

*The*  
**Mister**  
**Rogers**  
**Effect**

**7 Secrets** to Bringing Out the Best  
in Yourself and Others  
from America's Beloved Neighbor

**DR. ANITA KNIGHT KUHNLEY**



**BakerBooks**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Books  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kuhnley, Anita Knight, 1980– author.

Title: The Mister Rogers effect : 7 secrets to bringing out the best in yourself and others from America's beloved neighbor / Anita Knight Kuhnley.

Description: Grand Rapids : Baker Books, 2020.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020008738 | ISBN 9781540900296 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Mister Rogers neighborhood (Television program) | Conduct of life. | Rogers, Fred—Influence.

Classification: LCC PN1992.4.R56 K84 2020 | DDC 791.45/72—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020008738>

ISBN 978-1-5409-0113-2 (hardcover)

The author is represented by Hartline Literary Agency.

20 21 22 23 24 25 26 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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*In loving memory of my Mims—  
my grandmother.*

She was also known as Dr. Ida Molina-Zinam. She consistently brought out the best in herself and others. At ninety-one years young, Mims died during the preparation of this manuscript, but her last prayer with me was for the readers of this book and for the positive effect that it would have on them. Thank you for helping me honor her memory.

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Part 1

*Mister  
Rogers*

# A World without Mister Rogers

Many have said, “We need a Mr. Rogers in our world today.” I believe that if you can’t find a Mr. Rogers, you can certainly be one. Internalize his message and be a healing, calming presence. I fail miserably, but I’m trying.

comment on YouTube video “Remembering Mr. Rogers,” a video interview with Charlie Rose, televised in 1994

*T* will never forget the day I had a discussion with my students that would send me on a transformative quest. It was quiet in the large, dark classroom filled with aspiring counselors. I flipped on the fluorescent lights and looked out into the sea of faces. The powerful video clip had ended, and there were a few moments of contemplative silence before snuffles could be heard and tear-filled eyes met mine. After pausing for a moment, I asked, “What was it like for you to watch this video of Mister Rogers advocating

for public television, addressing Senator Pastore, and talking about how to address anger?”

One student raised her hand. With sadness in her voice, she said, “I work in inner-city schools where we see children from all sorts of backgrounds, like single-parent homes, poverty, immigration. The kids I work with don’t have a Mister Rogers. They have no one to teach them how to regulate their emotions, so they turn to violence. When they get angry, they fight.” This was the beginning of a lively discussion.

That evening, while taking my dogs for a walk, I remembered my student’s words: “They have no one.” Some children have no safe adult to talk to; they have the sense that no one cares. They fall victim to an adult with no knowledge of how to regulate their own anger, then consequently turn to violence, grow up, and in turn hurt their own children. As kids, they likely longed for an escape from the violence, for someone to rescue them from people who did not know what to do with their anger—until they, too, adopted their parents’ ways for lack of an alternative.

I knew I had to do something. I set out on a quest to uncover the psychological principles that Rogers used to transform Senator Pastore from his hostile and angry state of mind to a collaborative, friendly, even admiring ally. Mister Rogers skirted past Pastore’s defenses to his vulnerable inner child and engaged in authentic connection (we work at unraveling this mystery in more detail in secret 2).

Rogers offered an alternative—something delightfully incongruent with the path of least resistance. What he offered was hope of a safe world for the young child in all of us and for our children and all the children of tomorrow. Compelled by something beyond myself, I knew I had to use the

research tools that I had acquired through my training and the lens of psychology to unpack the mysterious principles that characterized his life and work. I set out to learn all that Mister Rogers embodied and generously offered to those around him. These findings became the source material I used to unravel the top seven psychological principles Rogers used to make a difference—lest my students and other adults continue to believe there is no hope for future generations.

Armed with my background in qualitative research, a panel of psychological experts, my own psychological training, and my tools—psychological principles, writing, and storytelling—I set out to identify and share the hope that comes with a step-by-step plan that we, Mister Rogers’s television neighbors, can use to build a strong tower and refuge to protect the children (and the inner child in all of us). My work begs them not to believe the lie and reveals that there *is* an alternative; they can work through their anger because there is hope, and there are caring adults who will help them. This theme was one of the most salient concepts that emerged from Mister Rogers’s work.

.....  
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.....

### **Mister Rogers Spoke to the Neglected and Lonely in Us**

Mister Rogers spoke to the neglected inside all of us—the part of us that believes we need to work hard to earn any inkling of love in this world, that believes “just maybe if I can work hard

enough, produce enough, or be good enough at something, then someone will love me.” He reached straight past the expert striver, worker, and producer into a place deep inside of us. He cared deeply for his viewers, or television neighbors as he often referred to us, and he communicated this in every program, wherever he was, and whomever he was with.

His song “It’s You I Like” is a radical message of acceptance and care, and he sang it often, sometimes personalizing the lyrics. When he appeared with comedian Joan Rivers, he improvised the words to match her personality: “It’s you I like, it’s not your jokes.” And for a young Jeffrey Erlanger, who used a wheelchair, he threw in, “It’s not your fancy chair.” Jeffrey and Joan, from such different walks of life, each appeared awestruck for a moment, shocked with such surprise and wonder that they didn’t know what to do. Joan Rivers pulled up Rogers’s cardigan sweater, which she had been wearing, around her head and hid for a moment. Then she quickly removed it and smiled at Rogers as he continued singing straight to her heart.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Jeffrey basked in his moment and giggled and smiled at Mister Rogers.<sup>2</sup>

It is as if Rogers knew that simply becoming familiar with someone was shallow water; instead he always pursued the deep dive. He was not satisfied with small talk or just knowing what was on the outside; he pursued true knowing and intimacy with everyone he met.

Rogers could reach the inner orphan, the lost and lonely, the down and out or the high and mighty. It did not really matter who was in front of him—he wanted to search for the good in that person. Perhaps the day he was bullied as a child for his outer appearance was the day he developed new eyes to search for the best in his neighbors and to truly know

them. This was demonstrated over and over in his interactions with others both privately and publicly. He started each show by inviting his viewers to belong, to be his neighbors, and he ended each show with expressions of care.

### **Finding a Safe Haven—Even on Television**

Mister Rogers was moved by demeaning behavior; he could not bear to see one human being degraded or humiliated by another. It made him angry, and he wanted to do something about it. Rogers told his journalist friend Amy Hollingsworth in their first interview, “I got into television because I saw people throwing pies at each other’s faces, and that to me was such demeaning behavior. And if there’s anything that bothers me, it’s one person demeaning another. That really makes me mad!”<sup>3</sup>

“How can we make goodness attractive?” he wondered. “And how can we encourage quiet reflection rather than noise?”<sup>4</sup> In a world that was sedated by the lullaby of noisy television, Rogers was awake to the knowledge that there was something of virtue in this powerful medium.

This was revolutionary thinking in the early years of television. Fred Rogers raised the bar for quality in children’s television production. He understood that there were children who felt alone in the world and had no safe place to go. He created that haven of safety on his show, giving viewers a pocket of time to watch someone who communicated care for them, who communicated that their feelings were safe with him, and who was there for them.

Before Mister Rogers came along, the slapstick, pie-in-your-face–style comedy abounded on television. But the

difference Rogers offered was meaningful. He'd studied child psychology in college, forming a close relationship with one of his professors, Dr. Margaret McFarland, a child psychologist.<sup>5</sup> Dr. McFarland mentored him for thirty years. Rogers also had the opportunity to hear Anna Freud, an expert in child psychology, known as a child analyst, and the youngest daughter of Sigmund Freud, when she offered a new perspective on a psychological case.<sup>6</sup> Instead of encouraging her audience to study what was wrong about the case or perform the usual analysis of the diagnosis and problems, which is commonplace in clinical circles, she presented a question that fascinated Rogers. Anna Freud encouraged her listeners to examine how someone could go through so much difficulty and still overcome it and thrive.<sup>7</sup>

Rogers also wanted to have eyes that searched for the strengths in others and called them forth to shine. He seemed to have the capacity to transform people in very short interactions, helping them feel safe and comforted.

### **Why We Move Toward or Away from Relationship**

Felt safety is foundational for secure relationships. Mister Rogers understood the importance of this principle and was versed in child psychology and development courtesy of his mentor and guide, Dr. McFarland, whom he credited as “the most major influence on [his] professional life.”<sup>8</sup> One of the most prominent theories of psychological development is called attachment theory.

Children who are neglected do not have an attachment figure, a safe person whom they can count on to be responsive and always be there for them. These children may go through

many different caregivers in the early years of life due to high turnover. This is difficult for a child's physiological attachment system. *Attachment* is a word that will come up throughout this text. Attachment theory—sometimes called *relationship theory*—describes the nature of the bond between a child and his or her caregiver. A child's ability to attach often predicts the state of mind a child will have toward relationships later in life.

Imagine this scenario. A mother sits her baby down in the nursery to play while she and friendly researchers observe. The baby plays with toys spread out on the floor, making eye contact with Mom, who smiles and nods back. The baby resumes playing, then Mom gets up and slips out of the room. The baby is noticeably upset; she cries. One of the researchers sits on the floor, trying to interest the child in a toy, and is eventually successful. Still, the baby is tearful, and she glances back toward the door eagerly awaiting Mom's return.

A few minutes later, Mom returns, and the baby quickly begins crawling toward her. At last, the crying has ceased! Mom picks baby up right away, and after the two hug, the baby quickly calms and is ready for play again. This is the essence of secure attachment style—also known as relationship style—in action!

One of the main purposes of the attachment system is to seek closeness to a caregiver. In order to survive, a baby must stay close to a parent or caregiver in order to get the care he or she needs. A parent provides nourishment for a child's biological needs but also for the child's emotional and psychological needs in most cases. The child goes to the parent for comfort, soothing, food, diaper changes, and

help calming their feelings of distress. Seeking closeness to a parent during childhood—or a relationship partner such as a spouse or a special close friend during adulthood—can be calming and soothing. This relationship where the parent serves as a safe haven during times of distress and a secure base from which the child can launch and explore the world is the ideal outcome.

However, what happens in cases where a child does not have a caregiver they can count on, on a regular and relatively consistent basis? There are four different outcomes (or attachment styles) that typically develop. Three of the four styles are organized (secure, preoccupied, and dismissing), meaning that the child has a predictable strategy of relating to others. The fourth is more chaotic and does not have a predictable organizational pattern. These are the four approaches to relationship:

1. **Secure attachment style**—an organized style characterized by a sense of safety in relationships and the belief that the self is lovable and others are competent to show love.
2. **Preoccupied attachment style**—an organized style characterized by a sense of anxiety with a tendency to get dysfunctionally tangled up in relationships. This style is also characterized by the belief that the self is not worthy of love, but others are competent to love.
3. **Dismissing attachment style**—an organized style characterized by a sense of aloofness or a pushing away of attachment relationships. There is often

a history of rejection and a belief that the self is worthy of love, but others are not competent to show love.

- 4. Unresolved for loss or Unresolved for abuse**—a disorganized style characterized by the belief that the self is not worthy of love and others are not able to love: “The grass is dead on both sides of the fence.” It often stems from a history of loss or abuse.<sup>9</sup>

Let’s explore an example of one of these relational styles in action, the dismissing style. In one scenario, a child may experience rejection. Perhaps a parent is busy due to overwork, is struggling with depression, or is otherwise occupied. This parent then tells the child when the child approaches, “Go play in your room,” “Go play with your siblings,” “Go do the dishes,” “Go outside,” or even, “Go away.” Any iteration of “Get out of here” sends the child an important message. In essence, if the parent *pushes the child away*, the child experiences rejection.

It is important to remember that doing this now and then is unlikely to be problematic. There is some of this in all attachment style histories, even for those that are securely attached. However, when this becomes the pervasive interaction style of the parent, the child is likely to develop a dismissing style of relating to others.

Early experiences leave a stamp on us; though it may not be seen with the eyes, it is there.<sup>10</sup> This rejection leaves children with the idea that they cannot go to other people in times of distress; the underlying belief is that others won’t be able to help. Also, by going to a rejecting parent during times of distress, the child may risk alienating the parent

further. So the child will often turn away from the parent and turn inward or turn toward objects.

After repeated experiences of rejection, children who have learned the dismissing attachment style can learn to mask their emotions and sense of needing and wanting closeness to their caregivers *as early as three years old*. These children do not cry when seeing their parents leave them alone in a nursery. Their play slows, and when the parent returns, they do not go to the parent. Instead, their play picks back up. This may be deceiving since they do not appear distressed—though they still experience the physiological markers of distress. Heart rate and blood pressure may increase, just like in the kids who are screaming their heads off and crawling after their parents. They mask these feelings for survival. Like a duck flailing its legs under the water but appearing to smoothly sail across the lake, these children experience inner tumult but appear unfazed on the surface.

Children who exhibit the dismissing attachment style may also learn to dismiss their own feelings, as well as other relationships, and turn toward things. Some of my clients with this style of attachment may have elaborate collections and be oriented toward things rather than people. They are sometimes thought of by peers and family members as a “lone wolf.” There are several other insecure styles that can develop with repeated experiences in relationships that communicate in one way or another, “Your feelings are not important. Other people matter more than you. Reaching out to others or being vulnerable will earn you nothing but hurt or rejection.” It is beyond the scope of this text to explore in detail each style.<sup>11</sup> Insecure relational

patterns develop in response to rejection to keep a child safe from the crudeness of these realities in their early relationships.

### **Mister Rogers Offered the Hope of a Different World**

Fred Rogers presented something that made the difficulties of reality easier to bear. He countered the myths that children often hear. Maybe you were told that children are to be seen and not heard, meaning what you have to say, think, or feel does not really matter. This, and messages like it, communicate that feelings do not matter unless they are positive.

In a world asleep to the treasures of children, and our own inner child, Mister Rogers gently roused us to wakefulness through his culturally incongruent messages: He taught us that it is okay to talk about feelings, even unpleasant ones. He taught that children matter, and the inner child in all of us is important to nurture. He taught that feelings are both mentionable and manageable. These and other important healing messages often allowed him to have a transformative effect on his neighbors in just minutes. Even though Mister Rogers is no longer with us, there is a bit of him in all of us who grew with the neighborhood. We have the ability to keep the love and care he shared with us alive so the world never has to know a world without Rogers's legacy. In the pages to come, we will explore some key strategies to do just that.

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## The Quest for Mister Rogers's Secrets

I grew up watching *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* on TV, and I remember Mister Rogers's gentle voice and kind eyes. I remember hearing him sing about the beautiful day in the neighborhood or what to do with the mad that you feel. I *learned* from Mister Rogers. As an adult, I thought the messages he put into the world need to be made accessible to anyone who wants to learn more about how to have such an influence. But how could we learn key principles from Rogers, small ways to make a big difference for ourselves and those around us?

I was inspired by my students and the thought of the neglected, the lonely, and the orphaned. I was inspired by what Mister Rogers had to teach all of us. The task set before me was important: to uncover these key principles, write about Rogers's work, and help parents, grandparents, counselors, coaches, teachers, and others keep his influence alive! Our feelings are mentionable and manageable, and people do not have to turn to violence because their anger is out of control, or to suicide because their pain is unrelenting. Mister Rogers firmly believed that by helping people learn how to manage painful feelings like anger and sadness, we could make their tomorrows safer.

This idea of managing emotions prompted me to search my memory for incidents where I experienced children (of all ages) who were unable to regulate their anger. Unfortunately, I had plenty of these memories. For example, I recalled working at a substance abuse rehabilitation facility for adolescent males. Each young man at the facility had turned to drugs and alcohol and other destructive behaviors (such

as maxing out Mom’s credit card on thirty thousand dollars’ worth of virtual equipment for video games like World of Warcraft) as a short-term way to numb the pain, emptiness, anger, and loneliness in their lives. After thinking through these examples, I asked myself, what if we could go back to Mister Rogers’s lessons and learn a new way to deal with our emotions? A way that would help us not only address our feelings but achieve even more authentic connection and intimacy because of our painful feelings? A way to cultivate gratitude as a lifestyle?

These are some of the questions I studied, and the answers I found may surprise you. They are contained within the seven key principles in this text. Although the psychological principles informing his work were not limited to these seven secrets alone, this book explores seven of the keys that emerged as themes throughout his work.

1. Listen First
2. Validate Feelings
3. Pause and Think
4. Show Gratitude
5. Develop Empathy
6. Practice Acceptance
7. Establish Security

Mister Rogers also valued inquiry and wonder, so in honor of the inquisitive man, there is a brief concept at the end of each chapter that invites you to reflect on what you’ve learned, which as Rogers would say “is really more important than all the text.”<sup>12</sup> These sections, which are

designed to nourish the appetite of the hungry soul while also leaving a hunger for more, are called “A Concept to Contemplate.”

Consider this an escape from all the noise that threatens the destruction of the imagination and an invitation to

one of the highest expressions of the human spirit: making a difference by being who you really are. Mister Rogers invited us to be who we really are; he invited us to be our best selves with his unwavering gaze on what was good in everyone he met. His lessons continue to beckon us to take a peek at our neighbors

through this lens of kindness and let the darkness disappear into a flash of light.

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## **Rub It In**

When I was growing up as an oldest child of four, it was often incumbent upon me to take care of my younger siblings. A bright spot on many days was my baby brother’s humor. You see, Paul had very kissable cheeks as babies often do, and I would kiss them often. One day when he was about four, after I had given him some kisses, I saw him rubbing his cheek. I said, “Aw, Paul, are you wiping off my kisses?” He looked at me with great sincerity, his eyes wide as he responded, “I am not wiping them off, I am rubbing them in!”

I smile every time I think of that memory! Paul does not share my love for that story, but he gave me permission to tell

it—but not without reminding me it is important to make sure kisses are not wet or slobbery, as one would expect nothing less from a baby brother turned adult. His incredible emotional intelligence, insight, and sweet words from that moment continue to nourish my heart. When I find something I admire in someone, I often let them know I hope they rub off on me. But in the words of my brother, I would like to rub Mister Rogers *in* to my soul. I would like more of what he offered the world in me and those I meet. This book is an invitation to, as Paul might say, *rub it in*. To embrace questions as they are: invitations to wonder rather than be consumed. Mister Rogers beckons us to savor and enjoy questions rather than just pursue answers. As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke said,

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. . . . Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.<sup>13</sup>

There will never be anyone just like Mister Rogers. He wanted each of us to remember that there is no one else in the world like you or me; we are all one of a kind. In remembering what Mister Rogers taught us, we can keep a bit of the love and expressions of care he shared with us by paying them forward. The principles and concepts to contemplate are at times heartwarming and at other times unsettling as they invite us to journey toward a depth of knowing and being known. So, neighbor, enjoy the journey along the path of keeping Mister Rogers's legacy alive in our neighborhoods!

**A CONCEPT TO CONTEMPLATE**

Mister Rogers had a way of transforming everyone he met into a neighbor—a treasured friend. He used authentic care, demonstrated in part by seven secrets—careful listening, validation of emotions, reflection, gratitude, empathy, acceptance, and expressions of care—to form lasting, loving relationships with people of all ages. You can too.