

How to Receive a Gift From a Child

By Fred McFeely Rogers

It was several days after Christmas, and the pencil holder was still sitting there on the hall table. Rather crude looking, made of painted popsicle sticks, decorated with bits of colorful yarn, the holder had a piece of paper pasted on it that said, in a childish scrawl, "I love you Daddy".

The problem was that it was hard for Kevin's father to know what to do with that pencil holder. Kevin was only five, and his father didn't feel that he could put this typical piece of five year old workmanship on his desk at the office- which is exactly where Kevin had said it was meant to go. In fact, it had been hard for that father to know how to respond when he'd opened the present from his son. What he'd said was "What have we here? Something you made? Thanks, Kevin, that's nice". And then he'd just left it where he had opened it.

Some of us adults have trouble knowing how to respond to children's gifts. One friend recalls how his mother always put presents in Kevin's "special" drawer. "It may have been a special place for Mom's way of thinking" that friend remembers now, "but whenever a gift I'd made or bought ended up there, I knew she had not liked it at all". That made me feel awful, because she was always giving me things I really did like.

That recollection reveals an important piece of the puzzle: When children are young, they're not able to see things from someone else's point of view. Older children and adults generally choose gifts by thinking about a person's interests, preferences, or needs. They'll choose a scarf for an aunt who has to wait for buses on cold winter days, or toy dishes for a toddler who likes to pretend about parties.

Young children, however, don't have the capacity to empathize with adult wishes and needs, and so their gift giving may reflect what gives them pleasure more than what the receiver might enjoy. Their gift giving is selfish in a good sense. What they are giving is really a gift of themselves, and the outward appearance of the gift is often misleading.