ask the children to talk with the puppet and offer some suggestions or encouragement. It may be especially helpful for children who have trouble with those kinds of social or emotional situations if you remind them later on what they told the puppet.

### **Making puppets**

The things children value the most are the things they make themselves, and puppets can be easy to make out of things like paper bags, paper plates on sticks, or socks. When children make their own puppets, they’re more likely to use them creatively in their pretend play.

You could also have children make puppets that express emotions. Have them look in a mirror, show an emotion (angry, sad, scared), and then represent it on the puppet’s face. What do the eyes look like? The mouth? When children talk through the safe distance of their own puppets, they may be better able to find ways to manage their own feelings and develop empathy.

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Puppets can be a powerful learning tool for you, too. Because they can open the door for some important conversations, they can help you gain insight into what children are thinking about and how you might support them. You might also find that learning how to use puppets can give you an engaging way to support children’s social-emotional development.

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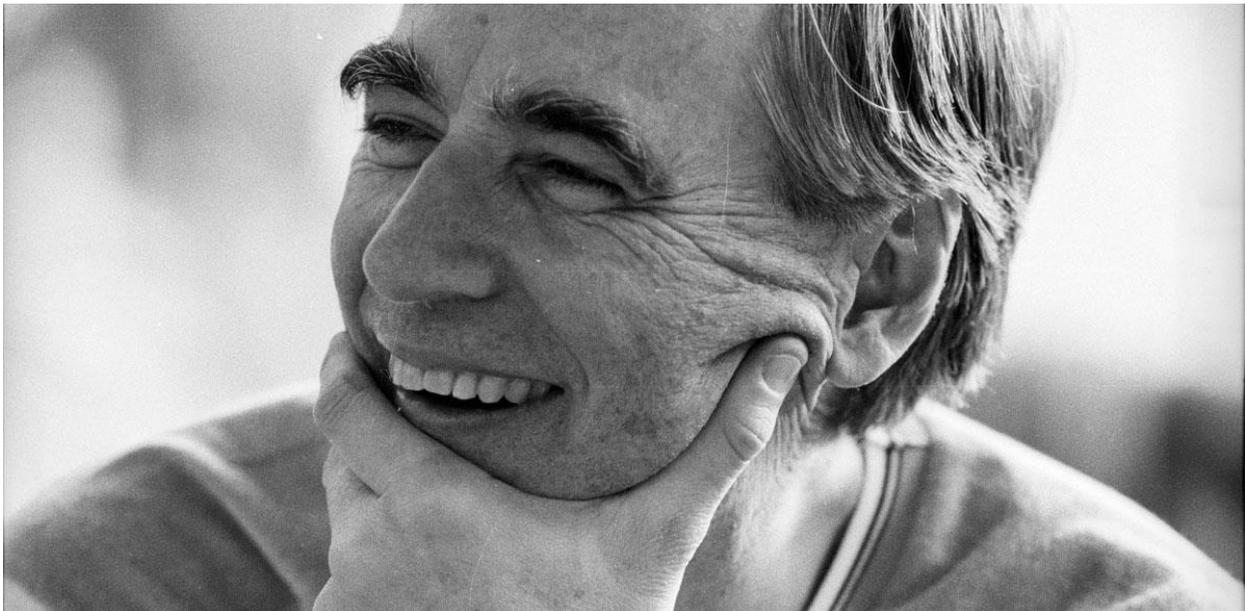
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## Timeless Wisdom from Fred Rogers



"No matter what the situation, if we can help children talk about their concerns and their feelings (and really listen to what they tell us), we are letting them know we care deeply about them."

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