

# Reaching Out to Parents With Technology

by Karen Stephens

When technology hit my desktop, I knew it would be useful for managing budget numbers. That was a no-brainer.

But I had no idea how handy it would be for connecting with our program's families! From fax machines, scanners, digital cameras, and web sites to e-mails and discussion list servs, technology helps directors communicate more

quickly and efficiently. (Okay, except during power black-outs and maddening machine melt-downs.)

When you pair up technology, such as posting digital photos onto a web site, you open a whole new window into your program for parents — and in fact, the *world*. It's a time-saving service that allows parents to explore your program from the convenience of their home, workplace, or local library computer.

When it works, and the user works it right, communication technology

strengthens the bonds of parent-program partnerships. For instance, e-mail makes communication more flexible.

Parents can exchange information with staff whenever their schedule allows — whether it's during program operation hours or not.

Program web sites offer parents with hearing impairments greater accessibility. It gives them easier access to information, thus avoiding the slower pace of TDD telephone calls.

Of course, the backbone of good communication is, *and always will be*, face to face dialogue. But communication technology does a great job of reinforcing and broadening your parent outreach efforts. It helps staff respond to a wide variety of family questions and needs. And it allows them to respond in a timely manner. By tapping into the Internet, staff can offer parents an almost immediate array of information with promising referrals.

For all its virtues, communication technology can be misused. Clear intent and a streamlined focus, rather than long-meandering and complex messages, are best. An avalanche of meaningless elec-

tronic information merely adds to the clutter of parents' detail-filled lives. Information overload — even when content is good — overwhelms parents, so they avoid rather than participate in program partnerships.

Learning to master communication technology is initially time intensive. And with each new innovation, competence is an on-going learning curve. However, in the long run, technology saves directors time and adds a creative spin to communication strategies.

Rather than letting technology become your *only* method of communication, consider it an additional tool for reaching a diverse audience with varying resources as well as learning and communication styles.

I believe we're in a "transitional generation" in terms of technology. Some parents (and staff!) love it; others hate it. That means directors must know clients well, so we reach out to parents with the style of communication they respond to best. For instance, even when I send out e-mail notices, I know I **MUST** give some parents a hard copy or they won't respond. And I still have a

In 1980, Karen Stephens became director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for ISU Family and Consumer Sciences. She is author of the electronic parent newsletter, "Parenting Exchange" located at [www.ChildCareExchange.com](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com).



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Illinois State University Child Care  
Campus Box 5060, 124 Turner Hall.,  
Normal, IL 61790-5060

e-mail: [isuchildcare@ilstu.edu](mailto:isuchildcare@ilstu.edu)  
phone: (309) 438-5026  
fax (309) 438-5659

large parent bulletin board for parents with resources and notices posted. However, I have a web site that is much more comprehensive.

During this generation of transition, pragmatically we have to offer a *buffet* of communication options. Gradually technology will be more widely embraced, and we'll play a role in building its momentum. You'll be the astute director if you jump on the band wagon now rather than later. So now let's explore how you can put technology's amazing potential to work for you and those you serve.

## E-Mail

The convenience of e-mail gives parents a chance to ask small, but important questions, without having to play *telephone tag* with administrative staff. For instance, if a parent lost a scheduling form, they could e-mail for a replacement. In turn, you could easily fax it to them. Or you can reduce paper clutter by sending out forms as e-mail attachments so parents can complete them on-line and e-mail them back.

Directors often have information to share with all parents. In that case, the "nickname" function in your e-mail's "Address Book" comes in very handy. This tool lets you combine all the parents' e-mail addresses into one short-hand "nickname." (Note: A respectful courtesy is to ask parents if they prefer e-mail at home or work; or neither.)

Group e-mails to parents is a handy, fast way to update them on timely information. For instance, if you hear of a great family event taking place, e-mail an encouragement to attend. Or e-mail to remind parents of deadlines for signing up for a parent-teacher conference. You can even send out a parenting advice column of your choice as a free courtesy service to program families.

If you have a group of parents very involved with classroom curriculum, e-documentation is a growing trend, especially among programs influenced by Reggio Emilia and The Project Approach. Documentation information, with photos of artwork, block constructions, sketches, surveys, etc. can be combined into a file and distributed to parents — or a curriculum committee of parents — for their input and feedback.

## Digital cameras and camcorders

Use digital cameras to enhance documentation of curriculum activities, including on-site experiences, field work at community sites, or dialogues with experts and special visitors invited to the classroom. Printing digital photos on-site is faster and cheaper than taking film negatives to be developed in a photo store. It allows teachers to quickly display photos; thus children (and staff) can visually — as well as orally — share the excitement of events with parents at day's end.

Photos of experiences are also great to share with parents when discussing children's developmental growth or needs. Digital photos can be e-mailed. For instance, an e-mailed photo of a happily engaged child does a lot to reassure nervous parents' separation pangs.

Digital photos can also be downloaded onto a compact disk. A colleague, teacher Barb Gallick, creates several *loaner disks* of children's special events, such as field trips, family events, or classroom parties. Parents can *check out* a disk to take home and download onto their own computer. They make it into aunts' and uncles' and grandparents' hands, too!

## Program web sites

A well-developed web site helps parents become informed as they make child

enrollment decisions. Web sites give parents a time-efficient and convenient way to conduct preliminary program *screening*. By viewing a program's scope of services and policies, they are more likely to find a good match fit for their family's needs. In turn, your program attracts clients who use your services longer.

After viewing your web site, parents are better able to formulate questions. Those questions can then be asked during a pre-enrollment on-site visit. If you have your newsletter and weekly menus posted, they can get the flavor of how your program operates before they even cross your threshold.

A web site should never replace on-site family *warm up* visits, but a visually enticing web site helps children (and parents!) gradually become mentally prepared for a transition. A photo gallery of digital photos taken of indoor and outdoor facilities is a start. Staff photos, with brief biographies and teaching style statements, helps families meet the people who will be woven into the fabric of daily life. (Note: Waiver authorizations are required before posting photos of staff, children, or parents.)

A web site with current photos of activities allows parents to view the fruits of children's play, even when they can't take time off work to participate. The photos also allow parents and children to share their program with older siblings and long-distance extended family. Their pride is such a compliment.

When families grow out of your program, they enjoy visiting your program's web site for sentimental reasons. It's a modern spin on a child's memory book. What a great public relations tool for maintaining community support!

An especially valuable service to parents is online resource links posted on your web site. It saves parents the time and drudgery of surfing the net on

their own. It also helps parents have confidence in your program as a reliable clearinghouse of sound early childhood care and education information. (But a warning, be extra sure to screen any link you post and check web addresses for reliability and accuracy at least yearly!)

Following are categories to consider for your program's web site. There are many available web links for each category. Due to limited space, I merely provide sample suggestions.

- Local Family Resources (i.e. your local child care resource and referrals, child subsidy office)
- Parenting Resources (i.e. I Am Your Child Campaign: [www.iamyourchild.org](http://www.iamyourchild.org))
- Children's Literacy ([www.earlyliterature.escd.net](http://www.earlyliterature.escd.net))
- Web Sites for Children (i.e. [www.crayola.com](http://www.crayola.com))
- Children's Health and Nutrition (i.e. [KidsHealth.org](http://KidsHealth.org))
- Child Safety (i.e. National Safe Kids Campaign: [www.safekids.org](http://www.safekids.org))
- Family-Friendly Travel Destinations (i.e. children's discovery museums at [www.childrensmuseums.org/visit-a-museum.htm](http://www.childrensmuseums.org/visit-a-museum.htm))
- Advocacy (i.e. your local voter registration office, [www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org) or [www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org))

## Parent resource room with web access

If you're lucky enough to have the space (and budget!) for a parent room, consider equipping it with some computers and quick working broadband Internet access. It's an ideal addition to a parent lending library or parent lounge.

This room would be a convenient place for parents to access online resources posted on your program's web site. And don't forget to advertise interactive on-

line opportunities for parents, such as availability of list servs, web talks, or web chats.

For instance, The Illinois Early Learning Project, ([www.illinoisearlylearning.org](http://www.illinoisearlylearning.org)) regularly offers topical online discussions — called chats or web talks — for parents and early childhood professionals. And you don't have to be from Illinois to participate. Hosted by experienced experts, parents participate by submitting questions or comments. For wider accessibility, the discussions are translated into Spanish, and in some cases, Polish.

If parents can't join the discussions live, they can access permanent transcripts maintained at the web site. A sampling of past discussion transcripts include: "Second Language Issues in Early Childhood Education"; "Communicating with Parents during Sensitive or Difficult Situations"; "Speech Delays in Young Children: When Will They Talk?"; "Caring for Children with Asthma"; and "Supporting Children's Social Development: Strategies for Parents and Caregivers."

If parents are just looking for advice, advertise parenting web sites, such as:

- National Parent Information Network: <http://npin.org/>
- Parent 2 Parent at U of I: <http://p2p.uiuc.edu/index.asp>;
- Zero to Three: <http://www.zerotothree.org/>
- National Fatherhood Initiative: [www.fatherhood.org/](http://www.fatherhood.org/)
- *Parenting Exchange* Library at: [www.ChildCareExchange.com](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com).

Parents with special interest in classroom curriculum will appreciate learning about Reggio Emilia Preschool Discussion Group at [REGGIO-L@listserv.uiuc.edu](mailto:REGGIO-L@listserv.uiuc.edu) or Project Approach Listserv at [PROJECTS-L@listserv.uiuc.edu](mailto:PROJECTS-L@listserv.uiuc.edu).

## Web cams: To use or not to use

Some programs have their facility, especially classrooms, equipped with web cams. The video photography feed allows people to view live classroom action via a web site connection. Each parent is provided with a secure password that allows them to *tune into* their child's classroom at any time. The presence of web cameras is a controversial topic, and not only for their price.

Most parents I've spoken with love the technology. They say they really enjoy being able to *click into* their child's program from their work computer to see how their day is going.

But many program staff I've spoken to have ethical reservations about its use. They worry about invading children's privacy, as well as staff's in their workplace. Others are concerned parents viewing incidents out of context will misinterpret a teacher's actions or an exchange between children. Standards of confidentiality also come into play; after all, parents can view all children, not just their own. And parents are as tempted to gossip or label a child as anyone else.

If web cams are used, such concerns should be addressed and settled. Plus authorization waivers need to be signed by staff and parents giving permission for photo transmissions.

I believe if used openly, and with the right intentions, web cams can be a fun addition to a program. It allows children and staff to watch themselves, which seems to be a never-ending delight to children. And tapes of the footage could be used in staff development training or parent-teacher conferences. However, openly making videotapes of the classroom can be put to similar use.

## Planning a Program Web Site: A checklist to guide design decisions

by Karen Stephens for *Child Care Information Exchange*.

Whether you create your program web site independently, or work with a professional web designer, there are always hard choices to make. What to include? What to leave out? Below are points to ponder to help you in the planning and design process. Reflecting on them will help your site say what you want, how you want it. Good luck!

### Identify Web Site's Target Audience(s):

- Prospective families
- Community at large
- Corporate employees only
- Program sponsors and/or granting agencies
- Students — college or high school
- Potential Employees
- Observers or tour groups
- Researchers, faculty, or student
- Children
- Advocacy groups

### Contact Information for Home Page:

- Name of program
- Name of director
- E-mail address for director
- Program's postal address
- Telephone number
- Fax number
- Web site address
- Map of location, with street address (not PO Box)
- Link to [www.mapquest.com](http://www.mapquest.com) for driving directions
- Parking accommodations

### Program Specifics:

- Affiliation or partnership agencies, i.e. Urban League or United Way
- Program mission & goals
- Eligible users
- Years in existence
- Days and hours of operation
  - \_\_\_ Full and/or part-time scheduling
  - \_\_\_ Week-day scheduling
  - \_\_\_ Evening scheduling
  - \_\_\_ Weekend scheduling
  - \_\_\_ Drop in services
  - \_\_\_ Unique summer programming
- Ages served
  - \_\_\_ Group sizes by age served
  - \_\_\_ Teacher to child ratio by age served
- Child enrollment capacity
- Fees by age group
- Transportation provided
- Bilingual staff or services provided
- Inclusive environments (special needs accepted)

- Subsidy payments accepted or financial assistance offered

### Quality Assurances

- Licensed by \_\_\_\_\_
- Accredited by \_\_\_\_\_
- Americans with Disabilities Act compliance
- First Aid/CPR qualified personnel
- Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Statement
- Food Service sanitation certification
- Staff development practices cited
- Smoke-free environment
- Pets on premises vaccinated
- Swim areas supervised with certified life guards
- Mandated reporter of child abuse statement

### Enrollment Application Process:

- Current availability of openings (or how to find out them)
- Deadlines for application submission
- Anticipated date of acceptance/rejection/waiting list notification
- How to apply
- Where/how to submit application
- Downloadable application
- Online application submission

### Administrative and Teaching Staff:

- Photos posted, professionally appropriate to work assignment
- Initial date of employment with program
- Classroom assignment
- Qualifications in terms of course work, degrees, certifications, credentials
- Work experience
- Brief personal biography
- E-mail address
- Contact phone number

### Curriculum Statements:

- Curriculum approach
- Curriculum goals
- Curriculum philosophy

### Child Guidance Statements:

- Philosophy statement on behavior guidance approach

### Daily Schedule

- By classroom
- Special services, i.e. music, dance lessons

### Parent Partnership Features:

- Open door policy
- Classroom observation and involvement
- Field trip chaperone opportunities
- Advisory or governing board decision-making input
- Parent handbook of program policies and procedures
- Parent group or parent support meetings
- Parent-teacher conferences
- Referrals to needed child or family services
- Family events
- Program evaluation opportunities
- Parent lounge
- Parent lending library
- Toy lending library
- Children's book lending library

### Photo Gallery:

- Indoor spaces for all age groups
- Outdoor spaces for all age groups
- Special use rooms or spaces, i.e. large movement or gym
- Variety of learning centers
- Inclusive action-shot photos in terms of gender, age, ethnicity/race
- Large as well as small group activities shown
- Photos of staff engaged with children
- Photos of staff engaged with parents
- Virtual tour of facilities, including kitchen, staff lounge, and reception area

### Added Features to Consider:

- Space on the home page set aside for prominent timely announcements
- Message from the director
- Message from each classroom teacher
- Monthly calendar of events
- Weekly menus

## Caveats, cautions, and conclusions

Research and common-sense tell us on-going and effective parent-staff communication is critical to providing high quality services. Technology is one means of achieving that goal. But technology should NEVER be your primary means of communicating. Humans are social beings; our brains are literally hard-wired for face to face interactions. High-tech tools should never take the place of daily chit-chat, weekly updates, and in-depth discussions during parent-teacher meetings or conferences. In other words, innovation allows us to communicate in new ways; but none ring as true and clear as the miracle of the human voice.

- Newsletters
- Bill periods and due dates
- Web cam connection, secured for parent with passwords only
- Documentation photos of curriculum projects posted
- Guest book
- Frequently asked questions section
- Chat room links
- Map of web site
- Web cam connection (secure password access only)

### Resource Links for Parents:

- Licensing agency
- Accreditation agency
- Child abuse reporting agency
- Local human service agencies
  - \_\_\_ Back-up child care options for mildly ill children
  - \_\_\_ Crisis nursery for emergency care
  - \_\_\_ City/county health department
  - \_\_\_ Developmental screening offices
  - \_\_\_ Early intervention services
  - \_\_\_ Child care subsidy office
  - \_\_\_ Child care referral office
  - \_\_\_ Agencies offering care for mildly ill children

- \_\_\_ Family counseling agencies
- Parenting information
  - \_\_\_ Health, nutrition, and safety
  - \_\_\_ Child development and developmentally appropriate care
  - \_\_\_ General parenting, such as positive discipline
- Family life and leisure information
  - \_\_\_ Time and stress management
  - \_\_\_ Local family activity opportunities or community events notices
  - \_\_\_ Vacation destination links

### Resource Links for Children:

- Child-friendly game and activity sites
- Homework help sites for school-age groups
- Museum, zoo, astronomy/space, or gardening sites

### Function and Usability:

- Date of latest update and revision appears
- Consistent "intuitive" symbol on each page navigates reader back to home page
- Photos download in a reasonable time on a typical *home* computer
- Site encourages "re-visits" with updated menus, newsletters, regular rotation of parenting tips sheets

### Appearance of Text and Graphics Considerations:

- Appearance appropriate to and respectful of target audience(s)
- Not too plain and boring, but also not cluttered or overly busy
- Proper grammar and punctuation is used
- Non-biased, non-offensive language and graphics used
- Headings clearly identify content sections
- Professional jargon avoided
- Text font is easy to read
- Charts are relevant and easily understood
- Content logically organized
- Color and graphics are pleasing, eye-catching, and engaging
- Animated graphics are inviting without being distracting or chaotic
- Actual work of children shown, i.e. art work, constructions, surveys
- Graphics, including clip-art, reflect diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, etc.
- Graphics and text reflect developmentally appropriate practice