

MAKING CONNECTIONS

HOW LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® CONNECTS STRANGERS AND CREATES MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS. BY EMAD SAIF

Have you ever overheard a super interesting conversation between strangers and felt a strong urge to join in? How about spotting your favourite book in the hand of a stranger and wanted to chat about it? Or, how about wanting to introduce yourself to that friendly stranger you see on your way home?

We are faced with similar situations every day. Some people may act on their impulses and speak with strangers effortlessly, while many would choose to look away, zip their lips and mind their own business.

Why do we shy away from casual interactions with strangers while we clearly have an inner voice telling us otherwise?

One piece of research suggests that it's often due to a misplaced anxiety that strangers might not want to talk to us. Most of the time this belief is actually false! As it turns out, many people are actually perfectly willing to chat and some would even be flattered to receive your attention!

Another piece of research suggests that "weak ties", meaning interacting with people that we don't know very well, is actually a mood booster and creates feelings of belonging that we didn't expect! This is quite different than interacting with family, friends and people we know.

Perhaps what's more surprising are the emotional benefits to "introverts". In five different studies, researchers essentially told introverted participants to "act extraverted," being more outgoing and talkative than usual. The participants found that doing so actually felt pretty good and thus confirmed the novel hypothesis: Introverts underestimate the pleasure they might gain from increased social interaction. This is of course not an absolute rule, but an overlooked gain for introverts to consider every now and then.

This of course doesn't suggest that we should talk to every stranger we meet, but to consider that we are overwhelmingly biased towards not doing so at the cost of considerable gains.

What do we gain from talking to strangers?

- 1. It makes us feel more human** - Every time you greet a stranger with your eyes, say "Hello" or start a conversation you are affirming your existence as well as theirs. You've made it clear that you see and acknowledge others and that can be a big deal for many who feel invisible in society. We are all humans!
- 2. It makes us feel more understood** - A number of sociological studies

found that sometimes strangers understand us better than our friends and family. That's because we may explain things more clearly and freely to strangers than to loved ones. Critical distance helps: "A stranger can listen to your feelings without having to live with them," Kio Stark in her new book "When Strangers Meet".

- 3. It can unlock hidden opportunities** - When we unplug our ear-piece, open our senses, start looking people in the eye, say "Hello" and start conversations with strangers we can tap into hidden opportunity. That stranger may help you land a job, introduce a friend or a million other things that you would normally miss. Strangers can be way kinder than you might think!
- 4. It can teach us invaluable lessons** - Strangers from all walk of life carry wisdom, life lessons, unique perspectives and amazing stories. These can challenge our own biases, develop empathy, gratefulness, inspiration and sometimes find answers to questions we couldn't address with our family and friends

With this realisation, how do we make talking to strangers easier?

I believe play is a powerful antidote to the anxiety and fear that stop us



from interacting with strangers. Play is a natural behaviour in mammals including us humans. Play is often how we form trust as groups and tribes. Nothing lights up the brain like play. Three dimensional play fires up the cerebellum, puts lots of impulses into the frontal lobe (the executive portion), helps contextual memory be developed and much more. Therefore, I see play as an immersive social phenomenon that creates an emotional safety, trust and collaboration in any group way beyond just speaking to each other.

As a certified facilitator in the LEGO Serious Play (LSP) methodology, I have seen this repeatedly in my workshops. I become fascinated with the idea of using LSP to connect strangers through play and create meaningful connections.

My main hypothesis:
Strangers + Play = Friends.

In this context, strangers are people who don't know each other yet and have no prior connections. Play is the unique human experience specially designed for strangers to undergo. Friends are the transformed strangers into people who now know each other and have

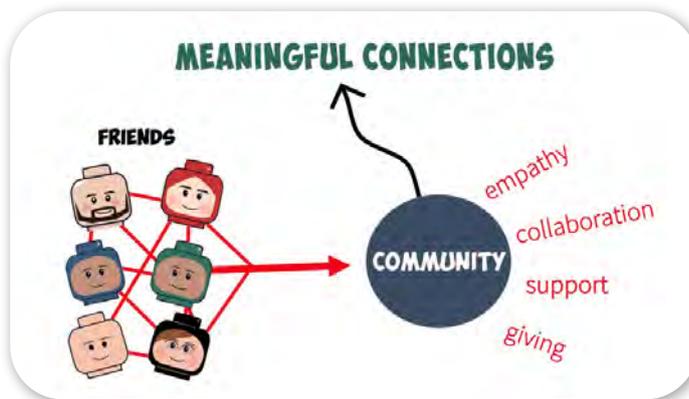


unlocked meaningful and valuable connections.

For over 2 years, I ran **PLAY MEETUP**, a social initiative that helps people connect and create more meaningful connections through PLAY.

PLAY MEETUP utilises the power of LEGO Serious Play methodology

to create a unique experience where strangers play, build, share



stories, reflect and make meaningful connections! In a way, it's gamified networking on a much deeper level.

Here is why many have attended PLAY MEETUP

- Expand personal network & make meaningful connections
- Engage in interesting topics & discussions
- Develop empathy & listening skills
- Overcome fear of self-expression
- Release stress & have fun!

What is the takeaway?

We have been told to avoid strangers as children. "Stranger is danger" they said and that was of course for good reasons. However, this rule is not

as applicable to adults. Strangers are not always scary or dangerous! There are many benefits and far less threats than we imagined. We can become happier, more empathetic, grateful, mindful, connected and less ignorant.

Again, we don't need to talk to every stranger we meet, but to consider

it every now and then for the considerable gains outlined.

If talking to strangers is great, playing with them is even greater. Utilising LEGO Serious Play as a method to connect strangers have been an incredible journey for

me personally. PLAY MEETUP connected strangers from all walks of life who wouldn't normally speak. It created deeper bonds where many have become friends and now a growing community.

Finally, the Irish poet William Butler Yeats said, "There are no strangers here, only friends you haven't yet met." Likewise, PLAY MEETUP is an innovative approach to connect with the friends you haven't met yet!

To learn more about Play Meetup follow our page @playmeetup on Instagram and visit our website www.playmeetup.com.

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