

Mr. Rogers on Men In Child Care

Eight weeks ago our son, Jim, and his wife, Tory, had their first child: Alexander Hughes Rogers. I couldn't help but think what a difference one generation had made. Jim was in the delivery room the whole time with Tory; and, since Tory had a caesarian section, Alexander went directly from the womb to his father's chest. Jim was the first person in this whole world to hold that baby in his arms.

It certainly wasn't like that when Jim was born about 30 years ago. I wasn't invited to the delivery. I was only allowed a glimpse of him all wrapped up in a blanket in a nurse's arms behind a glass window. What's more, when I was born, my father's only job was to give out the cigars and candy — cigars for the men and candy for the women.

Alexander is doing very well, cared for by both his mother and father who share responsibility for his feeding, rocking, diapering, cooking, laundry. That doesn't mean that I didn't do those things too, when Jim was little — and my father, when I was little. It's just that 50 years ago, the image of father was primarily that of provider and disciplinarian. Most men didn't seem to want the outside world to know that they could be gentle and caring with children. Often though, gentleness and caregiving seemed an important part of who they were.

The Men Who Cared for Me

My father was strong and confident and he was nurturing. There's an old family story which one of my parents' friends used to tell me. She said, "Freddie, you were a colicky baby, and you cried a lot. It was hard to get you to sleep. But when your father came home from work, he'd take you in his arms and go to the rocking chair. In a matter of minutes you'd be sound asleep — and *he* would be, too."

Dad's father was a steel worker and died when I was only six years old. When Granddad Rogers died, my father's nurturing came through in another way — when I saw him cry. Many years later when Dad himself died, I remembered his tears years before. It seemed all right for me to cry, too.

My other grandfather lived a long time, so I got to know him well. He was an industrious person and loved to start things. When he'd get them going well, he'd sell them, so he could buy something else and help build it up. When he retired, he lived out in the country where there were stone walls which I loved to climb. When my mother or my grandmother saw me on the stones and tried to save me from what they saw as a certain fall, my grandfather would

say, "Let the kid walk on the wall. He's got to learn to do things for himself." I loved that grandfather for trusting me and for caring about me in a way which let me know that I was far from fragile.

When I was five years old, a teenager named George came to live with us. His mother had died, and his father couldn't take care of him; that's why he came to our home and stayed with us through all of my childhood. He probably wouldn't have thought of himself as a child-care worker, but he was 12 years older than I and introduced me to the things he liked: music, photography, and airplanes. I call that care. By the time I was in high school, he had become a jazz drummer and an airplane pilot, and he taught me to fly. George went on to become one of a select group of black pilots who taught all the aviation courses at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama during World War II.

There was also Reverend McKee, who made church seem like such a welcoming place, and our neighbor, Mr. Frampton, who owned the jewelry store and was much more interested in showing things to us young people than selling them to the older ones.

Those are some of the men I consider as caregivers in my childhood. I think often of how

their industry, dedication, graciousness, and strengths influenced me, and how I integrated their care into the person I became.

The Roots of Nurturing

There's a nurturing element in all human beings that comes from having been nurtured ourselves. Men come to that as honestly as women do because of the care we have been given throughout our growing up. Anyone who nurtured us planted the seeds of our capacity to nurture others in our own ways.

Some of us are fortunate to have had warmth and love from a consistent caregiver right from the start — and then continuing care from many other people along the way. Even for those who didn't have that kind of beginning and continual reinforcement, there's strong evidence now to show that just *one* person who helps a child feel good about who he or she is can make all the difference. That loving boost from just one person can give a child the inner strength to emerge from high-risk beginnings and move towards becoming a competent caring adult — and one who can be nurturing to others.

What is the typical pattern of what we received from our fathers or other significant men in our lives? Because of young children's needs, a father's relationship with his baby is fashioned largely after a so-called "mothering" model. The infant's father comforts, soothes, and cares for bodily needs.

As the child gets older, though, there is a differentiation between what fathers and

mothers give. In their relationship with older children, fathers tend to emphasize expectation and encourage independence. Fathers are eager to teach their children how to tie their shoes, how to comb their hair and brush their teeth, how to take care of themselves. Mothers do those things, but fathers seem to invest a great deal more energy in helping their children learn those tasks.

A boy comes to learn that a father's care is similar but different from a mother's, and that helps him feel secure about developing caring ways in his own relationships. Likewise, a girl begins to learn what to expect of men through her experiences with her father. Of course, as children start to go beyond the home, they meet other men (and other women) who enlarge their picture of who they can be and what they can become.

Men in Professional Child Care

I firmly believe that our children — both boys and girls — benefit in important ways from experiencing care-giving from men in day care centers, pre-schools, and early elementary schools. Institutional child care (child welfare as it was called) was founded primarily by men in the 1800s. A hundred years later women began taking a more active part, and ever since have dominated most of the fields of child caring.

Even when men enter this profession nowadays, the literature tells us that many leave the jobs that bring them in direct interaction with children, largely because of low salaries. Losing a caring male

teacher, though, may be even more devastating for many children at child-care centers because they're often from one-parent families where fathers are absent. The high turnover rate of men caregivers tends to reinforce the pattern of male instability in their lives. I hope this can change, because there are men who want to work with children and are gifted at doing so.

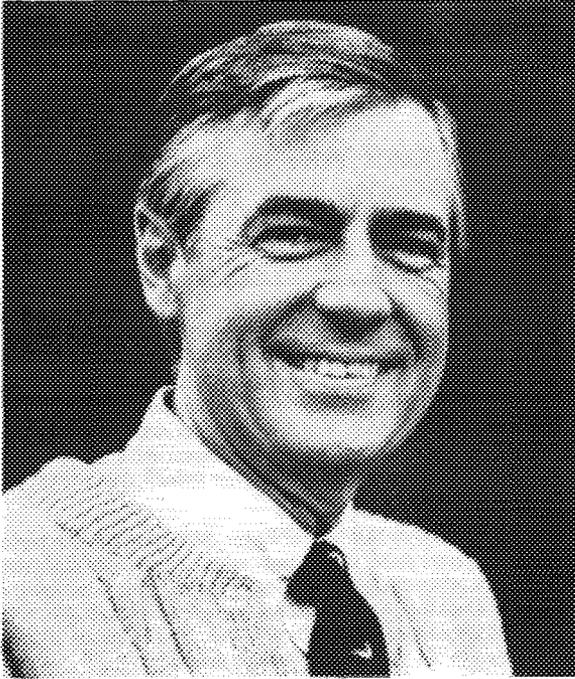
To encourage men in professional child care, we certainly need to offer them more financial incentives. Before that can happen, though, I believe we need to lay a foundation by validating something that has always been a part of maleness: the capacity in men for caring for children and for caring about childhood.

Some Fathers Who Care

Recently, I came to have renewed respect for the special ways men can nurture from some of the discussions I've had with fathers whose children have cancer. For our most recent project with the American Cancer Society, I have been talking with parents in various cities in an effort to understand what it's like to have a child or to have had a child with cancer.

One father of a 15-month-old with Wilms' tumor told me, "We were diagnosed about as early as anyone can be diagnosed." The pronoun "we" was so natural for him. He's obviously able to feel for his son.

There also was a Mexican-American father who said, "I used to consider myself to be a brave and macho type. But



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when my child got sick, it just tore my heart. At that, he began sobbing, and for a long while he couldn't continue speaking. He taught me a lot about real bravery that day: anyone who is able to express his feelings in such an open way is, in my opinion, very brave.

Another father I talked with, Mr. K, is a teacher in an elementary school. His empathy had made a significant difference in the life of one of his students. As a proud father, he displays photos of his children on his desk, and often students will ask about them. When they point to Rachel and ask how old she is, he is open about telling them that she died two years ago from leukemia. Most of the students react awkwardly or recoil. That was not the case for one boy, Richard, who continued the

conversation, adding that his mother had died of leukemia, too, and had become bald from chemotherapy. Up to that point, Richard had never talked to anyone outside of the family or physicians about his mother.

Through Mr. K's caring responses, Richard must have sensed it was safe to talk about some of his painful feelings. He went on to say how hard it was watching his mother's decline. The medication began to affect her personality. She became unhappy, and so did he. Now he missed her a great deal. Imagine how helpful it must have been for that boy to sense that it was all right to talk about his feelings, and to know it was permissible to feel hurt, upset, and sad. What an important lesson to learn from another male!

Mr. K described Richard as a loner, and he surmised that quality stemmed from the boy's difficulties dealing with his feelings about his mother. Mr. K's relationship must have meant a great deal to Richard because he began sharing more, even showing Mr. K essays he wrote for other classes and asking for his comments. I'd venture a guess that having someone like Mr. K in his life can help Richard begin to find the inner strengths he'll need to make peace with his mother's death and to reach out for other new, satisfying relationships in his life.

The Care We Can Give One Another

As men we have countless opportunities to nurture children — whether we're grandfathers, fathers, big brothers, relatives, friends, teachers, or professional child-care givers. The choices about how we men express our care to children come from a deep sense of who we are, from our willingness to share our honest selves with them, and from our willingness to let them grow in their own healthy ways. As a man or as a woman, giving in those ways is participating in child care. As far as I'm concerned, there's no greater gift any of us can ever give — to anyone of any age — than the gift of our honest self.

Fred Rogers is creator and host of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, the longest running children's program on Public Broadcasting. This article is based on a speech Fred Rogers delivered at the Yale University Child Development Center in December, 1988.

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