

Noticing—and Appreciating—Helpers

*“When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me,
‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’”*

— Fred Rogers

WHAT IF ARTICLES ABOUT THE RECENT MORGAN FIRE focused on the dedication and courage of the firefighters rather than the out-of-control destruction of the fire? We want our children to know that there will always be challenges, even disasters, but, more importantly, that there will always be people to help. After the Boston Marathon explosions, stories of ordinary people offering first aid, blood donations, and places for visiting runners to stay were real news of the day. Inspired by the selflessness they saw all around them, many people remembered the Mr. Rogers quote from their childhood: “Look for the helpers.”

We can teach children that helpful people exist all around them, and their services are apparent every day. Recently, our buildings and grounds supervisor, “Mr. Tim” Tacker, was putting finishing touches on a new preschool gate when I walked by with my three-year-old grandson. “Mr. Tim fixes everything at our school,” I explained to Oliver. In that impulsive embrace-the-world quality of preschoolers, my grandson exclaimed, “I love him.” Love, for a helper, at first sight.

Children do love Mr. Tim and take delight in watching him fix a drinking fountain (Hurrah, there’s water!) or climb a ladder to get up on the roof. Yet few people are aware that Mr. Tim has whole crews of fix-it and paint-it people who show up at 8 a.m. every Saturday. Another group maintains our computers. If you come to play on a Saturday morning, you will also see gardeners and classroom cleaners. On weeknights, the cleaners arrive after eight hours at their day jobs to work on teams to make the school glisten.

Children feel safe and supported when they know both their small world and the bigger world at large are populated by helpers. Here are some ideas for creating that awareness:

Reinterpret loud signals: Instead of saying “There must be a fire or an accident” when fire trucks, police cars, or ambulances rush around you, take a different approach. “People are rushing to help. These are the people who keep us safe.”

Make invisible jobs visible: We often take it for granted that there’s someone there to take our dishes away in a restaurant or haul away our trash and recycling. Stopping to think about these important, but often unnoticed, jobs that people do awakens us to our inter-connectedness.

Notice people at school who help: Introduce your child to the helpful people in the Office. Our shared goal is to help children become aware that they are surrounded everywhere by nets of support.

September 18, 2013