

July 5, 2007

MOVING ON

By JEFF ZASLOW



Blame It on Mr. Rogers: Why Young Adults Feel So Entitled

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Don Chance, a finance professor at Louisiana State University, says it dawned on him last spring. The semester was ending, and as usual, students were making a pilgrimage to his office, asking for the extra points needed to lift their grades to A's.

"They felt so entitled," he recalls, "and it just hit me. We can blame Mr. Rogers."

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ONLINE TODAY


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Fred Rogers, the late TV icon, told several generations of children that they were "special" just for being whoever they were. He meant well, and he was a sterling role model in many ways. But what often got lost in his self-esteem-building patter was the idea that being special comes from working hard and having high expectations for yourself.

Now Mr. Rogers, like Dr. Spock before him, has been targeted for re-evaluation. And he's not the only one. As educators and researchers struggle to define the new parameters of parenting, circa 2007, some are revisiting the language of child ego-boosting. What are the downsides of telling kids they're special? Is it a mistake to have children call us by our first names? When we focus all conversations on our children's lives, are we denying them the insights found when adults talk about adult things?

Some are calling for a recalibration of the mind-sets and catch-phrases that have taken hold in recent decades. Among the expressions now being challenged:

"You're special." On the Yahoo Answers Web site, a discussion thread about Mr. Rogers begins with this posting: "Mr. Rogers spent years telling little creeps that he liked them just the way they were. He should have been telling them there was a lot of room for improvement. ... Nice as he was, and as good as his intentions may have been, he did a disservice."

Signs of narcissism among college students have been rising for 25 years, according to a recent study led by a San Diego State University psychologist. Obviously, Mr. Rogers alone can't be blamed for this. But as Prof. Chance sees it, "he's representative of a culture of excessive doting."

Prof. Chance teaches many Asian-born students, and says they accept whatever grade they're given; they see B's and C's as an indication that they must work harder, and that their elders assessed them accurately. They didn't grow up with Mr. Rogers or anyone else telling them they were born special.

By contrast, American students often view lower grades as a reason to "hit you up for an A because they came to class and feel they worked hard," says Prof. Chance. He wishes more parents would offer kids this perspective: "The world owes you nothing. You have to work and compete. If you want to be special, you'll have to prove it."

"They're just children." When kids are rude, self-absorbed or disrespectful, some parents allow or endure it by saying, "Well, they're just children." The phrase is a worthy one when it's applied to a teachable moment, such as telling kids not to stick their fingers in electrical sockets. But as an excuse or as justification for unacceptable behavior, "They're just children" is just misguided.



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"Call me Cindy." Is it appropriate to place kids on the same level as adults, with all of us calling each other by our first names? On one hand, the familiarity can mark a loving closeness between child and adult. But on the other hand, when a child calls an adult Mr. or Ms., it helps him recognize that status is earned by age and experience. It's also a reminder to respect your elders.

"Tell me about your day." It is crucial to talk to kids about their lives, and that dialogue can enrich the whole family. However, parents also need to discuss their own lives and experiences, says Alvin Rosenfeld, a Manhattan-based child psychiatrist who studies family interactions.

In America today, life often begins with the anointing of "His Majesty, the Fetus," he says. From then on, many parents focus their conversations on their kids. Today's parents "are the best-educated generation ever," says Dr. Rosenfeld. "So why do our kids see us primarily discussing kids' schedules and activities?"

He encourages parents to talk about their passions and interests; about politics, business, world events. "Because everything is child-centered today, we're depriving children of adults," he says. "If they never see us as adults being adults, how will they deal with important matters when it is their world?"

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