

Catching Neighborliness

FRED ROGERS
Family Communications, Inc., Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

There's an old Quaker saying that character is caught, not taught. That's why I'm especially careful when I use the term "religious education." Education often means learning a skill and practicing it. But of course, children do not develop into caring human beings merely by memorizing biblical passages, hearing stories like The Good Samaritan, or filling in workbook sheets about New Testament heroes.

Neighborliness is caught, not taught. Certainly the most important people from whom children "catch" such traits are the primary adults in their family. In fact, we named our company Family Communications, Inc., because family relationships are the key to a child's development, and we hope that what we offer through our television program, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood,* and our other materials will help foster healthy communication between parents and children.

As children grow, they develop relationships with people outside the home—in their neighborhood, at school, and at church. The adults whom children come to know through the church, especially the ministers and their church school teachers, can be very important role models for their lives.

Two neighborly traits which I believe are essential for children to "catch" are empathy and forgiveness. Understanding how these are nurtured in a family may

give you added foundation for finding your own ways to help children become "neighborly."

In one family where the husband had to spend the weekdays away from home, the wife often felt sad and lonely. Her two young children kept her busy, and, for the most part, she was able to look after them cheerfully. One evening, though, her three-year-old son leaned up against the chair where she was sitting, and asked, "Are you sad, Mom?"

"Yes," she said, realizing her loneliness must have been showing. "I miss your dad when he's away."

"I miss my dad, too," said the boy. "We miss him together."

In another family, the mother was sad because a friend had died in an accident—a friend her four-year-old had never met. When her little girl asked her one day why she was sad, she explained what had happened. Her daughter nodded thoughtfully. "I'll be sad with you," she said.

Children's sensitivity to the moods of their caregivers begins very early. Even babies tend to react differently to the sight of a solemn face or a smiling one. But though children may seem to pick up particularly quickly on moods of anxiety or sadness, they're usually just as alert to moods of joy and excitement. What many parents find remarkable, though, is the extent to which

their young children seem both eager and able to share the feelings of the people they love—and the natural way children will often take on the role of the comforter.

Toddlers may become very concerned at a baby's crying, whether or not it's a baby they know. They may want to go over to the baby and pat it, talk to it, make the crying stop. Their reaction may partly be anxiety, but I believe it also shows the beginnings of kindness and demonstrates a tendency almost all children share as they grow: the natural inclination to become the doers, by themselves, of the things that were earlier done for them.

You can see this inclination working in many ways. For instance, there comes a time even in the first year of life when most babies will try to feed the people who have been feeding them. This usually happens long before babies can feed themselves. What they offer their caregivers to eat may not be very appetizing—the nipple on a bottle, or a soggy piece of cookie. Parents certainly don't need to feel obliged to eat what's offered, but it's important that the offer itself be appreciated. It is, after all, an act of giving, and a parent's reaction of disgust may seem to a child to be a reaction to the act rather than to the gift itself.

You can also see the urge to become the doer as children begin finding ways to bring themselves pleasure. They may seek out a chair where they have often been held on a lap and clamber up to sit on it by themselves. They may rock back and forth there, as they have been rocked, or sing to themselves as they have been sung to. Many children will hold their dolls or teddies almost exactly as they, themselves, were held, and most parents at one time or another have overheard a child talking to such toys in the same loving or scolding words that they themselves have used.

The way those two children with sad mothers behaved makes me think that it's not only simple skills that grow out of the early inclination to become the doer. When you combine that natural inclination with a sensitivity to other people's feelings and moods, you may be close to the origins of valuable human attributes such as generosity, altruism, and compassion. Those are big words, but it's my belief that they grow from small acts early in life—the acts of our first caregivers that set the patterns for the kinds of care that we, in our turn, will become capable of giving.

People who are particularly sensitive to the feelings of others run the risk of not being considered strong, and most of us, I believe, admire strength. It's something we tend to respect in others, desire for ourselves, and wish for our children. Sometimes, though, I wonder if we confuse strength with aggression, or even violence. One of the signs of this confusion is the way many people seem to consider strength an appropriate attribute of men, and gentleness a quality that women should possess. That, to me, seems very far from the truth. We all need the capacity for both strength and gentleness. The opposite of strength isn't gentleness but weakness, and the opposite of gentleness isn't strength but violence.

One parent writes: "My four-year-old son has hemophilia complicated by an inhibitor that renders today's treatment ineffective. When he watches television, the boys and men are stereotyped as very aggressive and physical. Our son needs to know that he can be masculine and gentle at the same time." It was this thoughtful letter that started me thinking about gentleness and strength. Not only does that boy need to know that men can be gentle and still be men, but also that he and his family will need strength of many kinds as they cope with his disability.

Strength is neither male or female; but it is, quite simply, one of the finest characteristics that any human being can possess.

Just as many people seem to think that there is something especially female about gentleness, so they seem to think that only girls and women should cry. There are just as many who disagree, however, and I'm certainly one who shares the viewpoint expressed by this mother: "Being the mother of a boy I have always been concerned about the fact that if he cries, people will call him a sissy. I feel that my son has as much right to cry if he is hurt or if one of his toys gets broken, as a girl does. It has always annoyed me that people have such a double standard."

Confronting our feelings and giving them appropriate expression always takes strength, not weakness. It takes strength to acknowledge our anger, and sometimes more strength yet to curb the aggressive urges anger may bring and to channel them into non-violent outlets. It takes strength to face our sadness and to grieve and to let our grief and our anger flow in tears when they need to. It takes strength to talk about our feelings and to reach out for help and comfort when we need it. There is no "masculine" or "feminine" when it comes to anger or sorrow, and certainly no weakness in expressing feelings that are human and common to us all. Yes, it takes strength to cry.

I am heartened by the way double standards are giving way in many arenas where there were stereotypical ideas of what men " should" do and what women

"should" do. As I look around these days, I can see that we, as a society, are growing in some really important ways. Not long ago a young child wrote to say: "We watch your show a lot. We watched your show about manholes. You only said men can go in manholes. My sister and I think that women can go in manholes, too."

You bet they can—just as women can be strong and men can be gentle, and both can cry.

The capacity to forgive is another character trait that can run afoul of widespread misinterpretations of strength—interpretations that seem to value the harboring of grudges and the wreaking of revenge.

Forgiveness is a strange thing. It can sometimes be easier to forgive our enemies than it is our friends. It can be hardest of all to forgive people we love. Like all of life's important coping skills, the ability to forgive and the capacity to let go of resentments most likely take root very early in our lives. I believe forgiveness is as important to our emotional well-being as being able to wait for what we want or to cope with stress.

A father told us of an experience he had with his four-year-old son. Something the boy wanted to happen didn't happen, and in a fit of angry disappointment he ran off sobbing to his bedroom and slammed the door. His father followed to comfort him. "It just isn't fair!" the boy complained through his tears. "It isn't fair!" Then, even before his father could begin finding words of consolation, the boy wiped away his tears with the back of his hand, took in a long, uneven breath, and said, "But then I guess *life* isn't fair, is it Dad?"

"Now, that's a big philosophical question," that father remarked as he recalled the incident. "I was taken aback to hear it from a four-year-old and I was somewhat at a loss for what to reply. I think I said that the things that happen to us in life don't always seem fair; that there are hard times as well as easy, fun times; and that's the way life goes for all of us. I remember my

wife and myself worrying that our son was turning into a very young cynic. But he's growing up now with a sunny, optimistic disposition, so perhaps our fears were groundless. He might just have been expressing a sort of forgiveness toward life, beginning to accept it the way it is, without harboring a grudge or thinking the world was out to deceive and disappoint him. I really don't know what was going on in his mind right then, and naturally he's forgotten the incident altogether."

Forgiving and forgetting are often paired together, but the one certainly doesn't necessarily follow the other. Some injuries, real or imagined, we may never be able to forget even though we say we've forgiven them. Other injuries we may never even be able to say that we forgive. Those are the ones, it seems to me, most likely to involve people we've loved, and so I'm inclined to look at what our experiences of forgiveness may have been like from the first people who loved us.

The first time we required forgiveness, we probably did something we shouldn't have when our closest grown-ups thought we should have known better—and we made someone angry. We were to blame. What did the first brush with blame begin to teach us?

If we were fortunate, we began to learn that "to err is human": even good people sometimes do bad things. Errors might mean corrections, apologies, repairs, but they didn't mean that we, as a person, were a bad person in the sight of those we loved. The second thing we learned (if we were fortunate) was that having someone we loved get mad at us did not mean that person had stopped loving us; we had their *unconditional* love, and that meant we would have their forgiveness, too.

Not all children are so fortunate. Some hear, again and again, that *they* are bad, not just what they've done. They're told they're "always breaking things," or "always spoiling things," and that's how they come to think of themselves: as spoilers and breakers. They grow with little sense of forgiveness, and they grow fearful of their parents' displeasure and unsure of their parents' love—unsure deep down that they, themselves, are even lovable to begin with.

Sad to say, there are even less fortunate children still, and statistics tell us they are many. These are children born to parents who are unable or unwilling to care for them. Already from the time they are nursing or sucking from a bottle, they can see in their reluctant caregivers' eyes that they are one too many a mouth to feed, one too many a body to look after. Children like that don't have to do anything "bad" to get blamed; they get no forgiveness simply for having been born. For these children, an early sense of love and forgiveness has to come from someone else, and happily it often does—as it does for many children who grow through otherwise unforgiving childhoods.

When it comes to forgiveness, there are fortunate and unfortunate parents, too. The fortunate ones are those who find they have forgiving children. There are times when all parents need their children's forgiveness. We can never meet all our children's hopes and expectations, and so we are bound to disappoint them. We will always make some hasty promises that we can't keep. Many of us will find that our children have a way of making us feel guilty about our shortcomings, and some of us will find ourselves angry at our children for doing so—and find ourselves behaving as if it were our children who were to blame. All of us, almost without exception, will be judged by our children once they realize we're not the infallible, omnipotent

creatures they once thought we were, but are, instead, mere mortals doing the best we can.

Life *isn't* always fair, as that four-year-old was coming to realize, and he, like most children, sooner or later probably came to realize that parents aren't always fair either. There's nothing unnatural about children feeling resentments of many kinds toward their parents. Coming to terms in our own ways with resentments and disappointments of many kinds is a universal and important part of growing up. There are, after all, lots of dreams we have as we grow that we'll never see come true.

Sometimes we have to give up our dreams because they were unrealistic and beyond our capabilities. A young friend of mine began dancing when she was six and dreamed of being a prima ballerina. She had unusual talent and worked hard at it, with success, for fourteen years. Just recently, she decided to give up dance as

a career. It was a tearful and painful decision, but she and her family talked it over and concluded that reaching the top ranks wasn't within her grasp. Her disappointment and grief were real.

A grown-up friend dreamed of going to medical school when he was young. He worked in his father's small auto repair shop all the time he was growing up, but he knew that one day he was going to be a doctor. That dream never came true. When he was finishing high school, his father had a heart attack, and my friend took over the auto repair business to support the family. That's still what he does today.

"Sure, I'd like to have been a doctor," he says, "but what's a person to do? It was tough to let go of that dream, but I've found a lot of satisfaction in my work, even though I didn't think life would work out this way."

A mother with a disabling illness writes: "I have a beautiful six-year-old daughter and a wonderful husband. But for four years, my little girl has been a victim of my illness. Although she is used to my being ill, I'm not, and I'm filled with guilt and sorrow over how I have messed up her life. There are so many things I had planned for when I had a child, so many things that I wanted to show her and do with her. Now all that has changed, and it is so hard for the whole family. My husband has to carry twice his share of the load and give up so much."

Disappointment, sorrow, guilt, and, I'm sure, times of anger are things that that dancer, that mechanic, and that mother know a lot about. So does each of us, each in our own way, and how we deal with the big disappointments in life depends a great deal on how the people who loved us helped us deal with smaller disappointments when we were little. Perhaps we couldn't go to the circus because we were sick. Perhaps we didn't get the present we wanted for our birthday. Perhaps we lost a race we had tried so hard to win. If we were fortunate, the people close to us let us know they understood our feelings, let us know we were still loved, and helped us through our disappointment into better times beyond.

It sounds like the six-year-old daughter of the mother who wrote is growing up in a loving family. Her mother certainly cares deeply about her, and her father seems to be accepting the extra burdens that have come his way, as well as his own disappointments. Through the hard years ahead, that child may grow up with some of the reassurances we all need when life seems unfair.

How great it is when we come to know that times of disappointment can be followed by times of fulfillment; that sorrow can be followed by joy; that guilt over falling short of our ideals

can be replaced by pride in doing all that we can; and that anger can be channeled into creative outlets that may lead to unexpected achievements...and other dreams that we can make come true!

For parents, one of life's bitterest disappointments can be not having the wherewithal to give their children what they'd like to be able to give them, and even, sometimes, what their children *need.*

"Can I have another helping?" "No, there isn't enough food."

"Can I have a toy like Jimmy's?" "No, there isn't enough money."

"Can I have a room of my own?" "No, there isn't enough space."

To have to tell a child, "No, there isn't enough," can be a painful necessity for parents. It can lead to feelings of failure and guilt and wonderings if we are worthy parents at all. Those can be hard feelings to live with, no matter how we tell ourselves that our having to say "no" to our children is part of their real world—and ours.

Truly deprived children soon become aware of their deprivation, but how they feel about it is quite another matter. They may feel sad...or hopeful...or, like one five-year-old in a family day-care center, clearly fearful. This little girl came from a home where there was seldom enough to eat, and on her first day at the center the mid-morning snack was a plate of buttered toast squares. She was given the plateful first, and when the woman in charge asked her to take a square and pass the rest along, the girl burst out crying and hung on to the plate with both hands. For once in her life she had enough, and yet she was to be deprived again!

Children's attitudes toward not having enough (as toward almost everything!) emerge from the attitudes of their first and closest caregivers. If those caregivers are bitter and resentful, a child may come to see the world and the people in it as hostile. If they blame the child for their deprivation—"You're just one more mouth to feed!"—that child may grow with guilt and a sense of being a burden to everyone. On the other hand if these caregivers can—through the emotional, spiritual, and physical nourishment of others—begin to understand their own worth, they will be able to pass on to their children a sense of well-being and the belief that good things are possible even when times are hard. It takes a certain amount of hope in order to be able to believe that life is worth the effort of living.

Empathy...forgiveness.... The character traits we define as desirable for our children to develop say so much about our own value systems. People tend to develop passionate commitments to the values they inherit or acquire, and judging from our mail, many parents feel they are waging a losing battle to keep the values they care about central in their children's lives. The influence of the larger world of friends and television and society seems too strong to combat.

One mother writes: "In our neighborhood there are eleven children who play together. They often play 'Hulk,' 'Charlie's Angels,' or 'Dukes of Hazzard'—which means the boys play like monsters and crash up their cars, while the little girls prance around in a sensuous fashion capturing them. I still want to see my little girls playing with dolls and dishes.

"One day our four-year-old was drinking a glass of water and said, 'Should I pretend this is beer, whiskey, wine, or champagne?' We're not drinkers and were amazed by her worldly knowledge. Some of the children my ten-year-old plays with have a vocabulary of sex words that

almost exceeds mine, even though they come from nice homes and good parents, and we've known them since they were babies.

"How do I explain my concern without coming off as a prude or as self-righteous?"

Several things come to mind as I think about that mother's question: We're

never going to look "perfect" to the people we know—not to our parents, not to our friends, and not to our children. The more we can accept that, the more we're likely to feel comfortable and confident with our own values and beliefs. No two people will ever have the same values, and even two people with very similar values may express them quite differently. Comparing ourselves to others is one way of finding out who we are and what we want to be. It's also a way of appreciating other people's differences.

Certainly, the desire to be like the people they love shapes children's values in their earliest years. They want to be loved in return by those people, so they try to please them. They find that some of the things they do produce this pleasure, and others don't. Those that do begin to give rise to a child's set of values. During the first years of life, the fear of losing love can be a very powerful influence.

A little later, children long to be liked and admired by their friends: to be accepted. They may find that what it takes to be accepted by their friends is at odds with what it takes to be loved by their family. The conflict can bring hard choices for a child. We are seldom able to "throw away" values we held when we were young, even if we consciously reject them for a time in favor of new ones. Early values have a way of persisting. Sometimes they cause us sadness, anger, and guilt. Often, though, they give us the strength, courage, and compassion we all need during life's harder moments.

Our children will go their own ways and be their own selves. They will find values of their own in addition to the ones they take from us. It may be painful for us to see them modifying or even rejecting ideas that were important to us and adopting others that could never be comfortable for us. Such times may produce conflict, but out of that conflict can come the reinforcement of other important values.

One is belief in the value of standing up for who we are. When our children are small, we can set those limits on their behavior that we feel are appropriate. Later, as our children move away from us and set their own limits, we lose this control. Nonetheless, we can, in our own lives, go on trying to be true to who we are, what we believe, and how we feel. Seeing us do this, our children, particularly at times when they are in value conflict with us, can learn the courage to stand up for who they have become.

Another is a belief in the value of tolerance and the awareness that people who disagree over even the things they hold dear can live together in love and respect for one another.

Yet another is tolerance of a different kind—tolerance for people at times when they fail to live up to their values. We all have such times. Such times are commonplace in early childhood, and how parents react to them is probably critical in determining how their children will feel about such lapses in themselves and others later on.

In early childhood, a child's values are still unformed and often seemingly inconsistent. It can be hard to believe that the child who says "I hate you!" is the same child who says "I love you!" How can the child who bit his baby sister

yesterday be the same one who holds her so tenderly today? And this child who is usually so willing to share...suddenly she's become fiercely possessive. How can it be?

Such apparent changes in character can be perplexing for parents—perplexing and sometimes upsetting when the "darker" side of a child seems to be eclipsing an otherwise bright and sunny disposition. These shifts often trouble children themselves. "Sometimes I clean up my room when I'm told to," a young boy wrote us, "but other times I just don't want to clean up my room and I cry a lot." Another boy told us about mornings when he was happy to get up and other mornings when he didn't want to get up at all. "What can I do so that I'll feel like getting up every morning?" he wondered.

As grown-ups, most of us have come to take for granted that we're going to have "moods." There are times when we need to be with people, and there are other times when we need to be by ourselves. Some mornings we feel full of energy, and the world seems full of promise; other mornings we're lethargic, and the world seems hardly worth getting up for. Some days we're glad to be who we are...and some days we're not.

Accounting for our moods and learning to control them are ongoing tasks. As we grow and change, our life's events and circumstances change, too—and so do our moods. The ups and downs we were subject to five years ago are not necessarily the same ones we feel today. These changing patterns are particularly true for young children for whom internal and external changes occur dramatically and frequently. When you think of all the new experiences that a child is likely to have between birth and the first day in school...well, it's little wonder that children can sometimes be found wondering, "Who am I, anyhow?"—just as parents may scratch their heads and wonder where this "new" child came from all of a sudden, and what became of the "old" one they were used to.

Amidst all this change, there are at least two kinds of stability that parents often strive for—for themselves as well as for their children. The first is the stability of even-temperedness. As soon as dark moods surface somewhere within the family group, they're chased away, cut short, or denied altogether; when you're angry, the thing to do is to swallow your anger. When you're sad, hold back your tears and keep a stiff upper lip. When you're discouraged or depressed, take a deep breath and keep slogging ahead...with a smile.

To stifle our emotions in this way is a tough road, and one of the reasons it's so tough is that it leads in a direction that's contrary to the natural tendencies of human nature. Though it may work for some people and some families, I believe the risks are certainly at least equal to the possible benefits.

A friend of ours remembers the times in summer he spent with his grandmother—good times, but in some ways difficult times, too:

"Gran was loving, no doubt about that," our friend told us, "but she was tough. She'd been widowed twice and in later life came to be independent and proud of it. She had no time for what she called 'idle regrets' and certainly no time for tears. She had no use for sulky moods or angry outbursts, either, and whenever

my dark side would get the best of me for one reason or another, she'd look at me sternly and

say, ‘There’s that bad little boy again. You know I don’t like him. I want him to go away right now!’

“After spending a couple of weeks with Gran, I’d actually start to see myself as two people—one good and happy, the other bad and moody. The bad one got to be scary because I couldn’t always control him, and he was sure to make Gran displeased. But I worked hard at staying the good, happy child Gran liked, and she and I were close until she died. But you know, there were whole parts of myself and my life I never felt I could share with her. When I wanted to talk about feelings, it had to be with someone else.”

There’s the risk: important feelings may go untalked about. That’s especially true for young children whose closest caregivers see even-temperedness as stability. When you have to stifle your feelings for fear of getting upset and upsetting the people you love, who can you talk to, and what *does* become of those emotions?

A different kind of stability comes from allowing ourselves and our children to express the full range of human feelings. It comes from believing—and encouraging our children to believe—that having dark sides as well as bright sides is part of anyone’s being a whole person, and it comes from trusting the people we love to accept our dark sides while helping us manage them.

That can be a tough road, too; such trust and acceptance is often not only elusive but sometimes the source of deceptions and disappointments as well. But I believe this road is a road toward growth in addition to stability. For children, it can be an avenue to finding out so much they need to know about who they are and what they can become. What’s more, that road can lead us, when we’re young, to one of the most important discoveries of all: that people can like us just the way we are—our dark sides, our bright sides, and all our other sides as well.