

## ***Why It's Essential to Know Your Neighbors***

"Be concerned about your next door neighbor. Do you know your next door neighbor?"—  
Mother Teresa, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize

How many neighbors do you recognize? How many neighbors do you know by name? Unfortunately, few people today know their neighbors. Only about one third of teenagers who responded to Search Institute surveys feel that there are people in their neighborhood who care about them. We've become a fast-paced society that zips in and out of our homes while barely having the time to acknowledge our neighbors. Yet a key aspect of asset building and bringing out the best in our kids is knowing your neighbors. Here's how.

### ***Try it...***

#### ***For all parents***

- Greet every child and teenager in your neighborhood whenever you see them. Learn their names. Smile at them. Get to know them. Be sensitive to how kids respond: some open up immediately, but others are more reserved. Be patient. Some kids can warm to you over a number of weeks or months.
- The first Tuesday of August of each year is National Night Out. It's when neighbors all over the country come together to learn more about each other and talk about ways to keep their neighborhoods safe. Many neighborhoods have block parties, cookouts, parades, and visits from local police and fire departments. If your neighborhood is celebrating this event, attend it. If not, be intentional about getting to know the people in your neighborhood. Learn more at <http://www.nationalnightout.org/nno/>.
- Spend time outside when you notice your neighbors are out. Wander over to your neighbor, introduce yourself, ask your neighbor his or her name, and chitchat for a few minutes.
- It's often easier to meet neighbors when they're walking dogs or are outside with a pet. Ask about the pet and you'll often get a conversation going in no time. (Note: Kids often learn the names of neighbors' pets before they learn the names of their neighbors. Their interest in pets can be an opening for further conversation.)
- Be aware of the neighbors you are and are not comfortable with. Although most neighbors are helpful people, be aware that there may be one or two whom you wouldn't trust to be alone with your kids.
- Find out if your neighborhood has a block captain. (You can usually find this information out from your city, community, or county hall.) If there is a captain, contact that person and ask about the neighborhood. Sometimes block captains

keep a list of neighbors and know helpful information about your neighborhood.

- Once you get to know your neighbors, periodically get together to discuss neighborhood concerns. It's much easier to create, agree, and enforce neighborhood boundaries (asset #13) when neighbors know each other—and know the kids as well.
- [Download free information](#) about the study on neighbors, grown-ups and kids.
- Figure out fun, easy ways to get together with neighbors. One neighborhood has purchased a number of plastic flamingoes. Every Friday, one neighbor takes all the plastic flamingoes and puts them out in his front yard. The neighbors call it Flamingo Friday, and when the flamingoes are out, it's an invitation for all the neighbors to come over and visit while the neighborhood kids organize fun games and activities.

### ***For parents with children ages birth to 5***

- As you go for family walks, stop and say hello to a neighbor when you see one outside. Young children can be a good conversation starter.
- With your children, draw a picture of your neighborhood. Go for a walk and record the house or apartment numbers. As you gradually get to know your neighbors, fill in the names of your neighbors with the corresponding house or apartment numbers on your drawing.
- Find out if there are other young children who live on your block. If so, invite the family over for lemon aid and cookies. See how the kids play together.
- Whenever you visit grandparents, ask about their neighbors. Often neighborhoods become segregated by age. Families with young children move in around the same time and then never move out. Sometimes you and your kids can find two strong neighborhoods: one around your home and another around your parent's (or in-law's) home.

### ***For parents with children ages 6 - 9***

- Periodically set up a neighborhood activity with kids that gets them excited, such as an art project, a game, or even a bike and trike parade. Ask kids what they'd like to do with your help. Get the word out by making flyers and sticking them on (or under) your neighbor's doors.
- If your kids want to set up a lemonade or Kool-Aid stand, encourage them to do so. This is often a good way to get to know your neighbors.
- When you see a new neighbor move in, bake some cookies, bring them over, and introduce yourself. Have your kids go with you. If the new neighbor has children, usually she'll bring them out to meet your kids.

### ***For parents with children ages 10 - 15***

- As kids become more friendship oriented, they'll bond more deeply with either the neighborhood kids or kids from other neighborhoods. If your children don't have good friends in your own neighborhood, have them attend neighborhood events by bringing a friend from another neighborhood.
- Be clear about what's acceptable and unacceptable neighborhood behavior. For example, tell kids not to ride their bikes over the neighbor's grass and not to use a neighbor's basketball hoop without first getting permission. Be sure to point out

when you see kids doing something good or nice. Compliment them.

- Continue to stay connected to your neighbors, even when your kids don't. Talk about what your kids (and your neighbor's kids) are doing. See if there are ways you can support each other, such as by cheering on a neighborhood kid at a game or attending a music concert.

### ***For parents with children ages 16 - 18***

- Even if they don't see your teenager often, keep in touch with your neighbors—especially those who have had a long-term relationship with your teenager. Tell them what your kids are up to. This keeps neighbors and teenagers connected even when they rarely see each other.
- If you ever go out of town and need to leave your teenagers at home, let your neighbors know—and tell them what to do if certain situations arise. In many neighborhoods, neighbors keep an eye out for each other's teenagers and are quick to intervene if they suspect trouble may be brewing. (Sometimes the best intervention is to give you a call.)
- Make connections between your teenager and neighbors who have a similar interest. For example, one teenager who loved chemistry found out that a neighbor was a chemical engineer. The two started talking and then began doing projects together. The neighbor became a significant role model and mentor for the teenage girl.
- Occasionally invite an interesting neighbor over for a meal or a dessert. Get to know each other more as you eat together. This is a great way to get older teenagers involved—especially if you serve a favorite food of your teenager.