



CONVERSATION WITH PARENTS:

Those Who Eat Alone

Amy Wilner, Psy.D.

My friend Hillary and I were recently talking about “No One Eats Alone,” the most recent component in Beyond Differences’ powerful campaign to help young people eliminate social isolation in middle school.

Hillary remembered her own experience: every school day for three years, she walked home (you could still go off-campus then), ate lunch by herself at her kitchen table, and watched the clock until it was time to go back for her first afternoon class. Her only friends were kids a year younger than she, from the neighborhood, and classes didn’t mix socially in middle school.

At the beginning of high school, things were more promising; she was playing sports and meeting people when a traumatic eye injury kept her away from school for seven weeks. By the time she returned, cliques had formed. At lunch, she sat alone beneath her locker, waiting for time to pass. But then things finally changed. She started drinking and using drugs, and all of a sudden, she had friends. Lots of friends. It turned out it was easy to be popular: all you had to do was get wasted most of the time, and there were a whole bunch of people, also wasted, who thought you were great to hang out with!

“I wonder sometimes,” says Hillary, now sober for more than 25 years, “how different my life would have been if I had had even one friend back then.”

I think about a patient of mine, Jennifer, whose three best friends from grade school abruptly dumped her in eighth grade, without explanation. In high school, she was socially successful, and now, halfway through college, Jennifer is popular by any measure. People are drawn to her humor, kindness, and intelligence. Yet her

friendships are only as secure as they are constant. When someone doesn’t return a phone call right away, she can become anxious, even panicky. She worries she’s done something to anger the friend, or that the friend has somehow decided to stop liking her.

Isaac, another patient, dealt with his shyness in sixth grade by withdrawing into video games. His addiction developed slowly over the course of

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high school; when he stopped going to classes in college because he could no longer leave the screen, he failed everything, and had to come home.

We know that the adolescent brain is incomplete, and that cognitive development continues into one’s late 20s. We also know that significant experiences from the beginning of life onward shape our characters and help configure our neurological wiring. Much depends on the highly individual factors of resilience, and the absence of compounding variables such as mood disorders or genetic loading for addiction.

Middle school isn’t where people’s stories begin and end, but it comes at a critical time for psychological development. How would Hillary’s life be different if she hadn’t started drinking and using in high school? Will Jennifer ever trust that a friendship isn’t vulnerable to some invisible factor over which she has no control? Can Isaac nurture and sustain his engagement in the real world?

It’s true that lots of people get through middle school without severe

scars. It’s also true that many don’t. And although there are some young people who actually prefer to be by themselves, most of those who are alone on a daily basis wish they weren’t.

Children stay self-centered for years, and even longer than that if we let them. It can be good to remind both ourselves and our kids that those who eat alone aren’t just choosing not to show up in our lives, but we are

choosing not to show up in theirs. And it’s worth considering that all we would have to do to change that is extend an invitation, or even just start out by saying hello.

Each month, Dr. Wilner answers parents’ questions in her online forum, “Conversations with Parents,” at www.BeyondDifferences.org/resources/parent-resources/. Click on “Tips for Parents.”

LETTER, continued from page 1

additional \$10,000 for “No One Eats Alone.” This campaign has allowed us to distribute more purple backpack toolkits and provide the support to bring this campaign to many more schools. Thanks to your generosity, we hit our goal!

Thank you for holding us close and supporting us through our early years of growth. We are striving for success with every step we take. We hope you will contact us to ask questions or offer help. For the sake of our children and their right to enjoy a healthy middle school experience, we thank you!

Warm regards,
Laura Talmus and Ace Smith