

I hated talking to strangers – until I had a baby

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Having a baby produced an unexpected social consequence – strangers started talking to me in public, and I didn't mind.

Prior to my son's birth, my philosophy on talking to strangers remained what I had learned in kindergarten: don't. I hovered at the edge of bus stops, then climbed onto the bus and darted for the seat least likely to be shared. I routinely hid behind books, newspapers or my MP3 player, and I always followed rule number one: Never make eye contact.

On occasion, someone would breach my self-imposed barricades. At the back of an East Vancouver bus one day, a middle-aged man with long hair noticed my black instrument case. "What you got in there? A horn or something?" he asked.

I looked around to make sure he was speaking to me. I was sitting directly across from him, hunched over said instrument case, clutching my purse and a bag of groceries. There was no escape without being incredibly rude so I answered in a sharp, curt tone: "It's a violin."

A smile erupted on the stranger's face.

"Good for you! What kind of music do you like to play?"

Caught in a pleasant conversation with a stranger, I wished for my stop to come. What was wrong with me?

After my son was born, each day I played the seemingly never-ending cycle of "feed the baby, change the diaper" until eventually I managed to bundle him into a stroller, diaper bag stuffed full. I then leisurely walked up the main commercial street in my neighbourhood, enjoying the warm summer breeze on my face, fetching whatever I needed that day at the grocery store, pharmacy or bakery.

With my newborn son snuggled into a stroller in front of me, chatting with strangers became my daily reality. Everywhere I went, people stopped to peek at my son and talk to me.

"My first grandchild is now two weeks old! How old is your little one?"

"Oh, a tiny baby! Congratulations!"

It seemed no topic was taboo – sleep, feeding, weight, crying. Topics I would have once considered private were now conversational fodder with strangers. In the drugstore one afternoon, as I piled my basket full of diaper cream, pacifiers, granola bars, chocolate and other necessities, a woman stopped to look in the stroller at my sleeping son.

“What a cutie! Is it your first? Are you breastfeeding?” she inquired, giving me the once-over. “You look good.”

“Thanks,” I stammered.

“You know my sister has been breastfeeding for 11 years straight,” she said.

I tried desperately to think of the appropriate response but thankfully she called out good luck and carried on her way.

Rather than trying to avoid them, I began to relish these encounters. The smiles generated by my son, with his soft newborn skin, tuft of brown curls and cheerful pyjamas, not only strengthened my connection to the world outside my house but often helped me forget a challenging night with a fussing baby. During my first few months of maternity leave, before I had befriended other local new moms, there were days when my only social encounter was with people on the street or in shops.

Now that I have learned to enjoy these daily interactions with people in my neighbourhood, I wonder why I never initiated conversations before I had a baby. I would walk down the street, covertly peeking at babies and puppies while avoiding eye contact or communication.

I remember sitting at a coffee-shop window one sunny day nursing a latte, an unread newspaper in front of me, and watching a scene unfold with a bulldog puppy. The owner had the wrinkly, wiggly pup at a table outside and was chatting with a friend. In 20 minutes, the puppy had three visitors. I wanted to be the fourth. But instead, when I was finished my coffee, I walked by and glanced. What exactly was I afraid of? Was I shy, grumpy or did I just not know what to say?

I think it was easier to be aloof in the past because I was so often tangled up in my own busy day. And because I had habitually dodged conversations with strangers, I was starting to believe that the worldview of my social and employment circles – not exactly a vast crowd – was gospel.

But through casual chats I’ve gained insight into a wider range of beliefs and experiences. Just the other day, an elderly man stopped at my car as I wrangled my son out of his car seat.

“You know, I was born a twin in the time of horse carriages and no electricity. Can you just imagine how strong my mom must have been?” he said with a grin.

“I bet you have some great stories,” I replied. He smiled pensively, extended his gnarled hand and touched my son’s smooth pudgy one, then slowly walked away.

A baby has been a great conversation starter. The ability and opportunity to commiserate, share experiences or simply remind someone of their past is a gift, not a nuisance.

But do I sometimes take the quiet back streets instead of the main commercial drive to avoid conversation and have a quiet walk with no interruptions? Yes. And will I try talking to strangers at 7:30 a.m. when I return to my daily commute? Probably not.

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