



## Fred Rogers Timeless Wisdom



### Disappointment: Birthdays & Holidays

---



*Fred Rogers was best known for helping children and families talk about and deal with all kinds of feelings and concerns. One way he addressed “disappointment” was in the context of birthday parties and holiday celebrations that often end in upsetting times because of unmet expectations.*

Some adults create so much excitement about birthdays and holidays that children come to think of them as the most special days of the year. With a focus on family gatherings, presents, and parties, there’s a lot for children to look forward to and to fantasize about.

It’s only natural that such heightened anticipation of birthdays and holidays might lead to expectations that can never be met. Unfortunately, when children find that the anticipation is so much greater than the actuality, they can be disappointed, angry, and upset.

#### **Creating Family Traditions**

Almost every family has some traditions for holidays or birthdays – being together at a certain place, making some special holiday food, singing certain songs, lighting candles. Most people say it’s those traditions that make the days special for them. Tradition can be like anchors that help us feel more secure and stable. They can be especially important when families feel the frenzy that sometimes comes with the holidays.

#### **Parents Want a “Perfect” Day**

Birthdays and other holidays sometimes make parents feel like they’re being swept up in a whirlwind. They’re naturally concerned about their over-worrying, over-working, and over-spending! And in the desire to try to make the holiday a perfect day for their children, they can easily be led to enormous disappointment.

In the case of the winter holidays, that desire to create the perfect day is fanned to a great blaze by media. The loudest message of the season, shouted from millions of television sets, newspapers, and magazines, seems to be: “To spend more is to love more and to be more dearly loved.”

What a seductive message, especially for parents! When a baby is born, parents feel that they would like to give their baby a perfect life. But of course that’s not realistic, especially if “perfection” means a life that is always happy. Our children will sometimes hurt, have stomachaches and growing pains, feel jealousy, and disappointment. Very early in our children’s lives we will be forced to realize that the “perfect” (untroubled) life we’d like for them is just a fantasy. Nevertheless, there’s a persistent fantasy that, “Even if I can’t give my child a perfect life, maybe I can at least make a perfect day once or twice each year – on his or her birthday, and at Christmas or Hanukah or....”

## **Coping with Disappointment**

Often the anticipated day brings tears, fights, and disappointments, with parents feeling at the end of the day that their children never appreciated any of it. “We did all this for you, and why aren’t you happy?” There’s a letdown that turns that “perfect” day into a big disappointment. Of course, no one wants to disappoint a child; however, an important part of being parents is helping our children cope with disappointment.

Children sometimes ask for gifts their parents can’t afford or don’t feel are appropriate. We can help children learn early on that there are limits to what people can have. Some parents have told their children, “We can’t buy everything you want. We don’t have enough money for all that. We need money for our home, food, clothes, and taking care of the other things that you need and we need.” If parents are willingly supportive, they can help a child face disappointment and grow from it. And coping with disappointment is a “gift” that they’ll be able to use all their lives.

## **Celebrate the Small Things**

While we generally think of celebrating big occasions, some of the best things to celebrate are the small moments that happen in every day life, like seeing someone help another person, learning something new, or noticing a beautiful sunset, a pretty flower, or a flight of birds. When we can take the time in the midst of our busy world to celebrate things like that, we’re nourishing our children and ourselves.

## **Helpful Hints**

### **For Birthday Parties:**

- For a birthday party, it can help to limit the number of guests to the age of your child – three friends for a three-year-old party; four friends for a four-year old party. With these limitations, you can probably keep the size of the party down to a number that is comfortable for both you and your child.
- Figure out some simple ways to celebrate. What matters most is that it be something that your child chooses, which is agreeable to you, and something that the family can do together – like selecting the menu for dinner, going on a picnic or to the playground.
- Find other times besides birthdays to celebrate your child’s growing, like when your child has helped someone, learned something new, or handled a difficult situation well.
- Remember that “Inside” growing is as important to celebrate as the “outside” growing. Some families light a candle or give a special cup or plate to the child who is being honored on those special occasions to create their own family traditions.

### **For the Winter Holidays:**

- Find some quiet time before the holidays to ask your child what traditions he or she has enjoyed over the years. They may be the ones you want to make sure to preserve.
- Involve your child in the preholiday activities by working together to make name cards for the family meal, making cookies, creating holiday cards, or setting up the candles. Participating gives children an important sense of belonging.
- Before going to another home for a family gathering for the holidays, let your child know what to expect. Talk about what you know about the house, your memories of being there (if you’ve been there as a child), and the guests who might be there.
- Try to be aware of when your child *begins* to be stressed and go to a quiet place with your child to lie down for a while, to look at a book, or to take a walk. Once children become over-stimulated, exhausted, fretful, or just plain out of control, it’s harder for them to settle down. They need to feel confident that their parents will help them get back into control.