

# Decoding Technology

Parent Communication Tools

by Tim Walker and Chip Donohue



Parents today have very demanding schedules, and finding time to communicate regularly with them can be a challenge for any early childhood administrator. However, with the assistance of technology, these lines of communication can be reestablished and maintained. Whether the situation calls for instant contact or just the dispersal of general information, there's a variety of tech tools that can help.

## Tech Terms

- **Internet-based Communication:** The ability to communicate with other individuals through the use of an Internet account. Internet-based communication tools come in many forms and can be synchronous or asynchronous.
- **Blog:** Short for Web log. An asynchronous tool that enables a single user to post text-based messages and electronic files to a publicly accessible Web page. It is typically updated on a daily or weekly basis.
- **Discussion Forum:** An asynchronous tool that enables multiple users to post and open text-based messages that have been organized into threads. Each thread contains a main posting and all related replies.
- **Chat:** A synchronous tool that enables multiple users to send and receive text-based messages instantly within a virtual "chat" room.
- **Instant Messaging (IM):** A synchronous tool that enables two users to

send and receive text-based messages instantly. Popular IM applications include AOL Instant Messenger™, Microsoft® MSN Messenger, and Yahoo!® Messenger.

- **Internet Telephony:** A service that enables users to transmit and receive telephone calls. This form of communication requires each participant to have a microphone connected to their computer. Popular Internet telephony applications include Netscape® CoolTalk and Microsoft® Windows® NetMeeting.

- **Web Conferencing:** A service that enables users to transmit and receive audio and video. This form of communication requires each participant to have a video camera, microphone, and speakers connected to their computer.

## Tech Tools

Some Internet-based communication tools require more resources and technical support than others. The key is finding one or two that will meet the needs of a typical parent who has a

child enrolled in your program. You may want to try these free tools first:

- Go to the Blogger™ Web site ([www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com)) and create your own blog account. Share your Web page address with parents and begin posting updates and new information about your program.
- Go to the Google™ Groups Web site (<http://groups.google.com>) and create a user account. Walk through the steps to set up your own discussion forum. Set the access level to restricted and invite parents to join by e-mail.
- Go to the Chatzy Web site ([www.chatzy.com](http://www.chatzy.com)) and create your own private chat room. Set a specific time for the chat to occur and invite parents to join by e-mail.
- Go to the AOL Instant Messenger™ Web site ([www.aim.com](http://www.aim.com)) and



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download the program. Then create a screen name and share it with parents. In return ask them to create one of their own and to share it with you. Set up a buddy list that contains these screen names and you're ready to start text messaging.

## Tech Tips

- **Content is key** — Understand that your primary goal is to meet the specific needs of parents who have children enrolled in your program. Be sure that the content you select to use is timely and relevant to the families you serve.
- **Keep messages short** — Very few people will read through lengthy electronic messages, so keep them short and easily identifiable by topic and title. Try to shorten your messages to about a third of what it would be in print.
- **Update regularly** — Web pages that appear old and obsolete will not be

revisited, so make sure blogs and discussion forums are kept updated. Determine a frequency that is also a reasonable objective for your program, and stick with it.

- **Learn "chat" lingo** — People often communicate electronically using shorthand. For example, BTW means "by the way," IMO means "in my opinion," and POS means "parent over shoulder."

## Tech Links

- Microsoft® MSN Messenger  
<http://messenger.msn.com>
- Microsoft® Windows NetMeeting  
[www.microsoft.com/windows/netmeeting/](http://www.microsoft.com/windows/netmeeting/)
- Netlingo.com — Acronyms and text messaging  
[www.netlingo.com/emailsh.cfm](http://www.netlingo.com/emailsh.cfm)

- Netscape® CoolTalk  
<http://wp.netscape.com/navigator/v3.0/cooltalk.html>

- Sharpened.net — List of e-mail and chat acronyms  
[www.sharpened.net/glossary/acronyms.php](http://www.sharpened.net/glossary/acronyms.php)

- Yahoo!® Messenger  
<http://messenger.yahoo.com>

## Sources

Walker, T. & Donohue C. (March 2004). "Decoding technology: Discussion forums, chats and Webcasts." *Exchange*, 156, 30-31.

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