

Name	
PM Class	

NATIONAL JUNIOR COLLEGE
Senior High 2 Preliminary Examination
Higher 1

General Paper

Paper 2

INSERT

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1 hour 30 minutes

READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST

This Insert contains the passage for Paper 2.

This document consists of **3** printed pages.

David Sax argues that strangers are good for us.

- 1 One Saturday morning, I took my 5-year-old son to the playground. A few minutes into his “ninja training” regimen, he attracted a fan. The other boy was younger, but the plastic glint of my son’s dollar-store sword slicing evil from the air proved irresistible. I smiled at the child’s father on the next bench and made an effort at playground banter, asking the boy’s age and whether they lived nearby. But after a few half-answers, he pointed to the AirPods in his ears. What could I do? I picked up my phone and scrolled through the news, and then my socials. As I sat there, willingly ignoring and being ignored by the only other adult nearby, the stories struck me as yet more examples of how modern life keeps us insulated from strangers. 5

- 2 Not so long ago, it was impossible to go through life without speaking, in some way, to a variety of strangers in your life: the bus driver, barista, security guard, receptionist, butcher, government clerk, store cashier and restaurant server were all humans who required at least the bare minimum of conversation. If you were at a playground a generation ago, half-heartedly watching some swing-set drama, ignoring the casual greetings of another parent would be extremely rude. When I lived in New York City a decade ago, I couldn’t spend 10 minutes outside without speaking to someone. That’s the thing I loved about the place: how New Yorkers will chat and comment and carry on a conversation in line for pizza, on the sidewalk or in the subway; ask for directions or compliment a particularly awesome hat of someone they have never met, without any awkwardness. Today, you can spend a week in New York, shopping, traveling, eating and working, and never utter a sound to another human being, or even take your headphones off. 10 15 20

- 3 It shouldn’t be this way. Engagement with strangers is at the core of our social contract. Most religious faiths instruct us to welcome the strangers we encounter, and there’s good reason for this. If we engaged only with the people we knew, our world would be small. That leap of faith toward the unknown other is what allows us to grow beyond the family unit, tribe or nation. Everyone you converse with who is not a biological relative — your best friend, neighbour, lover, spouse or even that chatty taxi driver from last weekend — was a stranger before you spoke to that person. Anytime we ignore strangers in our vicinity, whether because of fear, bigotry or the everyday convenience and efficiency of digital technology, we weaken that contract. And without such a social contract, without having any obligations to each other, society itself is weakened. 25 30

- 4 Far from random human inconveniences, strangers are actually one of the richest and most important resources we have. They connect us to the community, teach us empathy, and build civility. Beyond the predictable, they can also be full of surprises, a gateway to wonder, or at the very least, a reminder of the simple beauty we are surrounded by but so often forget to appreciate. 35

- 5 “I’ve spent many years studying the people who are the furthest out of our social networks, and they really do add a richness to our life that we miss when we’re not there,” said Gillian Sandstrom, a senior lecturer at the University of Essex, whose research has demonstrated how the small, transactional relationships we create by talking to strangers are important pillars of our social and emotional well-being. “We have all these kinds of people who populate our lives, who we aren’t that close to and we don’t share our deepest, darkest secrets with,” said Dr. Sandstrom, who forces herself to speak to strangers every day, despite identifying as an introvert. “But they form this tapestry that when we’re not there, our life feels kind of empty.” So it seems that despite our fears of awkwardness, deep, meaningful conversations with strangers are not only easier than expected but also leave people feeling better about themselves. 40 45

- 6 In some ways, our recent aversion to strangers is a by-product of technological evolution. Sure, newspapers and magazines, cassette players and televisions were all potential distractions, but none of them fully normalised ignoring other people in the way that smartphones have. The smartphone all-too-easily allows us to flit from one function to the next, consuming attention that could otherwise be opened up to others. E-commerce sites and third-party restaurant delivery apps incentivise us against entering stores and restaurants filled with strangers. Some digital technology goes further, like the Uber feature that allows you to pre-emptively mute a driver's attempt at friendly conversation. 50
- 7 Then came the pandemic, and suddenly, each physical encounter with a stranger carried the potential of death. We were ordered to stay home, avoid public spaces and speak only within our trusted bubbles. We sought refuge in the distance that digital technology allowed us, watching movies, attending exercise classes and having meetings – all without entering a theatre, gym or office. The longer we hid inside, the fewer strangers we encountered. Our world grew inward and suspicious, our fears exacerbated by the latest news about fresh variants and rising crime rates not seen in decades. "Stranger danger," that discredited catchphrase printed on milk-cartons in our unmarked-van kidnapping past, seemed to creep back into our present. 55 60
- 8 Strangers are intimidating for a reason. Even when they are not physically threatening, interactions with strangers are fraught with social risk: you could end up embarrassed or misunderstood. Digital technology promises to fill those silences with more hardware and software to insulate us from those we do not know, like the robo-barista vending machine that opened near me last year, which serves lattes through a little window with nary a syllable of chit or chat. But a future where coffee is served by robots is not an improvement on the coffee shop. It ignores a central purpose of the neighbourhood cafe, a place for hot drinks and human interaction. A robot-barista might always operate at peak efficiency and might even remember every component of your last drink, but it can never care about you or your order – you might end up with a hot drink in hand yet walk away feeling cold. 65 70
- 9 Eliminating strangers from our societal structures might make society more seamless and ensure that we never have to endure awkward silences, but it also leaves us in a social and developmental bubble. We wouldn't speak or network with people beyond social circles unless forced to do so by some sort of corporate work event or negative incident. By that point, however, the interaction is either inorganic or soured. Worse, a stranger-avoidant society makes it harder for one social demographic to 'break in' to another, ensuring that social divisions like class and background become even more entrenched. But if the old proverb 'birds of a feather flock together' isn't even particularly true of birds, why should we humans stick to the rule? 75 80
- 10 At the playground, I glanced up from my phone and saw my son and the other boy yammering away as if they'd known each other for years. The other father looked up too and seemed genuinely surprised at this instant relationship. He walked over, knelt and asked his son who he was playing with. "I don't know his name," the boy said, as his tiny fingers clutched one of my son's Lego figures, "but he's my friend." 85