



Nurturing Kindness

By Pam Morris, Early Learning Center director

I grew up watching “Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood.” “It’s a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood ” runs through my thoughts as I think about this memorable show. A simple concept spanning so many years and generations, even generating two films, his shows being watched countless times both on Youtube and misterrogers.org, and sparking a new show, “Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood.”

Fred Rogers even has a learning institute named for him: Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning & Children’s Media at Saint Vincent College in Pennsylvania - fredrogerscenter.org/. This learning institute’s mission: Staying true to the vision of Fred Rogers, we help children grow as confident, competent, and caring human beings.

How can we take Mr. Roger’s messages of kindness and caring and bring these to our children?

Hedda Sharapan a PNC Grow Up Great Senior Fellow and a former colleague of Mr. Rogers states, “We want children to grow up to be kind -- to be considerate, respectful, neighborly. Those behaviors are connected to the social skills that we, in early childhood, focus so much of our time and energy on -- sharing, empathy, conflict resolution. What a challenge it can be to teach children those skills in these times of physical distancing, limited sharing, masks that cover facial expressions and especially virtual learning.”

I had the pleasure of spending a couple of days learning with Hedda not too long ago at a recent conference I attended. She truly embodied the messages that “Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood” sought to instill in all of us and I believe they are quite relevant today.

Show kindness to teach kindness

In a classroom, it is the hands-on learning that is most effective with young children and I will say also with adults. As adults, we ask children “to use their words” to get what they need. But young children don’t know what those words are; these words need to be modeled. “Can I have the red truck when you are done?” “I want to play with the blocks, too.”

Modeling kindness is the same. Children need to see it around them to be able to use this skill. The more they witness the acts of kindness from the adults in their lives, the more they will embrace these qualities. One of Fred’s favorite quotes was the Quaker saying, “Attitudes are caught, not taught.” This virtue is one to be emphasized in all aspects of our lives. Imagine how much better the world would be if we all embraced kindness and showed it at every opportunity!

Pay It Forward

People all over the world embrace this concept in the line at their favorite coffee house or drive-through restaurant and even in the tollbooth line. The concept is simple: I will pay for the person behind me in hopes that they will pass on their good fortune to another and so on. Try this with an act of kindness; with a wave when you are walking in your neighborhood, with a greeting of goodwill at the checkout counter at your favorite grocery store and with a smile with your child during every interaction. One day those smiles can be paid forward in the general community; again model who you want others to be!

Point Out Examples of Kindness

News outlets have many uses, but in this age of the 24-hour news cycle, be diligent in finding those stories of grace, understanding and unselfishness. They are there. These are the stories to “retweet,” share on Facebook, mention to your child and your friends. Facebook often has crusades in flooding the pages with positivity. The more we can highlight these acts of goodness, the more we can internalize them and help us have a kinder, gentler outlook on life. It is so easy to get caught up in the drama of negativity, the pointing and staring at the missteps. I challenge you to change this narrative. Point out the goodness you see. It truly is all around us. Salute the heroes who fight to keep us safe; champion the educators in your life and your child’s life who gave countless hours to organizing, planning, grading and listening. It’s time to make the positive, uplifting stories lead the news cycle!

Noticing the acts of kindness around us

Be on the lookout because they are there. Be present with your children so you can catch them being kind and let them know you appreciate the effort they make. “That was kind of you to share your blocks with Jodi.” “You were a good friend when you asked David to play with you.” Be specific in your observations so your child knows what they did that was positive and should be repeated.

Find Ways to Say Thank You

“Fred appreciated other people’s kindness, too. We often heard him say “Thank you” even for small everyday things,” says Hedda Sharapan. It is important to show children why we say thank you. Demonstrate kindness by noticing when someone is helpful to you or when someone is considerate of your feelings. Be specific when you notice their kindness and model that for your children.

“Children need our help in understanding *why* we say ‘thank you’ -- that it gives someone “such a good feeling” to hear those words. It’s a way of letting someone know that you like what they did.” But remember that young children are basically ego-centric which is why saying “thank you” doesn’t come naturally for them. Young children need to be shown how to convey empathy and truly see something from another’s perspective. Through your nurturing care, you’re helping them in their journey of developing compassion.

I encourage all of you to try this with your children, no matter their age. Please share with me the acts of kindness you see. You may see it highlighted in an upcoming W.O.W.!

Shabbat Shalom!

