

# YOU'VE GOT mail

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*Like the humble scrunchie or a remake of The Babysitters Club, is it time for a pen pal revival?*

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**I**n our modern world, pen pals are synonymous with 90s nostalgia. Along with video stores, *Dolly* magazine and *Saturday Disney*, pen pals faded into the mist as social media steered our attention in a digital direction. But pen pals offered a unique opportunity that Instagram doesn't – the ability to get to know someone slowly, letting themselves unravel their lives in their own words. It's a dialogue. A connection. And if you're a good match, it can become a lifelong friendship.

A chance connection in the first year of my son's life led me to my first adult pen pal relationship – another mum with a boy of a similar age. We aren't Facebook friends, I've never met her in person (we've only communicated by email), but my fellow parental pen pal has been both a comfort and a lifeline. We share photos and milestones, tips and heartaches. Sometimes, it can take us weeks to reply but still, the connection continues. There is something comforting about knowing there is a safe place I can pour my heart when it all gets a little much.

## THE LONELINESS EPIDEMIC

Although commonly associated with the elderly, research has shown that loneliness is associated with major life transitions (such as moving neighbourhoods, starting a new job, or having a baby). A survey conducted on popular UK online community, Channel Mum, found that a staggering 90 percent of women experienced loneliness in the months following childbirth, with 54 percent describing themselves as 'friendless'.

The effects of this kind of social isolation are profound. People suffering from loneliness are more susceptible to illness, struggle with problem-solving and are prone to depression. Loneliness in mothers is associated with a lower secure attachment style and a higher possibility of distress in their infants. Yet even with a glut of online mothers' groups, we are not attaining the level of connection we need to stem this modern parenting epidemic. It might be time for some creative solutions.

## YOU'VE GOT A FRIEND

While letter-writing will never replace our need for in-person relationships (yes, you should try to befriend that nice neighbour), the connection can be just as meaningful says clinical psychologist Dr Sarah Hughes. "Whether or not a long-distance friendship can be as strong as an in-person friendship has a lot to do with how open and honest you are in your communication. Raw, authentic conversations are what deepens and strengthens friendships – giving us that close bond of a true connection," she says.

And when it comes to forming that connection, writing letters – be it by email, post or even Messenger – can be a shortcut to intimate conversation. "We're often less filtered when we communicate through writing... it can be easier to be truthful about how we're feeling – compared with face-to-face interactions – and where that's the case, written correspondence can lead to a friendship that's built on a deeper level of understanding and 'knowing' than might be achieved conversationally," Hughes says.



### NOT JUST FOR MUM AND DAD

Our children, too, can benefit from pen pal friendships, but don't be dejected if they move on from this connection fast, Hughes advises. "Kids often love getting mail or emails because it's something a bit different. It can be exciting waiting for a reply, which in the modern world is unique, because everything is so immediate and fast-moving. That said, there's a high chance they'll lose interest in a pen pal quickly - they're so used to fast-moving, immediate stimulation, anything different isn't necessarily appealing in the long-term - but it depends on the child and you might find yourself surprised by their interest in a pen pal friendship."

### HOW TO GET STARTED

Although my pen pal friendship began organically via email, there are plenty of ways you can seek out the connection for yourself or your child. A quick search will lead you to countless Facebook groups catering to pen pal communities of all ages and locations. Recently, I used one to connect my niece with a girl of similar age in Scotland who was, at the time, also experiencing temporary homeschooling. They decided to correspond the old-fashioned way and delighted in checking the letterbox, waiting for their carefully hand-written letters.

Locally, there are often community run programs supporting pen pals for nursing home residents who miss being able to write and send a hand-penned note. The recent global pandemic saw a resurgence in neighbourhood pen pals with many people connecting by dropping notes in the mailboxes of those in their community who might be isolated and at physical or emotional risk.

But when you are feeling lonely, it can be really hard to take the first step. Hughes says it is important to remember a few things. "We are all a bit afraid of rejection, no matter how confident we are. But odds are, if you do reach out, whoever you reach out to will be incredibly grateful. Making new friends in adulthood can be hard. Changing your mindset can be helpful. Try making it about helping someone else rather than doing it for yourself." And remember, if the person you are reaching out to is a new mum, there is a 90 percent chance she's feeling just as lonely and in need of a friend as you are.

My advice? Pick up your pen and take a chance on a lost form of friendship. If we are all alone, then we are all together in that too. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go check my email.

Words by Annie Bucknall

