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Positive Parenting
September 2013
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WELCOMING THE STRANGER

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing
that some have entertained angels without knowing it

Hebrews 13:2

What? Are you kidding me? Since I was a child a very long time ago, parents have taught children not to talk to strangers. My parents were a bit oblique about why, but I was fairly certain it was a fear that I would be given poisoned candy. The news today is full of lurid details, so children and adults alike are not left to wonder about what that danger might be. So, why would a parent educator, a parent and grandparent herself, encourage those who love children to teach them to welcome strangers?

Let me be clear: I am not suggesting that you encourage your children to wander off, engage with unknown adults, or go for a ride with someone they do not know. Wisdom about avoiding risky situations is still important, but we need our kids to know that, when we are present, adults to whom we introduce them, their doctor's nurse, their new teacher are not strangers to avoid. There are children who need them to learn to welcome the new kid, to include the ones who are left out.

It is because God, in Jesus, first welcomed us in our baptism, made us part of the family of faith and declared us beloved and forgiven. Jesus told his followers to love their neighbors as themselves. The neighbors he enjoined them to love are not the likely suspects, but the foreigners, those reviled in their culture. This is no small thing to which Jesus calls us ... and our children. So how will we begin?

You will be their first teacher about welcoming the stranger. Let them watch you or tell them about a time when you welcomed someone new.

My family moved when I was in kindergarten and knew no one in my new school. My mother took me to my new school, introduced me to my new teacher, who introduced me to my classmates. My teacher partnered me with a friend who lived near my new house to be my walking buddy. I felt huge relief. My walking buddy taught me how the crossing guards the controlled intersection. She showed me my street and walked me to my new house. The next day, she picked me up at my house to walk to school. She was only five years old, but she knew how to welcome the stranger.

Ten years later, my family moved from St. Paul to St. Louis and I didn't have an assigned walking buddy. Although I had walked the empty halls with my schedule, identifying my classrooms and how to navigate between them, the first day of school, I was still a very insecure, self-conscious junior. My first hour class was gym. When we were asked to sign up for the sports we wanted to play, an angel appeared in the form of Gayle Gullick, a junior girl, who invited me to sign up for the same sports she had selected. At lunchtime, Gayle appeared again, saying she had saved me a place at her table! I was stunned, relieved, and unbelievably grateful. She became a treasured friend, and I will never forget how she welcomed this stranger.

Can you begin now, equipping your child to be the one who welcomes the new kid in class this year? Can you help them plan strategies if they are the new kid in a class or sport or activity? Can you listen, just listen, as they pour out their hurt, when no one welcomed them? Harvest what they wished kids had done to welcome them.

This is a lifelong skill, a way we live out Jesus' injunction to welcome the stranger and love our oft unknown neighbor as ourselves.

FAMILY ACTIVITIES

- When a new person or family moves into your neighborhood or your building, buy or bake a treat; make a welcoming card or have your kids color pictures; make a list of people who live in the area, with names and contact info; include a list of neighborhood resources (grocery store, post office, parks, historic sites, bank, your congregation); and deliver it, as a family, to introduce yourself and meet your new neighbor.
- There will probably be a new child or youth in your kid's class this fall. Talk about how hard it is to be the new kid and role play some ways to

welcome those who are new to your child's school. Pray for those who will be new. Thank God for the opportunity to welcome the stranger.

- Remind your family that we are called to be “little Christs” and welcome all of God's family. No one is to be excluded.
- When your child is going to be the “new kid,” brainstorm ways to introduce themselves, find kids with shared interests, and ask to be included. Let them know ahead of time that not all children, youth, or adults are good at including the person who is new. Prepare them for a situation that is unwelcoming. Debrief the experience with them.
- Tell about a time when you were the “new kid,” whether that happened to you as a child or last week on a new job. Be honest about what was hard and lonely. Tell about those who made you feel welcome.