

Abstract

In the 1960s, Fred Rogers created *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood (MRN)*, a television show for children. Although Rogers may not have been aware that his series carried the potential for a public health model, such an observation becomes apparent in contemporary terms. This transdisciplinary narrative explores *MRN* through the lens of holistic 'health & wellness'. Several themes come in perspective as they relate to health as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) for present and future communities. Targeting a young population, Rogers focuses on emotional nurturing and health with safety for all and within a happy and healthy community – themes that are the core of public health. Through the 'health & wellness' lens, the footprints for a child's behavioral and social model are evident; a model particularly relevant to present and future generations with emotional growth, health, and community spirit as essential. In *MRN*, children are learning through the visual and audio arts, self-esteem, caring, and positive behaviors for personal and social health. Through this lens, besides the footprints to an educational model, another evidence manifests itself, which is the timeless impact of the content of Rogers' life lessons that are constantly adjusting to the next audience of this age group by updating its format in parallel with an advancing technology; which supports the validity of *MRN*' potential for a holistic public health model towards complete physical, mental, spiritual, and social well-being; and as previously proposed by the WHO.

Key Words

Mister Rogers; public health; wellness; community; prevention

Introduction

Mr. Fred Rogers (Figure 1) created a safe and calm place for preschoolers to learn about life within an entertaining setting at *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood (MRN)* T.V. Show. Taking entertainment to new dimensions, the educational and wellness dimensions, *MRN* focuses on children's total holistic well-being. Revisiting Rogers' work within a public health approach led to the conclusion that while he was creating an entertaining platform for young viewers during the first crucial months of a child development, he also designed a public health model to teach them basic life skills and health topics by introducing his audience to themes central to public health. In *MRN*, an ideal teaching platform (setting/format) for avid young minds to learn about themselves and the world around them, children are taught how to express their own feelings, taught about each other feelings, and how to interact in casual daily events within a healthy community (content). With scenarios that fuse make-believe and reality, the secret keys opening doors to a child's world, Rogers created a source of inspiration for children's growth and education.¹

The past and present popularity of the show highlights its creativity and its impact on children, precisely at the age when social learning starts by first subtly fusing the application of several developmental and learning theories to daily and casual situations and events (content); and second, by enhancing its production with an always progressive technology (format). This fusion is remarkably achieved with informal dialogues targeting that population and with make-believe plays expressly created to teach children peace and wellness through the visual arts; visual learners being the most prominent learning style. Gentle style diffusion, such as Mr. Roger's voice and approach, favors easy communication, in contrast to authoritarian style, and gives the opportunity to explain why things happen and what is important. Even though his audience is

young, Rogers' teaching style emphasizes on always telling the truth to the children, a sign of respect. As truth may not always be pleasant especially for young children, Rogers stages and explains eventual life episodes such as dealing with the death of a dear one (person or animal) in order to prepare them if such an event may become a child's reality; ² and always with his magical and natural style and with techniques reducing stress.

This transdisciplinary holistic narrative paper applies selected child developmental, learning and social theories, psychology, health, and neuroscience to *MRN*, which was created "with the goal of helping children to grow in a healthy way" ^{2(pp3)} and where they learn positive behaviors and interactions to be modeled within any given community. Various areas of contemporary and historiographic literature are reviewed as each one constitutes a part of the holistic and synergetic whole with the whole being health as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) and which Fred Rogers had imaginatively merged.

There is no evidence that Rogers was aware that his show was illustrating the footsteps to a public health model. Yet, recognizing a possible parallel between the teachable themes of *MRN* and selected child theories, it is proposed here that the construction of such footsteps would develop from Rogers' blueprint. The following aims to propose these blueprints into theoretical frameworks.

Mr. Rogers: Early years

When Rogers was studying theology and music at Rollins College, his family purchased a technology that was innovative for that time-period. He immediately felt the urge to expose children to it by airing, sharing, and teaching. In 1954, he created the first educational show that was community supported, *The Children's Corner*. That was his calling. At a time when

children's voice was not particularly accounted for, Rogers envisioned to empower them with their own television show. He fought for their rights in front of the Senate for funding not to be cut for children television shows. Where no one succeeded before, he did (About Fred Rogers, 1969). His support group and followers realized before he did his talent and his power, and once he did, his dedication to teach children while entertaining them was endless. He received several awards for his work and simply stated:

“I feel that those of us in television are chosen to be servants. It doesn't matter what our particular job, we are chosen to help meet the deeper needs of those who watch and listen – day and night!”.³

Humbly, he chose to be the servant of children and in 1971, he created *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* with the aspiration to teach them the model of a healthy community where each child is invited to be his neighbor.

Developmental Theories in MRN

Child development theories and learning theories overlap each other, as a child present a *tabula rasa*⁴ when it comes to learning. A child learns by modeling.⁵ The environment provides a source of learning as seen next in selected developmental theories. With the visual arts as platform, Rogers connected the concepts of *tabula rasa*, modeling, and child development in *MRN*.

Self-Identification

Soon after separating from the main care providers (usually mom and/or dad), identification is the next steps in early childhood development.^{6,7} Once a young child is able to sit and watch a

television show because they are absorbed by it, it is also the time when personality starts forming. Consequently, the need for self-identification in society takes place as he/she discovers the world around them. The different characters created by Rogers represent different personality types that a child may identify with, especially if he/she likes that persona. Indirectly, thus subtly, children also find their own place in society when Mr. Rogers asks, “*Won’t you be my neighbor*”⁸ and adds: “*It’s you we like*”.⁹ This approach merges several factors including identification, self-esteem, and community spirit. (Self-esteem being a precursor of behavior during adolescence). Exposing children to these concepts at such a young age, not only provides a safe place to grow, but would likely prevent related developmental issues; especially if supported by parents: “Developmental issues or personality disorders may be prevented or may occur during this significant time”.^{7(pp237)} Communicating with parents beyond a T.V. screen for further guidance in helping young children to learn and grow has also been Rogers’s endeavor.⁸

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Erikson & Psychosocial Development

Erikson¹¹ identified eight psychosocial stages in child development.⁹ In Erikson’s theory, Mr. Rogers’ prevalent audience ranges between the second stage, Autonomy vs. Shame (from 18 months to 3 years old), and the third stage, Initiative vs. Guilt (from 3 to 5 years old). As stated earlier, when a child is old enough to understand “*Would you be my neighbor*” and “*It’s you we like*”, the child is also at an ideal age to develop Autonomy instead of Shame; and then Initiative instead of Guilt. *MRN* prevent feelings of isolation by inviting children to join in, to belong to while growing and learning; learning being dependent upon observing and modeling, and an illustration of Bandura’s theory.¹²

Learning Theories in *MRN*

Bandura & Behaviorism

Bandura¹² theorized that learning and behaving were the result of observing and modeling. *MRN* provided a platform for young children to experience casual life events by observing and listening before modeling, and with the purpose to teach them self-esteem and social behaviors. Although Marazon¹³ was not certain at first that watching a T.V. show in her classroom of preschoolers would help the children, she and her colleagues agreed to implement an intervention: During five months, teachers and students watched *MRN*; which became a perfect daily planning to teach children. Marazon¹³ observed and reported constant positive behavioral changes in her young students and became convinced that students and teachers should watch the show together “to nurture the affective and social life of young children. Perhaps even more importantly, *MRN* now has a place in supporting the inner life of teachers who care for young children”.^{13(pp37)}

Coates et al.¹⁴ compared and contrasted the social behaviors of 32 preschoolers with a mean age of 4.75. The children were divided in two groups, group A and group B. The morning group watched "Sesame Street" and the afternoon group watched "Mr. Rogers Neighborhood". Before and after the treatments (watching the shows), the children's social behaviors were measured and classified within five categories: 1) Positive reinforcement; 2) Punishment; 3) Child: reinforcement and punishment given by a child to another child; 4) Adult: reinforcement and punishment given by a child to an adult; and 5) Social contact. The authors reported the frequency of positive reinforcements and of punishments observed on the young viewers before and after watching the shows (pre-and-posts tests). The results indicated that the group who was already watching *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood* at home scored higher from the baseline. The results

also indicated a significant increase in positive reinforcement, in social contacts with other children and with adults with $p < .05$. The hypothesis that watching *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood* would significantly increase positive social behaviors in children was confirmed. The authors also specified that this study was about social behaviors and not about cognitive development, the next topic.

Piaget & Cognition

In Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development,¹⁵ Mr. Rogers' audience situates in the second stage (2-7 years old), The Preoperational Stage. Imagination, playing, and learning the language define this stage and provide the foundation of a child cognitive abilities - the Preoperational Stage being the stage during which Sharapan¹⁶ and Fresco¹⁷ had reported the implications of early childhood activities in a child development. Those applications relating to "From STEM to STEAM"¹⁶ reviewed the early educational principles first introduced by Maria Montessori between 1910 and 1950.¹⁷ Montessori was the first scientist who researched the impact of facilitating young children's discovery of the environment through their senses. Montessori was a physician, and her first target population was children with 'developmental retardations'. After observing the success of her program, she extended it to all children. Her contribution to child development was not acknowledged by the scientific community when she introduced it. Yet, the success and the impact of The Montessori Method had proven itself and attracted several publications implementing her teaching method, such as Sharapan's "From STEM to STEAM" who collaborated with Rogers.¹⁶

Rogers' visual and musical artistic setting supports children's personal and social development by offering young children the opportunity to excel in Piaget's Preoperational Stage; thus, in their cognitive development by applying Maria Montessori's original techniques, including

providing the opportunity to acquire language. From its early beginning, television delivered the opportunity of sharing educational communications, which Rogers immediately understood.¹⁸

During Piaget's Preoperational Stage,¹⁵ the child experiences a rapid growth and his/her development is influenced not only by the way they perceive the surrounding world through his/her senses, but also from his own perspective, or little cognitive ability at such a young age; and which Piaget referred to as egocentrism. The child accommodates (Piaget's accommodation factor) this new information within his/her previous and limited perception of the world. This is the process by which the child acquires language and knowledge of the environment.¹⁵

Combining accommodation to egocentrism within a psychoanalytic perspective, it is further inferred here that what Piaget documented as egocentrism at this level of development is also a coping mechanism, a concept that will be extended below under Child Play & Therapy, Perception, and under Primary Prevention with Bion's thinking theory.¹⁹

Merging fantasy, reality, play, and make-believe with music and arts, promote a child's successful Preoperational Stage. *MRN* addresses the two senses mainly associated with learning (seeing and hearing) while language and concepts are simplified to target this young audience: Each show of *MRN* focuses on seeing and listening to teach young viewers/listeners about life within a make-believe neighborhood and by prompting play. "Play gives children a chance to practice what they are learning. We all need to practice new things before we can feel comfortable with them" and "I think play is an expression of our creativity; and creativity, I believe, is at the very root of our ability to learn, to cope, and to become whatever we may be".

^{20(pp5)} Child play is seen here as a tool in normal development. Child play is also an intervention in child psychology, as seen below.

Child Play

Child Play & Therapy

A few decades ago, playing was reported as an infrequent activity between parents and children, which Strom²¹ aimed to change after observing parent-child fantasy play and reporting the positive results of this practice. Strom²¹ identified the effectiveness of play as an educational tool as well as the tension arising in a child when a playing-session ended. Strom²¹ further observed that while playing, a child expresses emotions easily; thus, offering an opening for play therapy. Rogers and Sharapan²⁰ recognized the therapeutic dynamics of children when playing: “If you observe a child's play, you may be able to pick up the echoes of something that has happened, such as a recent move home, the illness of a sibling, or the pet”.^{20(pp8)}

As inferred when extending on Piaget's egocentrism, a young child's cognition not only is adapting by egocentrism,¹⁵ a form of compensation, but also compensates this lack of vocabulary within an inward search, as if searching for an echo within a subconscious displacement. Egocentrism then, becomes a defense and a coping mechanism to adapt to the limitation of words and to the unknown. Piaget¹⁵ reported egocentrism and accommodation but does not appear to have correlated them psychoanalytically to a coping mechanism, or as a defense. Egocentrism as a defense in early learning becomes similar to narcissism, a defense that may occur at the early stage of infancy;^{19,22} adapting to language and to thinking being the process by which the mind of a young child is going through.¹⁹ Based on Bion's work, Piaget's egocentrism phase is reported here as a self-defense process and a coping mechanism by which a child adapts while growing through this phase. Thus, the young viewers of *MRN* find a safe and non-judgmental community to play and to release psychological anxiety in make-believe situations until cognition and vocabulary increase, which are also developing while watching the

shows. Mr. Rogers' T.V. shows then help children to outgrow their early egocentrism phase by providing them means to express emotions while increasing cognition and vocabulary; make-believe and playing being an artistic approach for self-expression.

Child Play, Arts, Pedagogy, & Psychoanalysis

Playing and arts have more than one element in common with psychoanalysis, but self-expression is the one that best relates here, as self-expression offers a release from a structured superego within settings that are not only socially accepted (playing) but also appreciated (arts).

As introduced by Vida ²³ and Zelevansky ²⁴ explored the content of *MRN*, starting by "the radical nature of his pedagogy and strategic use of the television form". ^{24(pp196)} Pedagogy and strategy are fundamental features of *MRN* and also constitute the basis of modern psychoanalysis. ²⁵

In his article, Zelevansky ²⁴ introduces the "intimacy" created by Mr. Rogers who directly speaks to his young viewers, "you", with "constancy" to establish "trust". ^{24(pp196)} The same words are used to describe a psychoanalytic session. Once trust is established, "Mister Rogers is an engaged teacher: a parental figure, not an adult playmate", ^{24(pp196)} words that also describe a psychological orientation, such as a modern psychoanalyst and as described in the next paragraph. Then, the neighborhood becomes "a sanctuary, yet it never denies the commonplace anxieties and misunderstandings of the young children...". ^{24(pp197)} The neighborhood then may also be compared to the location where a psychoanalytic session takes place, where anxieties are released, and where magic builds self-confidence; lack of self-confidence being an indicator of possible issues while growing up as discussed earlier.

Mr. Rogers' "method is to ask questions, encourage speculation, and advance interpretations that encourage his young audience to recognize that careful thinking and looking can lead to both understanding and action". ^{24(pp197)} Mr. Rogers' method is comparable to a modern

psychoanalytic technique that encourages exploring and implementing any method deemed necessary by the psychoanalyst for “actively crediting and investigating personal emotions and sensations... as salient signs and facts of a common existential condition”. ^{24(pp197)}

Zelevansky ²⁴ also described Mr. Rogers’ secrets in a box containing “nothing else but air”.

^{24(pp198)} Within a psychoanalytic perspective, secrets may also be related to an introduction to inhibited feelings. However, related art to psychoanalysis in a way best suiting his purpose, and with the same constant and captivating style, he stated: “Art making and other examples of conceptual thinking (like architecture) may incorporate intuition and conviction, but are reliant on a semiotic grammar of language, perception, and interpretation that extends across many life experiences and disciplines”. ^{24(pp205)} Vida ²³ had stated in her introduction to Zelevansky ²⁴ that psychoanalysis and art were “straddling”. ^{23(pp193)} *MRN* platform incorporates artistic elements and factors facilitating young children learning through the arts with unique techniques. As culture and technology have progressed, Fred Rogers’ representations have adapted and evolved. His approach has been branded as radical pedagogy by Vida and Zelevansky. ^{23, 24}

Revisiting The 1990 Children’s Television Act, Huston and Wright ²⁶ reported that in contrast to educational programs for children, T.V. informational and commercial messages targeted to the general audience had harmful effects on children; and described *MRN* as one of the first and best-designed programs addressing social and emotional development of young children.

Perception and emotions, the core of neuroscience, facilitate young children learning through the arts in *MRN* with a positive impact.

Neuroscience in *MRN*

Thus, what children perceive while watching *MRN* optimizes their learning process, which is supported by how they are feeling. Perception and emotions, basic constructs in neuroscience, are also the key factors upon which Rogers established the creation of his neighborhood and what is happening there.

Perception

Sensory stimuli, either visual, auditive, olfactive or tactile are first perceived by the senses. Then the information is transmitted to the corresponding brain pathways. For instant, a visual stimulus is perceived by the cornea that transmits the information to the retina. Decoding starts in the eyes' rods and cone cells and is followed by complex electrochemical peptides. The information reaches the cortex that forwards it to the hippocampus for encoding and learning; the hippocampus being the brain structure where learning takes place and the site of memory. ²⁷

Learning is also associated with the emotions that perception generates at the time perception occurs. ²⁸ Bion ¹⁹ labeled *the alpha function* the process by which emotions are transformed into thoughts with feelings being precursors of learning a language. Bion's theory of thinking, created for therapy of psychotic patients, defines how thinking is the capacity of transforming beta elements into alpha elements; with beta elements being raw sensations that emotions produce. Here, correlating Bion's theory of thinking to Piaget's egocentrism indicates material for a Primary Prevention.

MRN offers scenes of real and magical situations with music, songs, and art. The impact of Rogers is proven by the fact that his viewers are able to sit and watch the show at such an early age, when the attention's span is not yet developed. ^{12,28} Besides positive emotions, the frequency of emotional challenges are facts of life. Rogers prepared his audience for emotional

challenges by providing the necessary tools to cope with those challenges. Levin and Hines¹⁸ reported that emotional coping was one of the major themes in *MRN*.

Wilson²⁹ investigated the effect of media on children's emotions and concluded a link between media and children's social development. She stated: "Developmental psychologists and media scholars alike have argued that screen media play a crucial role in children's emotional development".^{29(pp89)} She further associated emotional empathy to effective social behaviors, an association accounted for above. *MRN* stimulates its young viewers empathy and positive emotions as they are the recipients of positive interactions from Mr. Rogers (*It's you we like! Would you be my neighbor?*) and other characters in the show. This positive emotional experience optimizes the children's learning process, which prepares them for positive behaviors immediately in the neighborhood and in the community at large.

Communication Style & Community

As discussed earlier, after separating from primary caregivers, the process of self-identification occurs while a young child is also discovering others and the environment. *MRN* is a little community where learning, a predictor of a child's future actions, prepares for upcoming behaviors by modeling.¹² Perception and emotions also predict communication style: Children, like adults, primarily communicate with others and express themselves by speaking and behaving. *MRN* provides children ways to assimilate positively with others as "For Mister Rogers, every object he presents, every guest who stops by, is a potential good thing that one can investigate and learn from"^{24(pp203)} simply because "valuing the uniqueness of others and caring for others"^{30(pp1)} predicts peace in the community through communication.

Language and dialogues, principal way of communication, constitute key tools enabling children to express themselves. Mr. Rogers invites children to answer his questions, to ask questions, and to share their feelings. Klarén⁸ highlighted the effectiveness of Rogers' method in inviting his viewers to dialogue by documenting the interactions between several viewers and Rogers who communicated together beyond the T.V. screen and through mail; an indication that Rogers' communication style was effective and positive by immediate application.¹⁰

Poole³¹ captured well the impact and diversity of Rogers' communication style enhanced by music, songs, and by visual arts when he stated: "Throughout the series, Rogers asked questions, listened to his guests, was honest in his responses to difficult situations, managed expectations and transitions successfully, presented concepts in multiple formats... establishing routines, managing expectations and transitions, presenting concepts through multiple formats, and exposing children to our multicultural world".^{31(pp6)}

Exposure to a multicultural world, knowing and appreciating our neighbors should forecast peace within a given community because "Peace comes only after concentrated measures of justice" for "Change and the changeless".^{32(pp69)} Chatting with Zaleski, Fred Rogers shared that "Fred" means peace in Sweden; an appropriate meaning as his mission in life was to teach children how to create a healthy life and how to prevent conflicts.

It is regrettable that Rogers' lessons of justice for peace have lost that battle, at least for now, as racial shakeups have been multiplying worldwide, in spite of Rogers giving the formula for peace: Caring for each other and respecting each other reduce social pressure and announces peace in the community. In *MRN*, children learn that "anger can be expressed through words and non-destructive activities",¹⁰ including laughter and joy.³³ Teaching children how to deal with anger, conflicts, and wars through play calm children's fears.³⁴

If applied to a health education preventive intervention, exposing children to violent situations in make-believe examples would likely lower incidences of future acts of violence and wars: As those children are becoming adults, they would have learned how to positively deal with emotions such as frustration and anger. Caring for the community also means caring for the environment. Revisiting *MRN* at the age of COVID-19, one may wonder what in Mr. Rogers's valuable lessons had been missed? Rogers had announced - 'The Past and The Present is Now'.³⁵

The Environment

Caring for the environment was one of Rogers' major missions, which inspired the creation of a computerized board game to teach *Mr. Rogers Sustainable Neighborhood*.³⁶ Players model a computerized language to recreate situations promoting community sustainable: "Mr. Rogers Sustainable Neighborhood is a game designed to teach about complex issues of Sustainability".

^{36(pp396)} Yet, the world was not ready for those lessons, even though King and Lindey³⁷ rearticulated the urgency announced by Rogers in predicting a popular and imminent environmental apocalypticism with annihilation, fear, and horror in a collapsing world where nothing can be done. King and Lindey³⁷ further reported Rogers' environmental spirituality for children in imagining a new world to generate hope and actions. Referring to Rogers, King and Lindey³⁷ concluded that children could develop a sense of environmental stewardship and civic responsibility.

Health Education & Rogers

Spitz³⁸ stated that the children who watched *The Magical Neighborhood of Mister Rogers* "were fortunate enough to have encountered" the program because "Rogers possessed a serenity and

love of truth”,^{38(pp1)} and a “cross-disciplinary and cross-modal connections between developmental, emotional, and moral themes and the external world -- both natural and social --”.^{38(pp3)} Taking Spitz³⁸ words further, connecting love and truth to moral themes and to the external world within cross-disciplinary modalities for educational purposes constitutes the basics of health education. Targeting such a young audience with magic expressed in visual and audio arts to teach them personal, community, and environmental health reveals Rogers’ strength and uniqueness, whose neighborhood stages the application of a public health preventive model. Each one of Rogers’ shows has an educational message whether it is visible or not because “That which is essential is invisible to the eye”;³⁹ and a reminder of Rogers’ box of secrets and of “In and Out”.²⁴ “In and Out” described breathing (even the beginning of a meditation lesson), an essential technique when dealing with stress or simply when waiting), as reported by Zelevansky²⁴ when quoting Rogers:

“What kinds of things do you do when you’re waiting?

I sometimes just sit and breathe in [he inhales] and breathe out [he exhales].

In [inhale] and out [exhale].

And just think, in [inhale] and out [exhale]”.^{24(pp207)}

Figuratively speaking and in psychological terms, taking secrets out of a box brings emotional relief to a child and promotes his/her wellbeing by expressing feelings. Expressing feelings, one of Rogers’ interventions, prevents inhibitions and psychological issues.

Prevention Model in Health Education

The three levels of the Prevention Model in health education were established for conditions affecting physical health.⁴⁰ Bijaoui⁷ extended the concept by adding two other conditions to

physical health that Bijaoui labelled mental wellness and social health. Within this extension of the Prevention Model, the situations reported in *MRN* often referred to mental wellness or social health in primary prevention, except for the examples of war and violence that would fall under tertiary prevention in social health. Hospitalization and death in the neighborhood fall respectively in the secondary and tertiary preventions in physical health.

MRN & Primary Prevention

While examining *MRN* through the lens of total wellness, this paper correlated Piaget's egocentrism phase to Bion's thinking theory.^{15, 19} Applying selected theories as well as Piaget and Bion's findings, the positive impact of Rogers' influence on a child development is evident. As inferred earlier, Piaget's egocentrism phase is actually a defense mechanism to compensate for a lack of vocabulary. Bion¹⁹ outlined the steps in the process of acquiring language and how emotions affect learning when transforming beta elements into alpha elements. *MRN* provided his viewers the tools to acquire language and to learn about casual life elements while coping in a healthy way when necessary; which consequently would reduce the egocentrism phase:¹⁵ Vocabulary being available, the coping mechanism, or the defense, involved in egocentrism wouldn't be as lengthy or as evident. As the child would feel more confident, the anxiety involved from beta to alpha elements would also be alleviated, facilitating how thinking is developed;¹⁹ a prevention for anxiety and other mental disorders as defined in Bion¹⁹ thinking theory. Rogers achieved what could be called a "tour de force" (a pass of strength) when creating a television program perfectly addressing what young minds need to reduce or prevent such disorders while being entertained; language being a tool to express oneself and also promoting communication within a given community.

Hospitalization & Secondary Prevention

Rogers demonstrated again his magical talents with playing and singing when visiting Crisler (2006) who was hospitalized; a visit that Crisler immortalized in his rap style poem. *Preparing Young Children for Hospitalization*⁴¹ reduces a child's anxiety, one of the themes of *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*, because "Hospital-based preparation programs have been effective in helping children to cope successfully with the trauma of a hospital experience" and lowers stress in parents and children.^{41(pp2)} Preparation and playing while hospitalized constitute interventions for secondary prevention.

As Rogers' mission was to reach out to the community for wellness and peace starting with a young audience, the community also reached out to him. For instance, when two clinicians asked him for help to prepare children for anesthesia prior to surgery at Duane's Ophthalmology, Rogers first replied: "You were a child once, too"^{42(pp734)}. And then, Rogers added, reminding surgeons of "the primal fears of childhood and powerlessness of their patients":⁴²

"Just as you grow and mature professionally, like parents and teachers, you, too, will grow in your ability to deal with the psychosocial needs of the children – just by virtue of your caring about the whole child (not just his or her eyes)"^{42(pp734)}.

Citing Rogers, Nakayama added:

"[Most] anxieties grow from fear of the unknown or lack of information and understanding... That's why it's important to discuss the procedure and its goals with the parent and child"^{42(pp734)}.

Nakayama⁴² qualified Rogers' approach as establishing trust with the child, in contrast to the 6 volumes of "*dos and don'ts*" of Duane's Ophthalmology. Maybe Duane's surgeons overlooked this simple approach because of possible personal fears in dealing with a population as

vulnerable as children? As discussed earlier, establishing trust with children was natural to Rogers. At Duane's Ophthalmology, Rogers discussed with them eventual pain and gave them permission to express themselves with crying if that is what they felt like doing (Nakayama, 2020).

Death & Tertiary Prevention

Being confronted with the death of a dear person or animal is an uneasy time for anyone. Adults entered a mourning period but children do not know how to deal with grieving. Child play, entertaining while therapeutic, offers the opportunity to express those confused feelings and to relieve the pain and confusion in order to better accept it. "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood ...provided a vehicle for death education" to deal with death "in a low-anxiety way" and with "a positive impact on mental health". ^{2(pp2)} Affected by John F. Kennedy's assassination and by his dog Mitzie's death, Rogers sensed the need to assist children during those difficult times by preparing them. Staging the death of a fish in his make-believe neighborhood with songs and music, Rogers introduced young viewers to the permanence of death without the trauma and provided them with an easy point of reference for when eventually being confronted with death. ² Fred Rogers' own death is not an ending to what he has accomplished: His work stays beyond him to teach children. He has inspired continuity as discussed earlier with Perrone et al. ³⁶ in Mr. Rogers Sustainable Neighborhood computerized game that promotes community sustainable; and as seen next with *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood*. ^{43, 44}

Educational and Program Design Proposal

Public health and education experts may not have readily the budget and resources that Rogers had. However, public health and education experts could implement programs for children and

teens with Rogers' teachings and with a low budget by adapting Rogers' entertaining and educational perspectives to the principles of play therapy for children and psychodrama for teens. In play therapy, young children are invited to express themselves and to learn through playing, as seen above with Strom,²¹ Sharapan and Rogers,²⁰ and Zelevansky.²⁴ Psychodrama uses theatrical techniques that are ideal to teach children and teens about themselves and their communities as seen in *Play it Again!*⁴⁵ At *Play it Again*, diversity is not a wishful option, but a reality, as seen in its online theater room. This design proposes that the themes that are the core of public health are creatively redesigned with the purpose of teaching children while entertaining them, and as first designed by Rogers. The magic of make belief in theater combined to educational and psychological techniques are probably the best adaptation of *MRN* within a public health design.

Conclusion

Three facts conclude this examination of *MRN* through the lens of total wellness: Its contribution to public health, its implication in mental health prevention, and its advocacy for a protected environment in order to create a safer and better world. Thus, while creating *MRN*, Rogers designed the footprints of a health education model. Hutchison⁴⁶ asserted that, through foundational elements of religiosity, *MRN* emphasized personal growth, inclusiveness, and education through media phenomenology.

Combining major developmental theories and their subtle applications into daily situations, Rogers' fictional neighborhood, yet with elements of reality, reaches out to his young audience through an entertaining platform in order to expose them to life events and teaches them how to

grow healthy. This is achieved within a peaceful and happy place where life situations are illustrated to be positively modeled and within an educational health model that caters to a child's wellbeing for a successful early development.

Reevaluating Piaget's egocentrism within a psychoanalytic perspective, it is manifest that what Piaget documented as egocentrism at this level of development is first a coping mechanism taking place before egocentrism develops. A young child is not able to assimilate a new material because of limited capabilities. Yet the child copes with the situation with a defense such as egocentrism. Thus, a coping mechanism as a defense justifies this egocentrism phase. This inference does not seem to have been reported before in the literature as it is hypothesized here and indicates a breakthrough in child early development: Piaget's egocentrism phase constituting a coping mechanism and a defense is alleviated when watching *MRN*. This inference becomes evident when re-examining *MRN* through this lens because Rogers provides skills to learn language and express emotions, which results in interventions directly impacting the egocentrism phase and a young child's development.

Bion's thinking theory decodes how emotions predict thinking with an alpha system, which may result in mental illness when incorrectly processed. *Rogers' neighborhood* assists children in how to deal with emotions in order to think and act positively. Through, this lens, *MRN* also offers a model for mental illness prevention because children's anxieties are immediately dealt with, facilitating the transfer from beta to alpha elements while the capacity of thinking develops normally in contrast to pathologically. When children's emotional wellness is stabilized as early as possible, it predicts adults having the tools to manage their feelings before anger turns into violence affecting the whole community.

In the age of COVID-19, Rogers' lessons on caring for each other and caring for the environment have been overlooked. This narrative paper provides an opportunity to re-introduce Rogers' work to meet contemporary demands of reality, particularly in the health profession. An extension of Rogers' concepts started with Mr. Rogers Sustainable Neighborhood computerized game³⁶ and with *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood*.^{43, 44} Yet, still much needs to be done, such as maybe reintroducing Rogers' concepts in the light of creating a better world for self, others, and the world we live in; and without negativity.

Rogers also incorporated in his neighborhood the three aspects of health as described by the WHO, which is the state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being. Accordingly, and following the premise advanced in this document, the three levels of public health prevention (primary, secondary, and tertiary) illustrated in *Mr. Rogers's Neighborhood* constitute the footprints of a health education model for physical health, mental wellness, and social health. Those footprints, echoing WHO's definition of health and wellness,⁴⁷⁻⁴⁹ could provide an opportunity to design and implement a preventive program for children early development. Rogers's contribution to public health comprises several themes that are the core of public health and incorporates the three aspects health (physical, mental, and social health). Reintroducing child development, psychology, pedagogy, neuroscience, and prevention within an entertaining framework such as *Mr. Rogers's Neighborhood* best targets a child population and offers novel opportunities to promote holistic health. The timing to reintroduce and reexamine Rogers in contemporary terms could not be any better given the current global realities we find ourselves in.

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Figure 1. Bronze Memorial Statue of Fred Rogers in Pittsburgh – Pennsylvania, U.S

