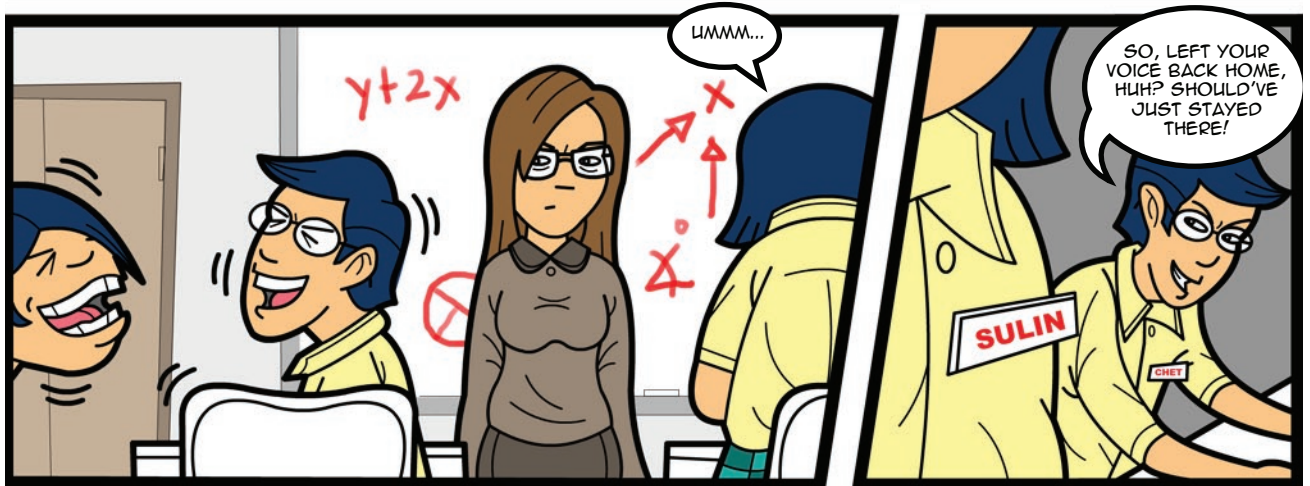


The new kid in school





RITA, YOU'D BETTER DECIDE WHO YOUR FRIENDS ARE. IT'S EITHER SULIN OR US! SO, CHOOSE. IT'S SIMPLE: YOU'RE EITHER IN WITH US OR YOU'RE OUT — NO IN-BETWEENS. SULIN IS OUT. YOU?



“It’s either Sulin or us!” say Rita’s best friends. Rita feels pulled in two directions. What does she do?

When schools re-open every January, many children join new classes. For students like Sulin, the first day may be a little scary. No wonder she mumbled when the teacher asked her a question. Poor Sulin. She didn’t deserve the sniggers and rude comment. That morning, Sulin had woken up worried that her new classmates wouldn’t like her. By recess, her fears had doubled.

WHY ARE SOME CHILDREN MEAN TO NEW STUDENTS?

Sometimes, kids put down a new student because they think that they look cool by making someone else look stupid. In their minds, the formula goes something like this: the worse you look, the better I look. Such kids may pick on easy Sulin-type targets. Sulin looked scared and she didn’t know anyone else at that school – she was vulnerable.

Also, Chet and Mei may have been rude simply because they were bored. In which case, making Sulin uncomfortable provided entertainment. But, it wasn’t funny, was it? Rita did not think so. And, there were other students in that class who didn’t think it was funny either.

WERE THERE OTHER REASONS FOR PICKING ON SULIN?

Yes, there was a third reason. Chet and Mei didn’t like something about Sulin: she was from somewhere else. The truth was that Chet and Mei felt their personal space was being invaded. That’s silly when you think about it – they still had their desks, chairs, lockers and everything else they had before. Yet, they were afraid that their lives would change somehow because of such new students. When people have fears like that, they sometimes attack whomever they think is the cause. Then, they feel better for a little while. However, putting down another person is a lousy way to feel better.

WHO GETS HURT WHEN KIDS ARE MEAN?

The victims get hurt, of course. That is obvious. What Chet and Mei don’t know is that they harm themselves as well.

How so? They may get into the habit of using mean behaviour to cope with life. In the long run, that definitely won’t help them. In fact, others will respect and love them less. Worse still, over time, they will respect and love themselves less.

The whole class was also affected. The first day should have been a happy time for reconnecting with old friends and welcoming new classmates. Instead, Sulin hadn’t felt welcomed. And, students like Rita were saddened by what happened.

HOW DID RITA FEEL ABOUT THE SITUATION?

Returning after long holidays always made Rita a little anxious. Because she wouldn’t have seen her school friends during holidays, she worried about whether they still liked her. On top of that, she now faced a dilemma. She hadn’t at all expected to upset her two closest friends by being nice to Sulin. Despite that, she still wanted to befriend Sulin because she knew it was the right thing to do. On the other hand, she didn’t want to walk out on her old friends as she liked them a lot. Rita felt like she was being pulled in two opposite directions.

WHO ELSE MAY HAVE HAD FRIENDSHIP FEARS?

Chet and Mei. Believe it or not, they might have been rude to Sulin because of their own friendship fears. What if Rita and Sulin became best friends and then, Rita had no time for them? It was a valid concern but that didn’t give them the right to treat Sulin badly. If only Chet and Mei had trusted Rita to remain their close friend, then they may not have put down Sulin or threatened Rita.

WHAT DID RITA FINALLY DO?

By the next morning, Rita knew what she wanted to do... ►



TO HER RELIEF, CHET AND MEI DID AS RITA ASKED; THEY STOPPED BEING MEAN TO SULIN BECAUSE THEY WANTED RITA AS THEIR FRIEND.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM RITA?

Luckily, very few students are like Chet and Mei. Unfortunately, not many are as brave and wise as Rita. In fact, we can learn a lot from Rita: she had several plus points that made her a winner.

Rita had empathy; she was able to imagine herself in Sulin's shoes. Rita had good social skills, too. She knew how to say the first hello to Sulin. Then, by sitting with Sulin during recess, she made a clear offer to be her friend. Later, she had the guts to stand up firmly to Chet and Mei. But, although she was being tough, she spoke to them in a caring way. Rita was unselfish as well. She had been eager to catch up with her old friends on that first day back at school. Instead, she put aside her own needs and sat with a stranger.

Rita also had moral courage; she

didn't take the easy way out. At one point, it seemed like an either-or case to her: either give up her beliefs about how to treat others or give up her dearest buddies. Thankfully, when Rita bulldozed her friends' demands with her own, she discovered that she didn't have to sacrifice her values in order to keep her friends.

We don't know whether Rita's two old friends and her new friend will become buddies one day. What is important is that Sulin now had a fair chance to fit in. And, Rita and her friends learnt a valuable lesson about what to do – and, what not to do – when there's a new kid in class.

Read on for more stories about students like Sulin, Rita, Chet and Mei (not their real names). We invite you to use these stories to think in new ways about your own relationships at school. ●

NEED SOMEONE TO TALK TO?

You can call Tinkle friend at 1-800-2744-788 to talk to someone about your friendship fears. A trustworthy adult will listen to you and give you advice. Phone calls to Tinkle friend are free.