

Building Your Community

Welcoming Newcomers

The need: Almost everyone knows the feeling of being the new one: not knowing anyone, not knowing how things work, feeling like an outsider. New students, families who just moved in, and people starting over in a new country all share that feeling. A warm welcome from youth can turn a lonely arrival into a sense of belonging.

"A stranger is just a friend I haven't met yet." — Will Rogers

"A smile is the universal welcome." — Max Eastman

"I am because we are." — African (Ubuntu) proverb

FACILITATOR NOTES

Time. about 60–90 minutes, run in one sitting. Works in a classroom, youth group, or club. Option A needs no setup; Options B and C use real service arranged ahead of time.

Service today. Pick one option in Serve below and set it up before you begin.

Warm-up (10 minutes)

FACILITATOR NOTES

Keep this quick, short answers are great. Read the questions together.

- Have you ever been the new person somewhere? What did that feel like?
- What's one thing someone did, or could have done, that made being new easier?
- What's hard about joining a place where everyone already knows each other?
- Beyond a new student, who else in a community might be starting over and feeling like an outsider?

Learn (10–20 minutes)

A newcomer is anyone who's recently arrived and hasn't found their place yet: a student who just transferred in, a family that moved across the country, or people starting life over in a brand-new country. However they got here, they tend to face the same things. They don't know anyone, and they don't know how things work. Even the ordinary stuff, where to sit, who to ask, how things are done, can feel overwhelming. On top of that, some are also learning a new language or a whole new way of life. What turns that around is simple and powerful: someone who notices them and makes them feel welcome.

Being new often means:

- Not knowing anyone, and eating, sitting, or standing alone.
- Not knowing how things work here: the routines, the unwritten rules, where to go.
- Feeling like an outsider, even when people are perfectly nice.

A closer look. A girl started at a new school three weeks ago. She's new to the town, and new to the language, so the days are a blur of not-quite-understanding. Lunch is the worst part. She sits alone, watching everyone else laugh with friends they've had for years. Then a couple of students start including her, saving her a seat, teaching her the slang, laughing with her when she mixes up a word. It's

nothing dramatic. But she stops dreading mornings. Years later, she'll remember exactly who made her feel like she belonged.

Why a welcome matters so much. Belonging is a basic human need, and being new strips it away all at once. A newcomer has lost their familiar people, places, and routines, and has to rebuild everything from scratch, often while feeling watched and unsure. The hardest part is usually not the practical stuff; it's the loneliness of being surrounded by people who already belong. That's also the good news: you don't need any special training to fix it. A friendly face, an invitation, a little patience, these turn a stranger into a neighbor. Whoever helps a newcomer feel welcome is doing something that person will never forget.

How youth can help. Welcoming people is something youth are uniquely good at, because you know exactly how it feels to be new. Youth can:

- Notice and include newcomers: introduce yourself, save them a seat, bring them into the group.
- Be a guide: show them how things work here, where to go, who to ask, the unwritten rules.
- Be patient with language and differences: speak clearly, be kind about mistakes, stay curious.
- Help newly arrived families feel at home, through a school or welcome program, by being friendly.

Keep these in mind.

- **Make the first move.** Newcomers rarely feel safe approaching first. You go to them.
- **Welcome, don't interrogate.** Be warm and curious, but don't pepper people with questions about where they're from or why they came.
- **Patience with differences.** Language, food, customs, or habits may differ. Kindness and curiosity beat judgment every time.
- **Belonging takes more than one day.** Keep including them past the first hello; that's when real belonging is built.

Serve (30–60 minutes)

Today you'll put this into practice in a real service activity. Here are ways to do it:

Option A — Welcome someone new today *(no cost, no prep, works in any setting)*

Look for someone new in your school, group, or neighborhood, and make them feel welcome: introduce yourself, learn their name, invite them to sit or join in, and show them one thing that helps (where something is, how something works). You know how being new feels. Be the person you'd have wanted. It asks nothing of you and can change someone's whole week.

Option B — Make a welcome *(low cost, a bit more effort)*

As a group, create something that helps newcomers feel at home: a friendly “welcome” guide to your school or town (the helpful basics and unwritten rules), a welcome kit for a new family, or a buddy system that pairs newcomers with someone for their first weeks. Make it warm, not just informational.

Prepare ahead. As the facilitator, you'll settle ahead of time who the welcome is for, a specific new family, new students, or a partner program's clients, so the guide, kit, or buddy system fits real people.

Option C — Befriend a newcomer over time *(more effort; ongoing welcome)*

Through a school program or a local or national nonprofit that welcomes newcomers and refugees, build an ongoing welcome for a new student or family: regular friendly contact over their first weeks or

months. Practice the language together, show them around, include them, and be a steady, friendly presence. Belonging is built over time, and you can be a big part of it.

Prepare ahead. As the facilitator, you'll connect ahead of time with a school program or a local or national newcomer or refugee nonprofit and set up the group's ongoing role. JustServe.org can help you find one and make the connection.

Before you go (all options): Welcome new students and families in public, supervised settings, with a partner, and let your mentor set up anything involving a resettlement or newcomer program. Respect privacy: don't ask people about their background, status, or past unless they choose to share. Follow the rules of any program you work with.

Reflect (10 minutes)

FACILITATOR NOTES

After serving, talk through a few of these together, then give everyone quiet time to write.

Thinking back to being new yourself, what did this experience help you understand?

What's the difference between being polite to a newcomer and actually making them feel they belong?

Was anything awkward, like a language gap or not knowing what to say? How did you handle it?

Why might a small welcome matter more than the newcomer ever lets on?

Then finish one or both sentences:

One newcomer I want to help feel welcome is...

One way I'll help someone new belong, past the first hello, is...
