

Parenting Advice from Mister Rogers by Maria Popova

Being responsible for ourselves, knowing our own wants and meeting them, is difficult enough — so difficult that the notion of being responsible for anyone else, knowing anyone else’s innermost desires and slaking them, seems like a superhuman feat. And yet the entire history of our species rests upon it — the scores of generations of parents who, despite the near-impossibility of getting it right, have raised small defenseless creatures into a capable continuation of the species. This recognition is precisely what made Donald Winnicott’s notion of good-enough parenting so revolutionary and so liberating, and what Florida Scott Maxwell held in mind when she considered the most important thing to remember about your mother.

And yet to be a parent is to suffer the ceaseless anxiety of getting it wrong.

A touching antidote to that anxiety comes from Fred Rogers (March 20, 1928–February 27, 2003) in *Dear Mister Rogers, Does It Ever Rain in Your Neighborhood?* (public library) — the collection of his letters to and from parents and children.

Writing back to a young father-to-be riven by anxiety about the task before him, Mister Rogers offers:

Parenthood is not learned: Parenthood is an inner change. Being a parent is a complex thing. It involves not only trying to feel what our children are feeling, but also trying to understand our own needs and feelings that our children evoke. That’s why I have always said that parenthood gives us another chance to grow.

In a sentiment that applies as much to parenting as it does to any love relationship — one evocative of Iris Murdoch’s superb definition of love as “the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real” — he adds:

There is one universal need we all share: We all long to be cared for, and that longing lies at the root of our ability to care for our children. If the day ever came when we were able to accept ourselves and our children exactly as we and they are, then I believe we would have come very close to an ultimate understanding of what “good” parenting means. It’s part of being human to fall short of that total acceptance and ultimate understanding — and often far short. But the most important gifts a parent can give a child are the gifts of our unconditional love and our respect for that child’s uniqueness.

Art by Olivier Tallec from Big Wolf & Little Wolf

With the mighty touch of assurance that is personal experience, he reflects:

Looking back over the years of parenting that my wife and I have had with our two boys, I feel good about who we are and what we've done. I don't mean we were perfect parents. Not at all. Our years with our children were marked by plenty of inappropriate responses. Both Joanne and I can recall many times when we wish we'd said or done something different. But we didn't, and we've learned not to feel too guilty about that. What gives us our good feelings about our parenting is that we always cared and always tried to do our best.

Couple with Kahlil Gibran's timeless advice on parenting, then revisit the young single mother Susan Sontag's 10 rules for raising a child.