

FAQ's ABOUT THE USE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY IN FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION

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Since 1994 I have been trying to figure out how to use information technology in conducting family life education. My sense is that none of us who are trying this work really know exactly what we should be doing or how to really do it, but here are my answers to some common questions and complaints about the use of technology.

1. I don't think you can teach people about parenting or relationship issues using computers and the Internet! Just try to convince me!

Information technology (e-mail, the World Wide Web, chatrooms and so forth) is just a tool, a potential teaching tool. It is not the only way to teach and it certainly is not the best way to teach many things about family life. At the same time it is a powerful tool that allows us to do some things that we can't do with books, video, radio, and face-to-face meetings. Its most powerful feature is that it creates a resource that is accessible anytime from anywhere (of course you have to have a computer that can get to this information, but more about that below). Another powerful feature is that it gives us more ability to update information (how long does it take you to update any of the print or video resources you currently have?) and it gives us more freedom to deliver the same information in different ways. For example, in print I could give two or three examples of what to do in a specific child management situation and then I would have to write about something else. At a WWW site I could create many more examples and continue to add to this over time.

At present the Internet is an excellent tool for answering straightforward questions about issues or concerns that people have and for allowing people who may want information anonymously to obtain it. Likewise, it is proving to be a good tool for helping people who are isolated to find others with similar interests or concerns. Take a look at Chuck Smith's Wonder Wise Parents <http://www.ksu.edu/wwparent/wondhome.htm> for some clever uses of this technology related to parents.

2. Most of the people I work with really don't use e-mail or the World Wide Web. Do you really think that it's worth spending time learning how to use this technology?

If you do a survey of the people you work with, you may be surprised at how many people are using this technology--either at work or at home. At present we estimate about 1 in 5 households have the capability of using the Internet. (A source of more information about the use of technology is <http://www.hec.ohio-state.edu/famlife/news/news-aaron.htm>)

3. Don't teenagers, the wealthy, really mostly use all this technology and the best educated in our society and won't this disenfranchise many people?

It is true that the young, the wealthy and the best educated are the most likely to have access to this technology in their homes. (See Falling Through the Net: <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/net2/falling.html> . At the same time libraries, community centers and schools are providing people more and more access to computers. Anybody who does this work should be thinking about the ways in which they can help all types of people have access to information. Here are three example of ways to use technology with inner-city families <http://www.alaweb.org/> , for

community building <http://www.webmarket.org/> and for reaching parents who have concerns about children with disabilities <http://nncf.unl.edu/ideas>

4. I like to see people when I talk to them and it just doesn't feel right to type answers to personal family life issues. You just can't read and know the emotions they are feeling! How do emotions get communicated? Isn't this critical?

At the present time it is generally not possible to provide live pictures of people as they use this technology, although there are an increasing number of users who have cameras mounted on their computers and this may become more common. Some people use "emoticons," symbols that are typed to express emotions, such as :) for "happy" and :(for "sad." And even with emoticons it is always important to remember that you rarely know the feeling behind someone's words or you can misread people's words because you do not have the nonverbal information that is added when you talk with them face-to-face.

It is also important to understand the limitations of the current information technology for some specific uses and for some people. I personally wouldn't want a world in which we only interacted by typing on computers. We should never view information technology as the only way in which we teach or interact with people. It is only one method.

5. I really don't know anything about this. Where should I begin?

Most of the people I work with are fearful of computers. They are either concerned that they will break them or they just don't feel comfortable using them. I learned the most by watching my son work with a computer when he was five years old. He wasn't afraid or intimidated by trying things. He didn't worry about doing anything wrong because he didn't know what that was. He just treated it as one more interesting object in his world. He followed his curiosity. He tried to do things and see what made it work. In the first weeks we had our computer he learned many things about it and all I knew was what I learned in the first pages of the manual (and that didn't make much sense). I learned to work with the computer like a child and just try things out and then read the manual when it got too frustrating... or to ask him. It is good to talk with others who are using the same software or doing the same job as you and find out what they are doing. Here is my own guide for beginners on information technology <http://www.hec.ohio-state.edu/famlife/technol/guide/guide98.htm>. If you are completely new to the Internet, begin with e-mail and find someone you can send mail to (and like to talk to) and practice sending and receiving mail. Find a class at a library or community college and find out more about this technology. Another thing to do to experience the World Wide Web is to go to a library and use the WWW to find information on a hobby or other interest you have. You will find both treasure and trash, but you will also find out more about what people are doing to use these new tools. Keep track of what you like and dislike and you will soon be ready to try your hand at using these tools for your own activities.