Let's blame it all on Mr. Rogers

Parents' attempts to boost kids' egos turned them narcissistic, some say

From Wire Reports

Don Chance, a finance professor at Louisiana State University, says it dawned on him last spring. The semester was ending, and as usual, students were making a pilgrimage to his office, asking for the extra points needed to lift their grades to A's.

"They felt so entitled," he recalls, "and it just hit me. We can blame Mr. Rogers."

Fred Rogers, the late TV icon, told generations of children that they were "special" just for being whoever they were. He meant well, and he was a sterling role model in many ways. But what often got lost in his esteem-building patter was the idea that being special comes from working hard and having high expectations for yourself.

Now Mr. Rogers, like Dr. Spock before him, has been targeted for re-evaluation. And he's not the only one. As educators and researchers struggle to define the new parameters of parenting, circa 2007, some are revisiting the language of child ego-boosting.

Some are calling for a recalibration of the mindsets and catch-phrases that have taken hold in recent decades. Among the expressions now being challenged:

"You're special." Signs of narcissism among college students have been rising for 25 years, according to a recent study led by a San Diego State University psychologist. Obviously, Mr. Rogers alone can't be blamed for this. But as Dr. Chance sees it, "He's representative of a culture of excessive doting."

American students often view lower grades as a reason to "hit you up for an A because they came to class and feel they worked hard," says Dr. Chance. He wishes more parents would offer kids this perspective: "The world owes you nothing. You have to work and compete. If you want to be special, you'll have to prove it."

"They're just children." When kids are rude, self-absorbed or disrespectful, some parents allow or endure it by saying, "Well, they're just children." The phrase is a worthy one when it's applied to a teachable moment, such as telling kids not to stick their fingers in electrical sockets. But as an excuse or as justification for unacceptable behavior, "They're just children" is just misguided.

"Call me Cindy." When a child calls an adult Mr. or Ms., it helps him recognize that status is earned by age and experience.

"Tell me about your day." It is crucial to talk to kids about their lives, and that can enrich the whole family. However, parents also need to discuss their own lives and experiences, says Alvin Rosenfeld, a Manhattan child psychiatrist who studies family interactions.

He encourages parents to talk about their passions and interests; about politics, business, world events. "Because everything is child-centered today, we're depriving children of adults," he says. "If they never see us as adults being adults, how will they deal with important matters when it is their world?"

Jeffrey Zaslow,
The Wall Street Journal