

# MISTER ROGERS' NEIGHBORHOOD

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## THE MIGHTY IMPORTANT MOUTH by Fred Rogers

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When a middle-aged friend of ours thought back to his early childhood, one of the vivid memories that came to his mind was being insistently spoon-fed food he didn't like. "I can still see that spoon coming at me," he said, "and I know I felt, well, like I was being violated."

Have you ever had a bug fly into your mouth? Or have you ever found something foreign, unexpected, in a mouthful of food? If so, you may know how that friend of ours felt when he was being forced to take something into his mouth that he didn't like. That such a memory should persist so strongly for so long suggests how important our mouths are -- right from the beginning.

A baby's mouth, of course, is a potential source of the many good feelings that early life can bring. It is the mouth that can come to mean, for instance, closeness to mother, warmth, the taste of milk and relief from the pain of hunger. Psychologists speculate that in these early times of pleasure and comfort lie the roots of a person's later capacity to hope and to be optimistic. By contrast, experts have noted that children who are deprived of these normal oral gratifications of infancy often tend to grow up taking a darker view of what life has to offer.

After infancy, the mouth becomes a major source of information about the world. We've all seen babies and



toddlers mouthing anything new or interesting, much as we adults might turn something around in our hands. Among the most interesting things babies find with their mouths are their thumbs. "Hey, that funny thing is part of me!" is one important realization that thumbsucking may bring a baby.

Also, sucking the thumb may remind a baby of sucking the nipple and, when that nipple isn't immediately available, the thumb may bring some self-initiated comfort. This, perhaps, is the beginning of patience and of our ability to find ways to bide our time as we wait for gratifications that have to be delayed -- an important life skill.

Have you noticed some children's tendency to suck their thumbs while watching television -- and not just during scary programming? It may be that close-ups of the human faces on the television screen bring back memories of those earliest close looks at faces children experienced at feeding time. It might even account for the desire many grownups have of wanting to eat or drink something when they turn on the television set.

What associations and memories do you have when you think back as far as you can? Somewhere back there you'll probably find the image of a mouth -- laughing or angry, teeth bared in a smile or in rage, lips pursed in a kiss or open in song. In trying to remember those mouths and all that our own mouths brought us in our early days, we may rediscover some sweet and sour episodes we thought we had forgotten.

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"Mister Rogers Talks About Mouths and Feelings" premieres November 19-23, 1990 on PBS. Highlights include Mister Rogers' trip to the dentist. For exact times, ask your local PBS station when programs #1626-#1630 will air. The dentist visit occurs during program #1629.

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