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A BEAUTIFUL DAY IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Need Parenting Help as the Pandemic Persists? Send in *Daniel Tiger*

The Emmy-winning *Mister Rogers* spinoff has been keeping kids sane in lockdown—and now it's got an entire episode focused on the coronavirus.

BY CHRISTOPHER ROSEN

AUGUST 13, 2020



For parents of toddlers, the song of the summer belongs not to **Taylor Swift**, **Cardi B** and **Megan Thee Stallion**, or **The Chicks**, but a four-year-old animated tiger.

“When you feel so mad that you want to roar, take a deep breath and count to four,” sings Daniel Tiger in one of the more resonate tracks from the PBS Kids series *Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood*.

“That’s what’s so brilliant about every episode,” **Ellen Doherty**, executive producer of *Daniel Tiger* and chief creative officer of Fred Rogers Productions, recently told *Vanity Fair*. “There’s just always something—an idea that’s designed for four-year-olds, but if you’re 44 or 64 or 24, you can learn something from it too.”

Inspired by Daniel Striped Tiger, the puppet Fred Rogers used so memorably and deftly on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* debuted in 2012. In the years since, it's become as baked into the firmament of early childhood entertainment as *Sesame Street*. Across dozens of episodes, Daniel and his family and friends navigate events and emotions big and small, using catchy songs to drive home lessons about everything from feeling jealousy toward a friend ("When you feel jealous, talk about it, and we'll figure something out") to using the potty ("When you have to go potty, stop and go right away; flush and wash and be on your way").

But for its season five premiere, the *Daniel Tiger* team was tasked with a challenge more daunting than even apologizing ("Saying I'm sorry is the first step; then, how can I help?"): to create an episode that maintained the show's timeless quality while addressing the fear and uncertainty associated with the coronavirus pandemic.

"Whether it's a change to routine, or parents adapting to working from home, or missing time with friends and family, those are some of the things that the advisors pointed to as things children would be wondering about," senior producer **Chris Loggins** told *Vanity Fair*, referring to the child-development experts who advise the series. "If we can show kids that Daniel is experiencing some of the things that they're going through, the hope is that it can make it a little bit easier for them."

He added, "I think part of that goes back to a quote from Mr. Rogers that I'll paraphrase, which is, 'What's mentionable is manageable.' If we can only talk about our feelings and things we may be wondering about, it might make them easier to understand."



Called *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood: Won't You Sing Along With Me?*, the special finds Daniel reckoning with the cancellation of the Neighborhood Carnival and the fact that he can't see his friends and extended family. In keeping with the precarious nature of the moment, the episode acknowledges that not even Daniel's parents, the indefatigable Mom and Dad Tiger, have all the answers.

"Things have changed a lot lately, and it's frustrating. Your dad and I are upset about it too," Mom Tiger says before one of the many songs in the episode, "Grown-Ups Are Here to Take Care of

You.” Parents who will undoubtedly watch this episode dozens of times before Labor Day will note that the words “coronavirus” and “COVID-19” are not uttered once.

“We talked about identifying COVID-19 specifically. We ended up not doing that, partly because we didn’t want to introduce any additional fear for children about getting sick,” Loggins said, adding that children in *Daniel Tiger’s* core audience of two- to four-year-olds had more basic questions, like “Why can’t I see my friends?” or “Why can’t I go do the thing that I always get to do?”

“It’s hard, because when something becomes dated, it becomes very dated,” Doherty said. “It’s just like when you see somebody’s mobile phone. If you see a flip phone in a show, it’s like, ‘Oh, OK. That was a while ago.’”

Under normal conditions, episodes of *Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood* take 40 weeks to produce. Production on the coronavirus episode, however, started in April.

“Back at the beginning of the pandemic, it was like, Well, we don’t know what things are going to be like this summer. But clearly there will be a need, because it’s not like this happened on a Monday and by Friday, everything was fine,” Doherty said. “This is something that kids are going to be dealing with, families—we’re all going to be dealing with for a while. Masks were just starting to be worn back then. And the work-life disruptions had started. But everybody tried to look at the key ideas and experiences that will be most relevant.”

Typically, *Daniel Tiger* scripts go through several drafts, which are reviewed by child-development experts along the way. “We didn’t cut any of those corners with this—we just did it much faster,” Loggins said. “We still wanted the final product to be up to our standards. One of the things that we try to do all the time is to earn the trust of parents that are choosing the show for their kids. In this instance, that is no different.”

According to Loggins, while most of the episode is brand-new—including dialogue that was recorded remotely and a fresh storyline—the show did draw from some existing strategies and songs, like an older track in which Daniel learns about germs, to help expedite the episode.



Going forward, Doherty and Loggins both said future episodes of *Daniel Tiger* might put a greater emphasis on health and hygiene—guidance that toddlers can use during the pandemic as well as after it eventually subsides. But while the special ends with Daniel and his pals connecting with each other via the all-too-familiar tiled-screen experience of videoconferencing, don't expect season five and beyond to include a lot of Zoom conversations.

“We did decide to do the special opening song and a special closing song that has that Zoom look to it,” Loggins said. “But we don't necessarily say in the episode that this is a video call or a Zoom call, and that is intentional. Partly, there's limited technology in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe.”

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