

Fred Rogers, from the Lynn Johnson Collection, Mahn Center for Archives and Special Collections, Ohio University Libraries

Fred Rogers, 1983



NEIGHBORLY ADVICE IN TROUBLED TIMES

True to the legacy of children's television icon Fred Rogers, the organizations that bear his name found “the helpers”— fictional and actual — to encourage children as they experienced the COVID-19 pandemic and other life challenges in today's society.
By Cristina Rouvalis

Like most creatures in his neighborhood, Daniel Tiger didn't venture out much at the start of the pandemic. The filming of the PBS show "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood," a beloved spinoff of the iconic "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," shut down during the spring of 2020.

Then, in August 2020, a special episode aired of "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" called "Won't You Sing Along with Me?" The show didn't directly mention the pandemic or COVID-19, but it showed Daniel waving at his pals, including one wearing a mask, through a computer screen. Later in the episode, Daniel was crushed when his mother told him that the neighborhood carnival he loved would be canceled that year.

Instead of downplaying Daniel's sadness and disappointment, his mother told him she too was frustrated by how the world had changed.

The special, which still appears on the PBS app, was praised by viewers.

Ashley-Anne Bohnert, a mother of two young children in Jefferson Hills, a suburb south of Pittsburgh, said she first saw the pandemic episode in the spring of 2021 "when everyone else was moving on with their lives except the parents of kids too young to be vaccinated or even masked. As parents, we felt isolated and forgotten."

"I wept like a child during that first viewing because the simple fact that someone was acknowledging the pandemic wasn't over for everyone made me feel seen."

Ms. Bohnert said her family plays the pandemic episode most weekends. Her son, Edward, 2, dressed up as Daniel Tiger last Halloween.

"My son loves Daniel Tiger, but I would say as adults, we probably love it more," she asserted. "It's lighthearted and it makes it easier for us to tackle some big issues without going down the rabbit hole of book upon book on parenting advice."

The Heinz Endowments has helped young children, their families, educators and others deal with these and other major life stresses through a range of grantmaking, including gifts to two major nonprofits that carry on the legacy of Pittsburgh's favorite neighbor, the late children's television icon Fred Rogers. The Endowments gave \$3 million over the last five years to the two organizations bearing his name: The Fred Rogers Institute, a nonprofit that helps families and other adults to support the healthy development of children, and Fred Rogers Productions, which creates shows, games and apps that inspire enthusiasm for learning.

"This investment is so essential. It has to be ongoing," said Michelle Figlar, the Endowments' former vice president for Learning who recently became executive director of the Pittsburgh-based Birmingham Foundation, which focuses on early childhood education and development. "I have colleagues from other foundations around the country and they say, 'Wow you are right in the heart of Mister Rogers country.'"

"Sometimes I think here in Pittsburgh we take for granted these two great assets: the institute and the production company. We take for granted that Mister Rogers will always be in our neighborhood. It's an asset we should be proud of and that we have to continue to invest in. It's not only impacting our kids here locally, but it's also reaching kids around the country and even kids in other countries."

Heinz Endowments leaders are not the only big fans supporting Fred Rogers programming such as Daniel Tiger.

"A little over a decade ago, the Hillman Foundation was presented the opportunity to support new original children's programming by The Fred Rogers Company [renamed Fred Rogers Productions in 2018]," said Lisa Johns, vice president of finance for the Hillman Family Foundations. "We were drawn to the heart of 'Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood' and its ambition to help young children prepare for lifelong learning by developing social and emotional skills and, perhaps most importantly, kindness. I think I speak for many Pittsburghers in expressing joy that this program with strong Pittsburgh roots and values has been a formative part of so many children's lives."

Fred Rogers Productions also encouraged kids through the pandemic by introducing two new shows that focused on perseverance and resilience: "Donkey Hodie" and "Alma's Way."

Although not directly addressing the pandemic, the programs tackled underlying issues that also could be helpful for some children for whom the changing rules and disruptions during the pandemic felt like whiplash.

“You’ve been inside and told not to go near people. Now you’re back in school in the classroom together,” Ms. Figlar noted. “Those are big adjustments.”

“Donkey Hodie,” a puppet series featuring the granddaughter of the original donkey character from “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood,” debuted in May 2021. In one episode, called “Donkey’s Bad Day,” Donkey starts the morning by spilling a new box of Crunch Doodles cereal. Later, while reading, she drops the book on her toe. Purple Panda tries to cheer her up, and Donkey finds ways to cheer herself up.

“It seemed like the right show at the right time,” said Paul Siefken, president and CEO of Fred Rogers Productions. “Donkey Hodie and her friends focus on topics about resilience and perseverance and problem-solving. Children were getting those messages about how Donkey was finding ways to calm herself down and learn from mistakes. She is willing to change her plans and realizes friends are there to help.”

A few months later, in the fall of 2021, the company unveiled “Alma’s Way,” an animated series about a Latina girl who lives in the Bronx. The show and its

bilingual main character were created by actor Sonia Manzano, who played Maria on “Sesame Street.” Broadcast in both Spanish and English versions, “Alma’s Way” has been renewed for a second season.

In one particularly poignant episode, Alma and her three friends decide to sing a song for an open mic night. One friend, Lucas, who has a great voice, gets stage fright when he hears about the big crowd in the audience. Alma searches for a solution to help him. At first, she blindfolds him, but he stumbles over the other singers in practice. She perseveres until she helps him overcome his fear and the group performs.

“Public broadcasting was a real lifeline for families during the pandemic,” Mr. Siefken said. “Their children were potentially seeing a lot more screen time than they might normally have. And so, we were giving them a lot of shows for the sake of choice.”



In 2020, the Fred Rogers Productions cartoon special “Won’t You Sing Along with Me?” Daniel Tiger’s mother talks to her disappointed son about why the neighborhood carnival had closed, though without explicitly mentioning the COVID-19 pandemic.

“MY SON LOVES DANIEL TIGER, BUT I WOULD SAY AS ADULTS, WE PROBABLY LOVE IT MORE. IT’S LIGHTEARTED AND IT MAKES IT EASIER FOR US TO TACKLE SOME BIG ISSUES WITHOUT GOING DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE OF BOOK UPON BOOK ON PARENTING ADVICE.”

Ashley-Anne Bohnert, a parent from Jefferson Hills, a suburb south of Pittsburgh

Fred Rogers' emphasis on the social-emotional well-being of young children is enduring, which is why the organizations that bear his name should receive consistent support, Ms. Figlar said.

"How do we help children, parents, family, caregivers and teachers understand those emotions, especially during this time of COVID? How do we help children not just cope with COVID but also gain skills to actually feel better? I think that we need this kind of investment now more than ever," she said.

Not only can shows help children to regulate their emotions, but they can also help them deal with frustrations without engaging in violence, Ms. Figlar explained. Many children were able to stay connected with friends and family only via screen during the pandemic, though that probably wasn't enough.

"Online relationships are not like in-person relationships," she acknowledged. "I think it has led kids to struggle with how to get along."

Mr. Siefken said while "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" doesn't address violence explicitly, it does give children strategies to deal with scary things they don't understand. In the episode called "Daniel's Fish Dies," there is a strategy song with the lyrics "Ask questions about what happened. It might help." In the episode called "The Neighborhood Snowstorm," the words in another song are intended to reassure children that "grown-ups are here to take care of you."

For parents, the program's message is to "focus on listening to your children and remind them that the grown-ups in their lives are there to keep them safe," Mr. Siefken said. "It's understandable and OK to be scared, but remind them there are grown-ups and they are there to help them. That's the most appropriate sort of contextual message we can give to young children in the midst of some really terrible things that happen in the news."

Fred Rogers Productions also is taking variations of its TV shows on the road.

During the pandemic, Fred Rogers Productions worked with the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh to develop a live Donkey Hodie interactive pop-up. The organization held the pilot event in the parking lot of Washington City Mission, in Washington, Pennsylvania, south of Pittsburgh. Mothers and their children participated in activities such as walking on little stilts — dubbed "hoof dancing" — and going through a donkey-themed obstacle course.

LeeAnne Kreuger, a kindergarten teacher at Pittsburgh Beechwood PreK-5, used fun props to interact with students virtually during the pandemic and encouraged them to connect with each other when they were learning online from home.



Joshua Franzos

TEACHING, LEARNING AND PLAYING IN A PANDEMIC

As a kindergarten teacher during the pandemic, LeeAnne Kreuger had good success in getting her young students to attend class online. She worked hard to keep their attention over the barking dogs, sibling chatter and other distractions in the background.

She knew her students from Pittsburgh Beechwood PreK-5 were learning, but they were also sad because they missed their friends. The children were lonely, but she wasn't sure how to help.

Fortunately, Ms. Kreuger could talk to other teachers from around the world on monthly Zoom calls through the Educators' Neighborhood, a program created by The Fred Rogers Institute. Pre-pandemic, Ms. Kreuger met in person with 12 teachers from Western Pennsylvania, but when the pandemic hit, the group moved to Zoom and drastically increased in size. The diverse group of teachers shared strategies, vented frustrations, offered encouragement and worked through unprecedented issues of the strange new world of pandemic schooling.

Another teacher gave Ms. Kreuger a great idea for letting kids "play together"—setting up an online breakout room where two kids could spend their time eating lunch together. The teacher could monitor the interactions on her screen and let them spend one-to-one time with a friend.

"I didn't have to be there the whole time," she said. "I could pop in and check on them. It was really, really cute."

Ms. Kreuger also shared her own ideas for motivating parents to get involved. Every Friday morning, she would play an episode of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood"—easily downloaded from the Institute.

Parents would often watch with their kids, increasing investment in their schooling.

Whenever an issue would come up with a child's social-emotional development, she also would take advantage of the Fred Rogers archives. "The archivist could pull articles or speeches Fred had written or spoken. It was very helpful."


In addition to the 11 women who lived at the mission with their children, former residents were also invited to the community fun day. Guadalupe Ospina said her 3-year-old son was so happy to get outside and interact with different children.

“Last year was really hard for him because he is very active,” Ms. Ospina said. “He really enjoyed playing with other kids.”

Mr. Siefken hopes to take the interactive Donkey Hodie show to the backyards of other community groups.

Dana Winters, executive director of the Fred Rogers Institute, said the nonprofit’s Educators’ Neighborhood initiative brought together 300 educators around the world on Zoom to discuss strategies based on the teachings of the late children’s TV icon.

During the pandemic, “we very quickly shifted our support back to the basics,” she said. “We started to meet every other week or monthly with our educators, being a support to them when they were managing something they weren’t necessarily trained to do in the first place.”



THE STRATEGY IS HELPING KIDS CONTROL THEIR EMOTIONS. INSTEAD OF ACTING OUT OR HURTING SOMEONE ELSE, THEY DEVELOP COPING MECHANISMS. HOW DO TEACHERS HELP IDENTIFY KIDS THAT MIGHT BE A CHALLENGE?”

Michelle Figlar, former vice president of Learning at The Heinz Endowments and recently named executive director of the Birmingham Foundation

In addition to the Educators’ Neighborhood, the Institute also started a 2022 Educators’ Symposium webinar series, providing information and support to teachers, child care workers and other “helpers.” The 300 to 400 registrants who tuned into the monthly webinar would see curated clips from “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood.” Panelists then shared what they learned from the clips and how they applied it to learning.

“They joined just to be reminded of what is so deep and simple about supporting children because everything felt very complex in those two years,” Dr. Winters said.

For families, the Institute provided tips on forging good relationships with their children’s care providers. Parents also had access to free information on family engagement through videos, online resources and webinars. The Institute partnered with the Pennsylvania Family Engagement Birth through College, Career, Community Ready Framework and the Pennsylvania Early Intervention Technical Assistance.

“Now more than ever, young children and families need a lot of support, and the programming produced by Fred Rogers Productions is meeting a lot of needs of young children today,” said Bill Isler, retired president and CEO of The Fred Rogers Company. Founded by Fred Rogers, the company produced the original “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood.” Under Mr. Isler’s leadership, it expanded the Fred Rogers programming portfolio by creating shows like “Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood” and later became Fred Rogers Productions.

“Likewise, the work of the Fred Rogers Institute is helping teachers of young children better understand children’s needs and how they can meet the needs,” Mr. Isler said. “One of the reasons that both organizations are doing such great things for children and families is that they have tremendous leaders. Paul Siefken has done a marvelous job of expanding the programs produced by Fred Rogers Productions. Dana Winters has taken the Fred Rogers Institute to a new level with her work with the educational system at all levels, especially early childhood.”

Often, people ask Dr. Winters, “What would Fred do now?”

“Fred never lived in a global pandemic. But we learned what he told families and helpers during times of uncertainty and chal-

lenge. He would remind parents that you don’t have to be perfect in order to be effective,” she said.

“There’s a lot of grief and lost opportunities to be together. One of the things we put out for families immediately was, ‘How do you talk to your children about this?’ It’s okay to say, ‘I don’t know what’s going to happen next. But we’re together, and we’ll do our best to get through this together.’” **h**