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Useful Community Development... quick notes

This month's order: Suburban Emphasis, Rural Emphasis, City Emphasis. It rotates!
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Top 5 Tips for Suburban Socializing

Let's say that you are in a typical suburb and you would like to get to know your neighbors. Maybe the one on your right is friendly because your kids are the same age. But the neighbor on the left barely speaks to you, you are not sure who's in the family, and you have struck out on starting a conversation. For healthy reasons, you want to know who lives around you. How about a get-acquainted party?

These five tips may or may not apply in a big city or small town environment where you have the same issue, but perhaps you can adapt these suggestions to what would work in your situation.

1

Good food is the great ice-breaker. Food gives a common topic of conversation, and tasty (not fancy) food shows that someone cares. A meal gives the busy person an excuse to spend the time ("Well, I

have to eat anyway"), although a festive snack may provide enough of an incentive for people to attend.

Believe it or not, there are some potential problems with food. Don't go far above or far below the average tastes. If you serve hot dogs in a baked brie neighborhood, people may be uncomfortable rather than charmed. And vice versa. You may decide to ask either a few people you know or everyone who attends to kick in a suggested donation. Again, the food costs need to seem reasonable.

Lastly, people are increasingly finicky about food, so make sure you have thought of the gluten-free, vegetarian, vegan, peanut allergy, anti-sugar, or anti-fried food sentiments.

2

If at all possible, **divide up the work** of inviting people to the party, preparing and organizing for it, and cleaning up afterward. This means that someone besides you will have a stake in the success of this gathering. Explain carefully what you are trying to accomplish, and seek agreement on the goals. If you literally know no one, you might have to face potentially doing all the work and financing this whole thing. But if it's a good party, someone will offer to help on the spot. So worry less about people helping you clean up and more about who is going to help pay and invite.

3

Think through things for the children to do, unless that is completely self-evident because the children all know each other anyway, or there is a playground in the median. Since you are feeling a need for this get-acquainted party, it's more likely that the children are not guaranteed to know one another either, so plan both some active games (jump rope, Twister, relay races, frisbee, wiffle ball) and some quieter activities such as board games. Of course also make sure there is some child-friendly food.

4

Distribute written invitations door-to-door well in advance. For your neighborhood that might mean two to four weeks ahead of time. If more than two weeks before the event, you'll need reminders too. Be clear about the starting time, food or refreshments (being as specific as possible to prevent misunderstanding), any closing time that must be enforced, activities planned, whether RSVP is necessary, what people should bring (lawn chairs, their own plates, their own beverages, and so forth), and whether any disturbances to the non-partying neighbor could be expected (street closure, pool closure, loud music till 8 p.m., for instance). If you have specific purposes in mind, such as wanting to make sure all neighbors know one another or giving information about a proposed development, be sure to state those. Give your phone number, Facebook page, or other contact info.

5

Be ready for anything. If getting acquainted is one of your goals, have name tags ready. Expect people who didn't bring what was requested, who have specific food allergies, or who forgot the bug spray. Keep a first aid handy. If a city permit is required, be sure you have it and know its conditions, especially if

planning to occupy the street. If you have rival factions, or an area divided along lines of age or ethnicity, have in mind a strategy for defusing tensions.

Adding Population to Rural Areas

Just based on the correspondence we receive at the website, we would know that loss of population is a major concern in rural areas of the U.S. But the move to repopulate rural towns and countryside is world-wide, with notable efforts in Australia, China, Japan, Ireland, Spain, France, and on and on. In societies that find something to value in a rural lifestyle, the lack of workers and families to support viable community is a concern.

Thus far what can be learned from the U.S. experience is that the most successful efforts break down the historic parochialism of each town, or dare we say rivalry, and learn to cooperate on a regional basis. Benefits of this approach include cross-learning, but also cooperation to provide essential services and amenities within reasonable driving distances without duplicating stores, services, and programs unnecessarily. So get busy with embracing whatever county-wide or multi-county initiatives might be struggling to succeed in your area.

There are strong support organizations available in almost every state, varying from state government initiatives such as Rural Opportunity Zones in Kansas to private initiatives such as [Nebraska Rural Living](#). Granted, many of these projects have to struggle with idealized (and therefore partly false) ideas of rural living, but also the deeply rooted families will have to accept some cultural shift toward the expectations of urban dwellers who may want to move to the country.

Benefits of re-population are essential to a reasonable standard of living for rural families, so it behooves both current and future residents to work together to capture the essence of rural and small town advantages including close interaction with nature, enhanced sense of community, a reasonable pace, and simplified material needs.

If you want to read some more, check out our pages on [rural economic development](#), [rural community development](#) in general, [rural housing](#), and [agricultural zoning](#).



The Latest on Neighborhood Effects

Neighborhood effects is a name that has been given to a body of research that deals in part with how neighborhood alone impacts life outcomes for children. Since an accidental experiment in Chicago in the 1990s, this work has focused on the question of whether moving people from a distressed neighborhood into a somewhat higher income area leads to more educational achievement, better job prospects, and the like. Most researchers have concluded that yes, better things happen to children who are relocated out of [community poverty areas](#), such as public housing, into slightly more affluent neighborhoods.

Like all academic research, there are a number of conflicting results reported, and the researchers snipe at one another about real and imagined biases. But for us, there is enough evidence to conclude that it is important to the future of children to try to create a mixed-income environment for them. People in the toughest neighborhoods do not have to be relocated to a fancy suburb; even a move from a 75 percent poverty rate (below, left) to a 50 percent poverty rate area (below, right) leads to better outcomes.

So what are you supposed to do if you are in a city neighborhood with very widespread poverty?

Since neighborhood groups and such have no ability to move people away from their neighborhoods to a less disadvantaged neighborhood, why not take the research findings in the opposite direction? As recently suggested by the [Strong Towns organization](#), we also should interpret these results as implying that we could bring opportunity, in the form of better employment possibilities and better schools, into those very low income neighborhoods.

While this is an extremely tall order for a neighborhood association or CDC, it is easier and more friendly than relocating all the families with children to a better neighborhood.

So city neighborhoods, get involved with bringing employers into your neighborhood. To be successful you'll need an alliance with your local economic development agency. Become a tireless advocate for yourselves with that agency. Also you need somewhat better schools, so perhaps it is time to swallow your pride and embrace a charter school--or pressure the school district to let you become heavily involved in improving a neighborhood school substantially. Both of these are difficult, but we also know from the neighborhood effects research, among other sources, that the results will be worth it.

In fact we have to say that if you want the children to succeed in life, working on better opportunity for jobs and education is even more important than improving physical conditions in the neighborhood. Of course there are other arguments for improving the quality of the housing and the appearance of the neighborhood, but we'll have more about those subjects next month.



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