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MISTER ROGERS TALKS TO MOTHERS

Fred Rogers leaves his neighborhood to advise parents... about children's fears... understanding death... physical handicaps... expressing anger... and how parents feel about their parents

by Flora Davis



Mister Rogers' Neighborhood is an oasis of quiet amid the clamor of children's television, a program concerned with a child's emotional development. Its creator is Fred Rogers, a tall, slender, soft-spoken man who is the envy of thousands of parents. They have come to look on him as a model of parenthood because they have seen their active, noisy youngsters settle down for an absorbed half hour with him as his obvious ability to communicate with them takes over.

The first half of each program takes place in a thoroughly ordinary living room. In a typical show Fred Rogers enters and hangs up his jacket, talking quietly all the while. His topic might be having a haircut or a stay in the hospital—both experiences sometimes worrying to children. About halfway through the 30-minute program Mr. Rogers invites his viewers to imagine with him what is going on in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, and the living room dissolves, to be replaced by a fantasy world that is peopled with both puppets and live actors.

Because of Mr. Rogers' great rapport with children, Redbook's editors thought that many parents would be interested in his ideas about how to help children grow emotionally. We invited him to talk with 11 young mothers who had questions to ask him, who wanted to see whether they might apply what Fred Rogers seems to know instinctively to their daily relations with their own children. An ordained minister well grounded in psychology, he produces his program with the guidance of the distinguished Arsenal Child Study Center of the University of Pittsburgh.

Mister Rogers' Neighborhood is a daily feature on 243 stations of the Public Broadcasting Service. Its atmosphere of intimacy and acceptance is unique on the television screen, and it is obvious that Fred Rogers honestly cares about children. "I like you," he tells his young viewers, "just the way you are."

"The question I'm dying to ask you, Mr. Rogers, is, do you ever lose your temper—holler at your own kids?"

"What I'd like to know is, what's going through a child's mind when he develops one of those irrational fears such as seeing wolves in every dark corner? Lately we've had wall-to-wall wolves."

And so our seminar in Redbook's conference room began. The exchange between the young mothers and Fred Rogers lasted for a crammed three hours as question tumbled over question, anecdote followed anecdote. Mr. Rogers responded slowly and thoughtfully, as is his way. What the women talked about mostly were emotions, those of both children and parents. Anger, fear, the problems of coping with death or divorce, all came up for discussion, but the most fascinating subject the group hit upon was fear.

Wenda, tall, blond, rosily pregnant, a free-lance writer with one child, recalled: "Just last summer my two-year-old son suddenly developed a fear of imaginary spiders. There were times when he was sure spiders were crawling all over him. At first I tried reasoning with him, but he was still afraid. Finally one day when he said there was a spider on his arm, I simply pretended to pick it off. He loved that."

Wenda had told me her spider story before the seminar began, and I had wondered then how Rogers would react to it. In his program he takes great pains to differentiate between reality and fantasy. He himself never appears in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe segment of his show, and these days no magic takes place in the "real world" of his living room. What I wondered was, if a mother goes along with her child's terrifying fantasy—if she annihilates the spiders or shoos away imaginary wolves, as I myself have done—does she not by her action encourage the child to believe that the spiders or wolves are real?

"I think it's important to know where fears come from," Fred Rogers began. His folded hands rested quietly in front of him on the conference table. "All fears start inside. They are created because the child projects his or her own angry feelings outward and then is afraid of them. When children themselves are angry, the world seems peopled with angry

beings. The spiders are angry, parents are angry—even when they really aren't.

"Such fears are a normal part of human life. They also change from time to time, since they come directly from the developmental tasks of different ages. When a child is two or three and trying to master his own urge to bite, he may be afraid of animals that bite; while he is trying to master his urge to mess, he may be afraid of big, messy things. No parent can know the root of every fear, nor can you banish fears completely, but you can help your child work through his fears by assessing for him what is real in contrast to what is imaginary."

For that reason, Mr. Rogers said, he was "worried" about a mother's participating in her child's fearful fantasy. But Rogers, who is perhaps the least dogmatic of child-psychology experts, was reluctant to say that anything is always right or always wrong.

"I respect people's coping with their particular situations," he said. "There can be an exquisite understanding in a relationship between parent and child. If killing the imaginary spider was a relief to the child for the moment and if the fear didn't crop up somewhere else, who can say it was a bad way to handle the problem? And I would hate to have parents feel they couldn't ever enter into a child's fantasies. Many fantasies are not at all fearsome."

Sometimes, Rogers pointed out, we hesitate to give support to a child who is frightened. For example, when a little girl is afraid of thunder someone may say to her, "You shouldn't be afraid," which denies the child's feeling. It's just as easy—and more reassuring—to say, "I know you're afraid, but thunder really won't hurt you."

Several times, Rogers said, he has retaped a portion of his program because a character was denied a chance to have an emotion. His actors ad-lib within the boundaries of the scripts he writes, and once one of them said to a puppet, "Don't cry, Henrietta—it will be all right." That "Don't cry"—though it is a phrase that has come down through the ages—was scrapped in favor of, "I know you're sad, but we'll make things better."

In focusing on situations that frighten or puzzle children Rogers has produced a program about death, in which he discussed the death of his own dog. Several of the women wanted to talk about that. Lynn, a small, slight brunette, once a teacher, now a mother of three children, said, "When my father died recently, my three-year-old daughter suddenly became obsessed with the subject of death. She couldn't stop asking questions about it, and sometimes I didn't know how to answer her."

"There are many things about death that are hard for children to understand," Rogers said gently. "They may ask what a dead person eats; then they may want to know if he can talk. Children seem to have to go over and over the active life experiences in an effort to understand death. But there really isn't a logical explanation, and I don't feel we should slide over how tough it is to give up a loved person.

"I also don't go along with this business of 'You mustn't cry in front of the children,'" Rogers continued. "I cried at my dad's funeral and my sons saw me cry—and I wouldn't have not had them there for the world. Children need to be included in their family's way of coping with grief, whether it is praying in a church or taking a walk along a stream."

When a child has loved a person who died, she will remember that she was sometimes rude or angry with him and may even have wished him dead. "It is terribly important to reassure the child that scary, mad wishes don't make things happen—that you can't kill or hurt someone by wishing him dead," Rogers said. But one woman objected that it might be putting the idea into the child's head unnecessarily to tell her, unless she brought it up first, that you can't kill someone by wishing. Rogers replied, "That fear is so universal, you can be sure the idea is already there somewhere."

Carol, a suburban doctor's wife who worked for a publisher before her son was born, asked how to explain handicaps to a youngster. "There's a little girl in my son's class at school who is blind," she said. "Recently he asked me why she's blind. I said I didn't know, so he said he would ask her why. (Continued on page 148)

MISTER ROGERS

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I told him he couldn't do that and then he wanted to know why he couldn't, and I didn't have an answer for that either."

"It seems to me that by telling the boy not to ask the mother you imply that this is an unspeakable subject," Mr. Rogers said. "And in my experience, when you're dealing with a child with a gross handicap, it's best to talk about it. If you pretend it's not there, the child may think, He likes me, but if he really knew I was blind (or deaf, or whatever), maybe he wouldn't like me. When a sighted child sees a child who is blind, the unspoken question is often 'What did that child do to get to be blind? Did she look at something she shouldn't have?' That kind of fear can impede curiosity if it isn't dealt with well; the sighted child becomes afraid to look carefully."

The answer, then, when a child asks why a person is blind, has to be the truth: that it was due to an accident or a disease or a birth defect. Rogers believes that children can cope with truth better than with subterfuge because their imagined fears are always much worse than the facts. The core of his approach to children, in fact, is what he calls "this overriding business of honesty."

Because of that insistence on honesty his program has avoided some subjects. For instance, when Lori, a young New York City mother who is separated from her husband, made a plea for a program about divorce, Rogers' reply was that he couldn't talk honestly about it to a mass audience. To a child whose home is intact, though her parents may occasionally quarrel, straight talk about divorce could be very worrying.

For a similar reason Rogers approached the subject of death by talking about the death of a pet, not of a close relative. "Eventually I'd like to make special tapes for children who have had significant losses—a parent or grandparent who died—or for children whose parents are getting a divorce. But I really feel I want to know that the kids who are going to see these rather packed programs are children who are going through the experience."

Anger was another subject the women were eager to talk about. "What do you do when your child says, 'I hate you' whenever he doesn't get his way?" asked Peggy, who has two preschool children.

"You have to draw the line somewhere," Carol put in, "because next the kid starts hitting you. At first I tried hitting back, but he just hit harder and harder, so now I don't allow it at all."

Rogers suggested that hitting and saying, "I hate you" call for different responses. When a child says, "I hate you," what he or she means is, "I'm angry"—it is mostly a matter of labels. If parents can tolerate the statement and reply with something such as, "I know you hate me now," the child learns that hate is a passing emotion that can be absorbed in a loving relationship.

On the other hand, a child who is allowed to hit his parents is apt to become

frightened, both of his own out-of-bounds behavior and of what he imagines his mother or father may do to retaliate. "If you're a very small child and you feel that amount of rage," Fred Rogers said, "you can only guess what somebody three or four times your size might feel and do." What helps then is to acknowledge the child's anger but limit his behavior.

Several of the mothers seemed more troubled by their own anger than by their children's. "What about the times when I lose my temper and scream like a banshee?" Wenda asked. "When it's over I feel bad—after all, I'm thirty and he's only two."

"It's important for children to know that anger is natural," Rogers said. "If they know their parents get angry, then they can feel there's a whole range of emotions that it's all right for them to explore."

Returning to the subject of hitting, Rogers said that there were two things to keep in mind about it—it hurts and it's something people do when they're angry. Parents can help children talk about their anger or channel it in another way. And he went on to apply the same interpretation to spanking.

"When a mother spans, she does it to vent her own anger, not for the sake of the child. It's hard not to strike out when you're angry. I really don't think

spanking helps children, though I'm not saying it hurts them. I've become so enraged at my boys that I've spanked them, but I knew it was part of a mutually loving relationship; you can go through an awful lot if you have that as a basis. It seems to me that to love a child is to be outraged with that child at times—to care enough to be really angry. I once heard a little boy say, 'You can't make me mad. I don't even like you.'"

This touched off a flurry of comment about the way Fred Rogers handles his own anger, both on television and at home. "I really feel you're a saint in comparison to everybody else because you don't seem to get angry," Peggy said. Another woman added, "I would just like to see you dramatize on television that primitive anger that's in all of us." In the midst of the hubbub I heard someone say glumly, "Lady Elaine is the only character on the program who's like me." Lady Elaine, scrappy almost to the point of shrewishness, is the most aggressive and mischievous of the show's puppets.

"But Lady Elaine is part of me," protested Rogers, who writes his own scripts. "All the puppets are. They come straight out of what I feel."

Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine that Rogers ever really raises his voice, and when pressed he did say that it does not happen often. After the seminar I had a chance to discuss this characteristic of his with Dr. Margaret B. McFarland, a professor of child psychology at the University of Pittsburgh and a long-time psychology consultant for Mister Rogers' show.

"Fred is not a dramatized image on television," she told me. "What he is on television is what he really is—that's one of the important differences between his show and others. Since he's a person for whom aggression is not a very strong component, the children would know it wasn't real if he tried to dramatize aggression. He simply handles his anger in a different way."

A woman's need for time away from her children was another subject that came up at the seminar. One of the mothers put the problem this way: "How much time is enough time to spend with your child?" With the increase in the number of working mothers, this seemed an opportune question, but I was particularly interested by the fact that the three women most concerned about it were talking about three very different situations.

Lori is separated from her husband, has a child and works full time; Janet was worried because as a Junior Leaguer she now regularly spends half a day a week away from her two children. By contrast her concern seemed excessive, until she mentioned that during her own childhood her mother virtually never left her with baby sitters; apparently that was the standard she measured herself against. The third woman, Carolyn, has three children and lives deep in the country. She spoke of the quality of her time with her children.

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"I sometimes think I spend too many hours house cleaning," she said. "I see some of my friends managing differently and then I think that maybe what counts isn't just being with the kids, but finding thirty minutes or so a day when you can give them one hundred per cent of your attention." The difficulty is that small children sop up attention like sponges; you can spend 24 hours a day with them and still wonder whether you're giving them enough.

Rogers does feel that the quality of the time he spends with his sons is what is most important. When he travels he sometimes takes one or the other of them along, to have some concentrated time alone together. "But I still feel pangs of guilt when my boys ask me to do something with them and I can't," he said.

He went on to tell a story about his 13-year-old son, Jamie, who had accompanied him on this trip to New York from their home in Pittsburgh. After the seminar, Mr. Rogers said, he would be seeing Jamie off for a visit with relatives. "On the way to New York I told him about the time I went away to camp. I was his age, and my mother was so anxious about it that she stayed at a nearby hotel the whole time I was at camp. You know, that didn't help me much! But now it's Jamie who's going away, and he has mixed feelings about it and so do I.

"So we talked about feeling two opposite ways about a thing, like feeling both glad and sorry, and I told him that's called ambivalence. Sometimes it helps a boy or girl just to know there's a word for a feeling, because if there's a

word for it, other people have felt that way too."

Interested by the idea that Fred Rogers is trying to raise his children somewhat differently from the way he was raised, several of the women said they were determined not to make some of the mistakes their own mothers had made. Carol recalled: "When I was a child my mother always used to say that all she wanted for her birthday was good children. I hated that. But last Mother's Day, Jeff woke me and said, 'Mommy, what do you want for Mother's Day?' And I heard myself say, 'A good child.' I was horrified. But I guess he'll be all right, because his answer was, 'Well, then, I guess I'd better buy you a doll.'"

"The confusing thing about being a parent," Wenda said thoughtfully, "is that things seem to happen in four dimensions at once. I'm going through my childhood as I go through my son's, and through my mother's relationship with me as I go through my relationship with my child. And on my husband's side the same things are happening."

What children do for parents, Fred Rogers said then, is to give them a new chance at growing. "I feel there are certain times of outstanding growth in life—for example, when you're a preschool child, when you're an adolescent, when you become a parent and when you become a grandparent; we go through again with our children the very same things we lived through when we were small ourselves."

To reject entirely what our parents did in raising us would be, he said, to reject the meaning of our childhood. But many couples are trying to do things that differently, for the pendulum has swung

from one extreme to the other, from the time several generations back when the inner needs of children were not recognized at all to a time when some of us feel guilty for every mistake we make. "I can't help feeling tender toward parents," Rogers said. "They want so badly to be so fine for their youngsters."

As they grope for a different way to do things some parents have found in Mr. Rogers a kind of alternative to their own parents. Several of the mothers said exactly that—that as parents they tried to model themselves on him. Others seemed almost to resent him, feeling that he was the perfect parent they could never hope to be. Dr. McFarland recalled that once when she spoke to a group about Rogers' program, several fathers came up to her afterward to complain, "We don't feel like being that patient with our children." But when it comes right down to it, Dr. McFarland said, Fred Rogers "is not intended to be a model of parenthood. He is intended to be a unique television experience for children."

Obviously, though, without intending to, he is reaching adults in one way or another. As Wenda said, "I almost envy my children. I could use some of that marvelous, calm, accepting emotional climate myself. There really should be a Mr. Rogers for parents."

After the seminar I asked Fred Rogers about that, and his reply was, "We've thought about it, and we're working on it."

THE END

Writer Flora Davis is the mother of two children, Rebecca, nine and a half years old, and Jeffrey, six.

FEEDING THE DUKE

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or a tuna salad sandwich, the tuna won every time.

I went on feeding the Duke on a more or less steady basis for three months. Through that whole spring of 1957. But the funny thing was that in all that time I never really saw Duke any place but at Sugarman's. And then he didn't say more to me than "Thanks."

But one time I did get more than my end of the bargain. It was at the All-School Party at the end of the year. Usually the dances were divided up by grades, but this one was for all the grades. It was sort of like the senior prom of junior high.

Naturally, Marsha and I went together. (A girl didn't go to a dance *with* a boy even if they were going steady.) Mrs. Plummer drove us, but we asked her if she wouldn't please drop us off at the church on the corner so no one would see us getting out of the car. I remember she shook her head and laughed a little, but she did it.

In the gym some student committee had gone berserk with purple and white (the school colors) crepe-paper stream-

ers and big white balloons with purple Ws painted on them. There was also a big banner strung across one wall that read: "So Long, Ninth Graders!" It was hard to believe that this was the same gym where I played dodge ball in my blue cotton gym suit.

Down near the stage (the gym was also the auditorium) was a microphone and a record player that was hooked up to a couple of loud-speakers. The kid who always read the P.A. announcements during home-room period (Michael Betterman was his name) came up to the microphone and said something that was lost in a bunch of squeaks and screeches from the loud-speakers. But then the whole gym started to vibrate to: "Da-dip-dip-dip-dip-dip-dip, Boom-boom-boom-boom-boom-boom, Sha-da-da, Sha-da-da-da, Sha-da-da-da . . ."

The floor filled up fast with pairs of girls jitterbugging, so Marsha and I started dancing. (We had a whole routine we had worked out while watching *Bandstand*.) Marsha was twirling me under her arm when I saw the Duke standing at the back of the gym under the "Exit" sign.

He was leaning against the gray gym mats that hung on the wall back there, talking to a couple of the boys he ate

lunch with. He was wearing a blue-and-white-checked shirt with the collar turned up and black chinos belted low with a big brass buckle. I'd never seen him that dressed up before.

Of course, he didn't notice me, not even when Marsha and I maneuvered over to dance right in front of him. And he certainly couldn't have cared less that Rick Mellon (the neatest boy in the seventh grade class, despite his pimples) asked me for a slow dance to "Eddie My Love."

Finally, when the party was almost over, I saw that the Duke was alone against the gym mats (the other guys had gone off for a smoke), and I told Marsha that I was going to go over and say hi. She told me I was nuts and asked if I didn't have any pride and finished up by saying, "Well, I can't stop you."

I came up behind the Duke while he was busy watching Angie Frey and Judy "Jugs" Christiansen calypso-ing to "Little Darlin'."

"Hi, Duke," I said, trying to sound very cheerful and offhand.

His head twisted around and he looked at me the way he did that first time I popped up over the booth at Sugarman's.

"Holy smokes!" he said. I could see then that his eyes were exactly the same