

# Ten Tips for Involving Families through Internet-Based Communication

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Photo by Michael J. Rosen



**THE RESEARCH IS CLEAR** that a family's involvement in their child's early education improves outcomes in areas such as the child's language, self-help, social, and motor skills (Connell & Prinz 2002;

Henderson & Mapp 2002;

Sheldon 2003; Epstein 2004; Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez 2006).

The more frequent the contact between home and school, the more the child benefits (McWayne et al. 2004).

While traditional forms of home-school partnerships (for example, parents participating in class activities and teach-

ers sending home children's work) are associated with positive results, they are limited in their ability to effectively reach all families. Some children divide their time between two households as a result of divorce, and some parents cannot volunteer in the classroom due to daytime work hours. In such cases, teachers need to use different methods of home-program communication.

A variety of Internet-based communication methods exist to help increase the frequency and outreach of communication between families and early childhood programs. We recommend these strategies after observing and interviewing teachers who have successfully used them in their own classrooms.

## Using technology to improve home-school communication

All of the following methods emphasize two-way communication. Unlike one-way communication approaches, in which families are merely informed of their child's progress, two-way communication approaches invite parents to participate in their child's learning process, thus creating an ongoing dialogue between home and program (Abdal-Haqq 2002; Vazquez-Nuttall, Li, & Kaplan 2006).

- **Create a classroom Web site.** Many schools and programs have Web sites that teachers can add to. For teachers without this option, tools to create Web pages, such as Google Sites and Facebook, are free and accessible from any computer (see "Resources for Creating a Web Site," p. 49). In addition to using print sources to give families information about your classroom activities, post items on the Web site. Embed a calendar, your family handbook, newsletters, homework assignments (for primary grades),

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announcements, wish lists, permission slips, and volunteer opportunities. It is best if your Web site is password-protected and accessible only to the families of children in the class. Be sure to keep the information on the Web site current. If you have a large number of families whose home language is not English, post all key messages in families' home languages.

**2. Send individual e-mails to share positive information about a particular child's activities and accomplishments.** Teachers need to reach out to families when a child is facing challenges at school; e-mail can be too impersonal and too easily misinterpreted for these types of communications. On the other hand, teachers *can* send e-mails to share short anecdotes about children's developing interests, their newly acquired skills, or their ability to be a good friend that day. These types of positive, spontaneous communications can create two-way conversations when parents reply with similar anecdotes or questions.

**3. Post photo stories on the class Web site.** To help families focus on the process through which their child learns rather than just an end product, create photo essays—a series of photos with captions that capture children engaged in a project (for example, building with blocks, painting a picture, planting seeds). Post the photo essays for families to view; many software programs and Web sites provide easy ways to upload photos. (As photos can be copied on the Internet by anyone with access to the originating page, take special care to select photos for

your Web site that do not show children's faces or names.) Sequenced photos give families a more accurate picture of their child's developmental progress. Also post photos of children's work. Change the photos often, and make sure to display each child's work at least once a month.

**4. Provide at-home educational activities.** Your Web site can help families use home computers as avenues for extended learning. Prepare a short list of activities that use readily accessible materials and include links to age-appropriate sites related to classroom topics. For example, if the children are learning about birds, add a link to the National Audubon Society Web site, which families can explore with their children. Encourage families to document their children's learning at home by keeping a portfolio of their work, taking photos, and jotting down their child's questions. Also ask them to share links to good sites they have found while investigating topics of interest to their children.

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**5. Create a family response link or form on the Web page to elicit comments, questions, and feedback.** This is a good strategy for inviting families to monitor and comment on their child's progress. Parents can complete a short online form to provide comments and questions and e-mail them directly to the teacher.

**6. Establish and moderate a family support discussion forum.** The purpose of discussion forums is to offer a place where families can share their thoughts and questions. As the discussion forum moderator, you can instigate forums, but work toward families becoming the major contributors. Check the forum regularly to highlight important points, pose follow-up questions, and delete contributions that are inappropriate. As new topics

emerge, archive old forums for future reference. Examples of topics might include how to address challenging behavior or develop nutritious meal or snack ideas for children. Also share listings of upcoming family events in the community.

## 7. Communicate logistical information through group e-mails.

In addition to using informal communication (conversations at drop-off and pickup) and formal communication (parent-teacher conferences, print), send group e-mails to remind all families of upcoming events, such as field trips and parent-teacher conferences.

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## Techniques for addressing challenges

While the above methods are opportunities to increase communication between programs and families of young children, they also raise concerns of equity. The following techniques offer ideas on how to increase access to computer technology for all teachers and families.

8. **Ensure families' access to technology.** To ensure that families who do not have computers at home are included, continue to communicate through traditional means and by printing and sending home hard copies of your Web site announcements and general e-mails.

Remember, some families may need these items in their home languages. You might choose to apply for funding from various public and private sources to secure laptop computers that families can check out for home use. For example, the following organizations award computer grants to schools serving pre-K through grade 12 students: (1) Computers for Learning, <http://computersforlearning.gov>; (2) Sun Microsystems Open Gateways Grant program, [www.sun.com/aboutsun/comm\\_invest/giving/education.html](http://www.sun.com/aboutsun/comm_invest/giving/education.html); and (3) the HP Technology for Teaching Grant, [www.hp.com/hpinfo/grants/us/programs/tech\\_teaching/k12\\_main.html](http://www.hp.com/hpinfo/grants/us/programs/tech_teaching/k12_main.html). In addition, the Teachers Network posts technology grant opportunities at [www.teachersnetwork.org/Grants/grants\\_technology.htm](http://www.teachersnetwork.org/Grants/grants_technology.htm). Computers acquired through grants can be placed in the family area of your center or school.

9. **Provide opportunities for families to increase their technology skills.** In certain circumstances, technology-based solutions can produce an unintended communications gap. To ensure that families receive your communications, offer a brief orientation to your classroom Web site during Open House or parent-teacher conferences. Demonstrate how to access and navigate the site. Focus on teaching families how to use the interactive features (discussion board, e-mail response). Distribute information about computer availability at public libraries and any other local organizations that provide computer access.

**Staff members could take turns becoming "experts" and train others in how to use the technology.**



## 10. Set aside time for technology-based communication.

Teachers need time for training, maintaining a Web site, keeping information current, and preparing regular communications. Seek professional development opportunities to learn how to use new technology, or consider contacting experts (or an older student) who can assist with the initial setup. Alternatively, access free online tutorials. Staff members could take turns becoming "experts" and train others in how to use the technology. Visit the Web site of the NAEYC Technology and Young Children Interest Forum, [www.techandyoungchildren.org](http://www.techandyoungchildren.org), for more information.

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## Resources for Creating a Web Site

### Google sites

<http://sites.google.com>

Provides Web-based templates for creating Web pages and announcements, plus file cabinet (<10mb document upload), dashboard, and lists. Web pages can be modified easily by anyone who has editing privileges, and can include videos, Google docs, spreadsheets, presentations, photo slide shows, and calendars. The site manager designates members as owners, viewers, or collaborators. No advertisements.

### webs (formerly freewebs)

[www.webs.com](http://www.webs.com)

Template-driven Web site construction lets you create blogs, discussion forums, and calendars, and allow for comments. Share ideas, information, photos, and videos. Can accommodate group publishing, and can be set up for either public or member-only viewing. Web-based construction allows editing from any computer with Internet connectivity. Fee-based version does not contain advertisements.

### Wikispaces

[www.wikispaces.com](http://www.wikispaces.com)

Classroom version features:

[www.wikispaces.com/site/for/teachers](http://www.wikispaces.com/site/for/teachers)

Features include page editing, file and image uploads (including video), and links to Web pages. Allows unlimited members and discussion posts. RSS feeds can notify members of changes to the site. Free version for educators contains no advertisements.

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