

**Mister Rogers Neighborhood:
Acceptance or Narcissism**

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Fred Rogers guided a whole generation of young people through the most difficult stages of their development from children into young adults. His way of seeing the world and seeing what was possible out of every human being was unique. To say that Mr. Rogers was a one of a kind individual is an understatement. Despite his sunny disposition and his rosy outlook on what the world could be, he was not without conflicts and enemies. Like many of us, one of Fred Rogers greatest enemies was himself. Despite his attempt to make others feel better about themselves and to feel accepted, he struggled with his own self-doubt and his own lack of acceptance as a child (59:30) (Neville, 2018).

In the documentary “Won’t you be my Neighbor?” we see moments where Mr. Rogers was called out for creating a whole generation of narcissistic people (1:19) (Neville, 2018). The claim was made that because Mr. Rogers taught kids that they were special and that they did not need to do anything special to be loved and accepted, that he instilled in them a sense of entitlement (1:19)(Neville, 2018). The idea is that by making kids feel special that we make them think that they are entitled to be treated like kings and queens without having to do anything to earn that kind of respect. I believe this is a fundamental and willing misunderstanding and misstatement of what Fred Rogers was trying to say in his years on the air. Mister Rogers Neighborhood taught children that they deserved to be accepted for who they were, not for who people expected them to be. He taught children to accept their emotions, to embrace the person that they were, and to accept others no matter who they were or what they went through.

Two of the great figures in humanistic psychology, Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, both viewed this kind of unconditional acceptance as necessary in human psychological development. Their belief was that acceptance was necessary for a child to develop the proper

sense of self (pg. 12-13)(Hawkes Learning, 2020). Should a child's other needs be met, this would help to lead to self-actualization (pg. 12-13)(Hawkes Learning, 2020). In Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the kind of acceptance that Fred Rogers taught fits into the Social and Esteem tier (pg. 12-13)(Hawkes Learning, 2020). In the social tier acceptance aids in our feelings of belonging or family bonds (pg. 12-13)(Hawkes Learning, 2020). In the Esteem tier, it contributes to our self-worth or confidence (pg. 12-13)(Hawkes Learning, 2020). In Carl Rogers ideology, unconditional positive regard is the idea that one can be accepted, by the therapist, unconditionally no matter what the person says to them (pg. 12-13)(Hawkes Learning, 2020). I believe this can be more broadly applied to everyone in that person's life. We should be willing to accept a person for who they are without judgment or precondition.

Karen Horney developed the theory that children have to move toward self-realization and away from potential dysfunction that can develop out of a lack of healthy self (pg. 404-405)(Hawkes Learning, 2020). Part of this process involved positive attention and affection from the adults in the child's life (pg. 404-405)(Hawkes Learning, 2020). Because of this unconditional acceptance of the child and who they are, they would be more apt to move toward people rather than isolating themselves from them which would lead to aggression and detachment (pg. 404-405)(Hawkes Learning, 2020). This would suggest that accepting a child for who they are would lead them away from narcissistic behaviors and toward a more balanced and healthy self.

In a study conducted by Dr. Eva Henschke and Dr. Peter Sedlmeier they discuss the fact that many people do not understand the difference between "self-love" and "narcissism" (Henschke & Sedlmeier, 2021). They go as far as to say that narcissism and self-love are opposite and completely different from one another (Henschke & Sedlmeier, 2021). Many

different religions, schools of philosophy and psychology teach the importance of self-love and acceptance of who we are (Henschke & Sedlmeier, 2021). “Specifically, self-love is seen as a crucial resilience factor in preventing psychological diseases and emotional imbalances” (Henschke & Sedlmeier, 2021). Given this fact, the idea that Mister Roger’s Neighborhood promoted acceptance and self-love to the point of causing narcissism and “entitlement” society is completely absurd. If anything, the opposite is true. By helping a whole generation of children learn that they are loved, accepted and it is ok to be themselves, Mr. Rogers help them maintain a health psychological outlook and a healthy view of self.

Fred Rogers took the opportunity to explain what he meant when he told children they are special in the last commencement speech he gave. He said, “And what that ultimately means, of course, is that you don’t ever have to do anything sensational for people to love you” (1:19)(Neville, 2018). As a minister and psychologist, Fred Rogers understood that people needed to be told that they are loved and accepted. They need to feel included and a part of something bigger than themselves. And for many people, that comes from within them.

References

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