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What Mr. Rogers Could Have Taught Michael Jackson

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BODY:

IT was a tremendous incongruity that the month of February began with a frenzy of television specials about Michael Jackson, the world's oldest child, and ended with the death of **Fred Rogers**, who devoted his life to helping children grow up.

Sitting in his tree in his own private Neighborhood of Make Believe, telling an interviewer that he intends to stay a kid forever, Mr. Jackson, 44, represents the extreme end of the boomer notion of everlasting childhood. There are apparently no limits in Mr. Jackson's life, no divisions between childhood and adulthood, fantasy and reality, as he rides his choo-choo train around his Disneyland-like estate, invites children for sleepovers in his bedroom and playfully dangles his veiled baby son from a hotel balcony.

But, in one of the most disturbing segments of ABC's "Living With Michael Jackson" (the British-made special that started it all), Mr. Jackson tearfully repeated his allegations that, as a child, he was beaten and ridiculed by his father, Joe. Watching that, many viewers who had tuned in for a freak show came away instead with new sympathy for the embattled and cosmetically mutilated King of Pop. Mr. Jackson seems to be suffering the poisonous after-effects of a traumatic childhood.

And wasn't that what Fred Rogers was trying to teach us: that emotionally unhealthy children become emotionally unhealthy adults? For more than 30 years, these were the messages of PBS's "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood": Respect your children, nurture their self-esteem, listen to their fears and concerns, play with them. "We all long to be lovable and capable of loving," Rogers told a CNN interviewer in 1999, and that applies to Mr. Jackson, too. Watching "Living With Michael Jackson," you didn't have to be a therapist to understand that Mr. Jackson's perceived eccentricities -- his fetishization of childhood, his fascination with toys and theme parks, his magical single fatherhood -- are self-medicating attempts to give himself the boyhood he never had.

Fred Rogers was the wisest man on television, and never more so than in the way he used the very

structure of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" to teach the necessity of boundaries in children's (and adults') lives. We all know the routine by heart: Mister Rogers entered his television home and performed a ritual transition from work to play, outside to inside, taking off his suit coat and dress shoes and putting on his cardigan sweater and sneakers. Similarly, there was a strict division between reality and pretend, signaled by the arrival of the clanging Neighborhood Trolley.

The trolley left Mister Rogers's living room, passed through a subconscious-symbolizing tunnel and emerged into the Neighborhood of Make Believe, where puppets talked and sang about anger, sadness, separation anxiety, sibling rivalry, nightmares and, that old favorite, fear of slipping down the drain while taking a bath. It's no wonder that the children's television advocate Peggy Charren has been quoted as saying that the first time she saw Fred Rogers, she thought he was "a singing psychologist for children."

Yes, there was much more to "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" than just playtime. Play was good, but Mister Rogers set limits on play and make-believe. He showed that there were interesting things to be done outside the playroom, too; young viewers went with him on tasks like grocery shopping, and on field trips to visit grown-ups at work. "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" was all about preparing kids for life.

Children can't set limits for themselves, of course; they need adults to do that. Fred Rogers was of a time and a tradition in children's television (and in child rearing) in which adults were thought to be the best teachers for young children. And Mister Rogers was the kindest of teachers, and of authority figures. He is irreplaceable -- not that anyone has tried very hard to replace him. Oh, there are Steve and Joe of Nickelodeon's preschool show "Blue's Clues," but they're more like big brothers than true grown-ups. Very young kids can spend an entire morning in front of the tube with otherwise worthwhile shows like "Bob the Builder," "Arthur" and "Dora the Explorer" and not see a human adult face. On shows for older kids and on primetime sitcoms, adulthood is ridiculed more often than not and **dads** are buffoons (d'oh!). It's kiddie anarchy out there.

But "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" remained unchanged by pop cultural fads, television trends or shifting educational winds. There was no merchandising rush, no frantic concession to supposedly shortened attention spans. It was the unwaveringly decent antidote to the hard sell of kid culture and the commercialization of "innocence."

Fred Rogers undertook his life's work with extraordinary integrity and grace. He never preached (though he was an ordained Presbyterian minister), but then he didn't need to: his open demeanor and gentle drawl carried greater moral authority than a thousand pulpits. Accepting a lifetime achievement award at the 1998 Emmys, Rogers requested of the audience what he requested at every speaking engagement: "All of us have special ones who have loved us into being. Would you just take, along with me, 10 seconds to think of the people who have helped you become who you are?" The way Rogers saw it, a secure and happy childhood was of the greatest importance not because we stay children forever, but because we don't.

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GRAPHIC: Photo: Fred Rogers at a 1993 taping of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood": the need for boundaries in our lives. (Associated Press)

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