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Look for the Helpers

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

Beginning with his first PBS broadcast in 1968, Fred Rogers taught grownups and children alike many important life lessons. I had the privilege of meeting Fred (affectionately known as “Mr. Rogers” by his viewers) in person at a conference some years ago. There he recalled that when he was a child and saw scary things on the news, his mother would say, “Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.” To be observant, to be hopeful and optimistic, to find the calm in the storm — these are life skills his mother taught him. He also learned he could be a helper!

Research verifies what we know from life experience. Hopeful kids aren’t passive bystanders! Some children are born with more easy temperaments — and these children have a higher probability of growing up hopeful, but parents really impact the ways they think about themselves and the world. If parents can give any gift to their kids, it should be hope.

Parents often struggle with how much to say and how to say it when explaining difficult and scary news. “Put tragedies in context. Tell your child that despite horrible events, some things remain sacred and can’t be destroyed, such as your love and caring for each other and your faith in God,” suggests Kenneth Pargament, whose research focuses on the role of religion in times of trauma.

Specific, developmentally-appropriate conversations need to take place throughout the years as children grow up. Seek out everyday situations to build your children’s hope and awareness levels. Listening to the wind, the leaves rustling in the breeze, the songs of birds, even the flow of traffic attune young children to their environment. Alerting children to the effects of temperature and the sun and helping them understand how their body works to insulate itself are also confidence boosters. Certainly, these are also powerful ways to recognize a creative, creator God.



Providing children opportunities and allowing them to make a difference is also a strong component of helping children to be hopeful, and offers countless opportunities for building awareness of their surroundings. Even enlisting a child at home for help rather than just chores can convey that you see your child

as a valuable family member, rather than just a kid doing work for an allowance or because he was told to.

When children believe the world will be a better place because they are in it, they are hopeful, confident and productive. They are then free to serve a living God. Being part of a helping community also gives us opportunity to show them that, in the world, there are more good people and kind acts than bad people and evil deeds.

We do live in a world of sin and Satan terrorizes people, but God does not want that for us. He does not desire for us to live in a spirit of fear. His desire for us and our children is to live in His light and to light the way for others with a spirit of optimism and hope. And He gives us helpers along the way!

Susan E. Murray is professor emerita of behavioral sciences at Andrews University, certified family life educator, and licensed marriage and family therapist.