

# MISTER ROGERS:

## *Be Honest With Your Kids*

Self-expression begins at home, where genuine responses to your child's feelings are the highest form of praise. by Gail McCracken Tuttle

At 59, Fred Rogers, producer of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," does not have all the answers. Nor is he a man who speaks as if his words carry a great deal of weight, although they cast a spell over the nation's preschoolers every weekday.

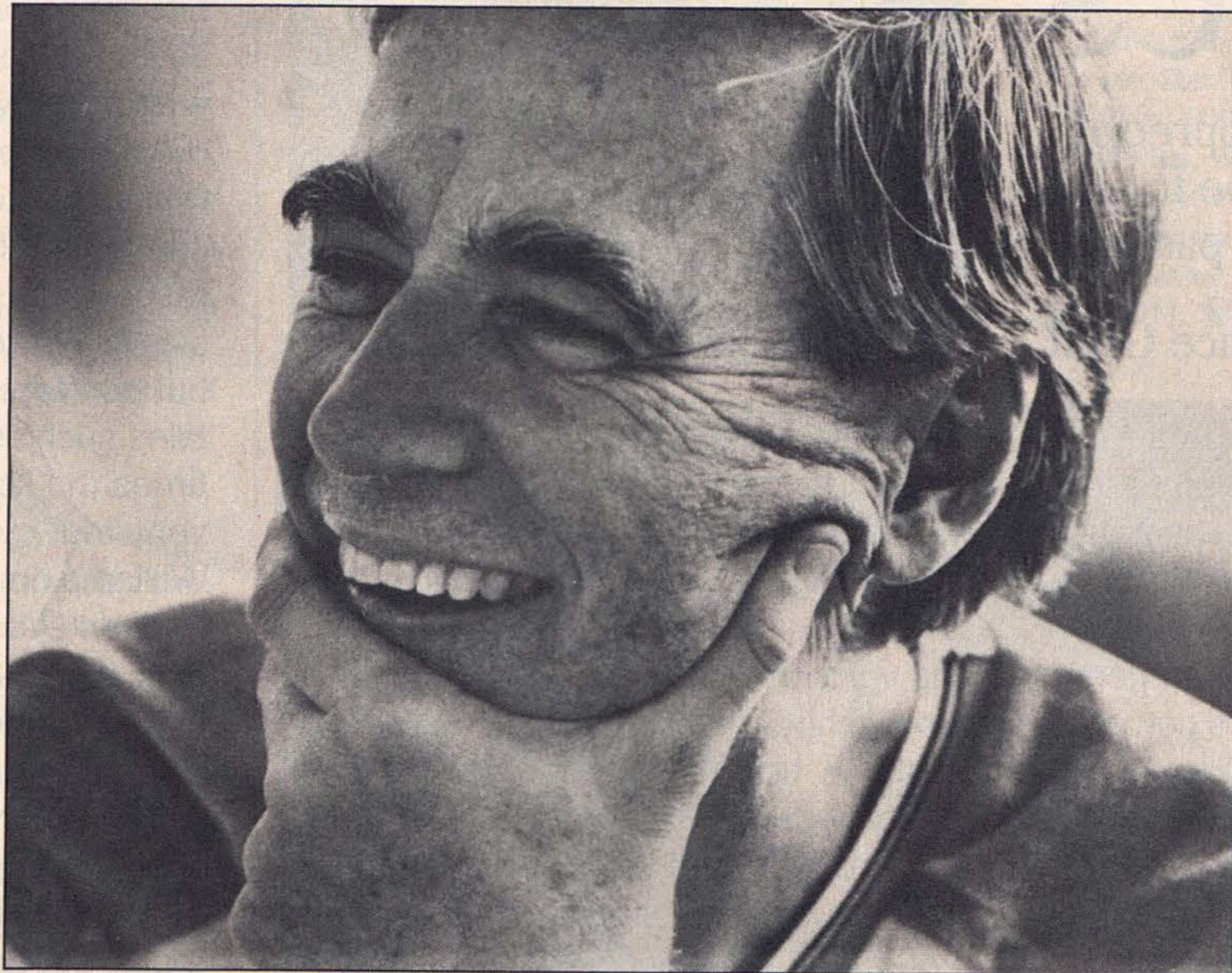
Rogers, whose phenomenal success perplexes some, is the creator and star of the longest running children's series on public television. And this quiet-spoken man has no trouble explaining the reason for his popularity with youngsters.

Honesty. Pure and simple.

"I think we all long to be in touch with someone who will be honest with us," says Rogers, an ordained minister and the father of two sons. "The person on camera is the real me. I think children appreciate having a real person talk with them about feelings that are real to them."

It may seem unusual that a man who prides himself on being straightforward trades in make-believe. Yet his unself-conscious brand of honesty has convinced millions of children that they are his "television neighbors." They take imaginary trips with him on the Neighborhood Trolley to toy factories, air traffic control towers, and grocery stores. They also meet his pretend friends — a cast of puppets. And they know Mr. Rogers as a person who sings songs he made up himself, such as "You'll Never Go Down the Drain" (designed to relieve anxieties of toddlers afraid of a bath).

Make-believe and pretend play are great sources of creativity and self-expression, says Rogers, who sees part of his off-camera role as one of helping parents respond to their children's attempts to be creative. The latter is one area where adults often miss



Photograph courtesy of Family Communications, Inc.

the point, he says, if they're not in touch with a child's feelings.

He recalls a story about a nursery school teacher who lavishly praised a preschooler's drawing of a cheery home concealed by heavy strokes of dark brown paint. The teacher held up the gloomy work and proclaimed it "beautiful," recounts Rogers. And he remembers watching a crestfallen child tuck his chin and walk away. "The child did not make that picture to be beautiful," says Rogers. "That picture was made to give some sort of message, to say he was feeling really messy inside."

While children need praise and recognition to fuel their creative energies, shallow praise can dry up ideas and make children think that their work is insignificant. Rogers suggests trying something like: "That's a pretty dark picture, would you like to tell me about it?" Or, if there is something that really pleases you, use a spontaneous remark to comment *specifically* on a color or shape in the drawing.

Parents who enjoy creating and appreciate the creative works of others want to encourage their children to do the same. But this isn't as easy as it sounds, especially for working moth-

ers and fathers, who find creative time hard to come by, says Rogers. Often, they feel compelled to sandwich special projects between supper, baths, and bedtime, when both parents and children may be tired and cranky from work and day care or school.

Rogers, who has authored a guidebook for parents, suggests that it's not always necessary to have a planned activity at the end of a long day. Sometimes it's more effective — and fun — to involve the child in

whatever the task at hand may be.

One of the best opportunities is meal preparation. Stirring, holding a measuring cup, clearing odds and ends from the dinner table, and setting places at the table are easy jobs.

"Once that food gets onto the table, the child can have a justifiable pride in knowing 'I really helped make this dinner,'" Rogers says. "That is much more creative than 'Oh, you go over in the corner and cut out snowflakes.'"

Working dads can rest while giving their children an opportunity to create by just being near them at the end of the day. A group of milk carton blocks or a sock puppet will stimulate a young child, and Dad can keep the fun going with an occasional suggestion. Let older children choose a favorite make-believe game or toy, which can be played — quietly — in the same room with Dad.

"Little by little, I think fathers are feeling more and more comfortable about having a part in raising children," Rogers says. "There was a time when I think fathers felt that was something they weren't expected or allowed to do. But fathers can participate in mighty effective mothering."

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