



**The Head & the Heart:
The Real World of Child-Centered Education**

By Tom Junod, national award-winning writer

Tom Junod has been a writer at Esquire since 1997 and a parent at High Meadows School since 2007. He has won two National Magazine Awards and serves on the High Meadows Board of Trustees.

HIGH MEADOWS SCHOOL

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"You were a child once, too."

That was how Fred Rogers — a.k.a. "Mister Rogers," of children's television fame — began an introduction he wrote for a book intended to teach doctors how to deal with children. It wasn't simply that he wanted the doctors to remember who they once were. It was that he wanted them to remember who they still were, now — and to respect the children who came to their offices by respecting the children within themselves.

He was a man who never stood above children and who never talked down to them. He always met them where they stood, both physically and developmentally; he always looked them in the eye and talked to them as individuals. And he listened, because he had innate belief in the value of what children told him — in their wisdom.

I have thought about Fred Rogers a lot in the eight years my daughter, Nia, has attended High Meadows School. I've thought about him because he knew that the only way to truly value a child was to value childhood itself, not

simply as a time of innocence but as a unique opportunity for learning and growth.

And I've thought about him because more and more it is childhood itself — the idea of childhood as a unique and protected place — that has come under siege.

We see it everywhere. We see it on TV, where so many children don't act like children at all,

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but rather mini-adults. We see it on the Internet, where children not only have access to information never intended for them but also to supposedly age-appropriate games and entertainment that act like digital caffeine. And,

alas, we see it in our schools.

It is a sad and simple fact that the educational trends that have taken hold in America's schools are not child-centered. That's why when we hear politicians talk about how they want to fix what they call "the crisis in American education," they talk about goals and standards instead of about children.

Children are inconvenient in many ways, but they are especially inconvenient to an educational system that has grown increasingly standardized and data-driven.

At the very moment when technology is supposed to have unleashed the individual, American education has become more institutional, if not frankly, industrial. Its signature has become the test and the teacher under pressure to teach to it — education for all shrunk to the idea that one size fits all.

High Meadows does not offer one-size-fits-all education. It offers, instead, education that respects the fact that all children learn differently, with different styles and different strengths and different developmental timetables. It understands that the best way to teach a child is as an individual, and the best way to teach an individual is within a truly supportive community.

High Meadows does not try to discover how much children can do — how high they can score on a test or how much homework they can endure. It does the much more challenging and rewarding work of encouraging them to love what they do, and therefore to discover who they can be. It is not an “easy” school, but rather a school that believes in the radical notion that school should be the place where children love going, and therefore the place where they are free to live up to their true potential.

How does High Meadows go about bringing out the best in the children who go there?

By giving them a place to play, and by remembering that it’s by playing that children first begin to learn. By remembering that kids teach each other. By encouraging them not just to ask questions but to be questioning. By never, ever, giving them a reason to be scared of school.

By focusing not on test scores, but on the quality of their hearts and minds and spirits.

By recognizing the importance of friendships. By understanding that a child’s desire to learn is based on a child’s desire to be understood, respected and valued. By believing in children, along with their input and

their ideas. By making the effort to “get” the children who populate its classrooms and playgrounds, its woods and its meadows. And by challenging them to think for themselves rather than to reproduce the thinking of others.

There are many schools that take pride in making the lives of children difficult, as a way of preparing them for the “real world.” High Meadows believes that the real world is the new world — the world being built by those who know how to think critically and creatively.

We live in an age of amazing invention and daunting change. Indeed, we live in an age that scares adults a lot more than it scares the children who take to both invention and change as their natural birthright. And yet so much of our educational system has arisen in

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response to fear, and as a result has very little to do with children.

Attempts to standardize education, such as Common Core, don't even have all that much to do with education, because they are institutional answers to institutional problems. But we no longer live in an institutional world. We live in a digital world, where individuals can upend institutions with a single good idea.

The real common core of the digital world is the kind of education that takes individual children into account, and meets them on their own terms ... the kind of education that High Meadows has been offering since long before the digital world began, in its classrooms, on its playgrounds, in its woods, at its stables, in the barn where students stage their plays, in the community center where they make their music, and, of course, on its highest meadows.

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