Adaptations to Technology and its Effect on Communication and Cohesion in the Family Context

Vanessa Pratt  
Stephen F. Austin State University

Brandon Burr, Ph.D.  
Stephen F. Austin State University

Introduction

As technology continues to advance and develop, families are constantly changing to meet the demands and knowledge needed for an increasingly technology-based culture and lifestyle. With the immense influence technological advances have on human interaction, investigations on how technology affects family communication and family relations will be paramount in the years ahead.

My research addresses different aspects of family life that have been known to be affected by technology. Researchers have established several empirically based frameworks to analyze the impact of technology on the family. These frameworks emphasize the areas of family cohesion, communication, adaptability, boundaries, and personal self-esteem.

Background

Family Cohesion refers to the emotional ties that family members have with each other, which are developed through shared experiences.

Family Communication includes both verbal and non-verbal messages and cues received and interpreted by members of the family.

Adaptability is the ability to change in order to maintain family stability.

Boundaries are the invisible, but very distinct, lines that divide what is considered ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ the family.

Methodology

I searched various databases for scholarly literature that referred to technology and its effects on family life; more specifically family communication and cohesion. I sought research and empirical review literature relating to the use of television, cell phones, and Internet on family dynamics.

Effective Use of Technology

- Increase Lines of Communication
- Maintain Appropriate Boundaries
- Quality Family Interaction
- Shared Family Memories
- Efficient Time Management

Ineffective Use of Technology

- Isolation of Family Members
- Communication Barriers
- Lack of Boundaries
- Unproductive or Excessive Use

Results

All the literature reviewed, agreed that technology can effectively be integrated into family communication and create family cohesion. Effective use of technology involves the following factors:

- One of the processes of maintaining family stability is being able to define quality family time. There is passive family time and active family time. Adapting schedules and routines to accommodate technology use so that it does not interfere with active family time is a form of adaptation.

- Family cohesion is strengthened by quality time and shared memories. Using the Internet, or technology, as a shared family activity or to optimize time increases family cohesion.

- Technology has changed the manner in which families communicate. When technology is used as another line of communication between family members it can be a positive contribution to family unity.

- The use of technology in the home has made family life public and deteriorated family boundaries, creating a shaded line between the outside world, and its influences, and the home. As parents are actively involved in monitoring and setting limits to technology use, family boundaries will reform creating an environment that encourages intimacy and true feelings.

- Parents who wish to effectively integrate technology into their families cannot parent passively. They must be actively supervising and monitoring technology use, so that it does not create isolation and a lack of communication and cohesion.

Implications

New technologies are not inherently negative, but can become such unless controlled. With the onslaught of technology and information readily available to children, parents cannot parent passively. Parents must be actively involved in monitoring and setting limits to technology use (Osi, 2008). Positive use of technology requires adaptability in the family regarding these tools. Examples of adaptation to positively incorporate technologies into the family include using technologies to free up family time through increased efficiency and creating shared family time involving technology.

According to researchers, families who recognize and use technology to enhance family time by using its efficiency functions (i.e., information, planning, and bill paying) found that technology created more family time. These “successful families effectively negotiated and regulated the use . . . and avoided their potential to be obtrusive” (Lanigan, 2009, p. 604).