

## **THE INTERNET AND CRITICAL ISSUES FOR FAMILIES<sup>1</sup>**

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*A survey questionnaire was used to examine 104 Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) educators' perceptions of how the Internet positively and negatively affects issues important to families. Fifteen of the 104 respondents with Internet skills were interviewed about their views on critical Internet issues and ways educators can assist families. Issues identified as most positively affected by the Internet included (a) access to knowledge, (b) personal empowerment, (c) understanding of people from varied backgrounds, and (d) economic success. Issues identified as most negatively affected included (a) development of values, (b) family unity and strength, (c) emotional development, and (d) sense of community. Results imply that FCS educators must promote reflective and critical thinking skills, particularly those related to the affective areas of life, so that family members can most wisely reap the benefits and avoid the risks associated with the Internet.*

The Internet is a rapidly growing cultural phenomenon that offers unprecedented opportunities and challenges for individuals and families. As a worldwide electronic system for communication and information exchange, the Internet poses critical issues for individuals and families. For example, they must learn to judge and use an increasing deluge of information. They must determine how the Internet potentially changes their relationships with both friends and strangers.

According to Foster (1997), the Internet is creating a "redefinition of both the public and the private self" (p. 35). Positive redefinition includes access to information from seemingly unlimited sources, new opportunities to find specific information to solve problems, and global communication free of physical boundaries. Yet the Internet is negatively redefining experience to the extent that deceptive information, questionable values, and misguided social interactions proliferate (Lockhard, 1997; Seel, 1997). Because Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) educators seek to improve everyday life, they have an exciting opportunity to provide valuable leadership to help learners and their families think critically, creatively, and wisely regarding Internet use.

### **Purpose of Study**

Because the Internet is "foremost among new information technologies that promise to significantly impact the day to day circumstances of all social relations" (Foster, 1997, p. 23), it can be viewed as a practical problem with unprecedented benefits and risks for individuals and families (Rehm, 1999). This study was designed to identify FCS educators' perceptions of (a)

issues positively affected by the Internet, (b) issues negatively affected, (c) relationships between issues, and (d) ways educators can assist learners in wise Internet use.

### **Review of Literature**

Research indicates that the Internet is becoming a powerful technological, informational, and even cultural system with both positive and negative effects on everyday life (Lockhard, 1997; Seel, 1997; Streibel, 1998). One of the most beneficial effects is that the Internet extends our ability to obtain state-of-the-art information on any topic at any time of the day. Individuals who tap into the unlimited information available through ever-growing numbers of web sites have the potential to expand their knowledge, synthesize information, and deepen understanding about various issues and topics. Topics generating interest among FCS professionals include (a) retirement planning, (b) health, leadership, and (c) education; others show interest in expanded economic power when individuals (a) comparison shop, (b) develop a home business, or (c) conduct job searches online (Devaney, 1999; Kapica, 1999; Kato & Hackman, 1997; Laughlin, 1999; Quilling, 1999).

New information gained over the Internet also positively improves awareness of diversity, contributes personal and social understanding of alternative views, and provides opportunities to propose new ideas. Anyone with Internet access can become involved in global discussions, debate issues, engage in political processes, and promote change from the grassroots level. Because good ideas theoretically shine forth on their merits, individuals are freed from gender, race, or disability biases that have historically limited opportunities (Lockhard, 1997; Stratton, 1997). Because shared narratives may be more important than physical proximity (Giese, 1998; Iseke-Barnes, 1997), nurturing communities can develop if individuals meet frequently in cyberspace (Garner & Gillingham, 1996).

The Internet also is negatively redefining human experience in a number of troublesome ways. "Surfing" bombards a computer user with a rapid succession of bits of information--a process that facilitates random and trivial types of thinking rather than the reflection, creative effort, and logical connections that contribute to knowledgeable expertise and wisdom (Seel, 1997). Virtual communities may encourage selfishness and manipulation over dialogue and civic responsibility (Foster, 1997; Streibel, 1998). According to Wilbur (1997), "many computer users seem to experience the movement 'into' cyberspace as an unshackling from real life constraints" (p. 11). They present false personalities, promote antisocial values, and stalk or harass children and others (Lockhard, 1997).

Some scholars claim that the Internet is misnamed as a "global community." Elkind (1994) argues that "with so many sources of information and avenues of communication available at our fingertips, we run the risk of a loss of community, of a shared view of the common good" (p. 25). Individuals who lack writing and literacy skills may be particularly disadvantaged in virtual communities. Those who do not have access to computers cannot participate in electronic public debate (Stratton, 1997).

In summary, families are challenged to ask reflective and critical questions concerning the Internet's consequences on the ways they process and apply information, conduct everyday life, and participate in the community. This study investigated views of FCS educators regarding the Internet's positive and negative effects on such critical issues.

## **Methodology**

### Sample

A list of all Education and Technology Section members of the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences was purchased because of the research purpose to survey educators; this list included teachers at from middle school to university levels, extension agents, and educators in administrative/program roles. A total of 230 names were randomly selected from the list of approximately 2,300 and mailed survey questionnaires, with 104 usable surveys (45%) returned. The sample was considered large enough to provide initial insight into significant Internet issues. Twenty respondents who indicated skill with the Internet additionally volunteered for a brief follow-up interview, and the researchers were able to reach and interview 15 participants.

### Instrumentation and Procedures

The researchers developed a survey questionnaire based on significant issues--such as access to knowledge, effects on emotions and values, and the types and quality of relationships--identified by Internet scholars and writers. Respondents provided demographic data, then used a Likert scale to rate the Internet's perceived effect on each issue listed as important to families. Ratings ranged from 5 indicating an extremely positive effect to 1 indicating an extremely negative effect, with 3 indicating no effect or not sure. The survey included open-ended questions to allow respondents to describe additional positive or negative effects that they associated with the Internet.

All survey respondents who felt skilled with the Internet were invited to participate in a follow-up interview concerning their views on critical issues for families and their views on ways FCS educators can promote beneficial Internet use. Two key open-ended questions were asked via email interviews or through 15-minute telephone interviews (depending on participant preference) to identify what participants thought were the most critical Internet-related issues (positive or negative) facing families and to suggest leadership roles for FCS educators.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the demographic data. Means for the rated effects were calculated for each issue, then ranked from the most positive to the most negatively affected issue. The Tukey HSD test for multiple comparisons was conducted to determine significant differences regarding positively and negatively affected issues. Content analysis was used to identify categories and themes resulting from open-ended comments on the survey and the interviews.

## **Findings**

The survey questionnaire sample primarily consisted of individuals in educational and administrative positions. Professional roles included 70 (66%) middle or high school teachers; 15 (14%) university employees including a president, deans, and professors; 14 (13%) administrators such as school principals, supervisors at state or county agencies, curriculum coordinators, and editors; and 5 (5%) extension agents. The majority had been in the FCS profession for an extended time. Only 13 respondents (12%) had 10 or fewer years, 35 (33%) had between 11 and 20 years, 39 (37%) had between 21 and 30 years, and 19 (18%) had over 31 years of experience. Professional roles of the interviewed participants included: 10 secondary school teachers, three college teachers, one educational administrator, and one retired teacher. All had at least 10 years of experience in the profession.

## Positive Effects of the Internet According to Survey Questionnaire Results

Respondents viewed the overall effects of the Internet as more positive than negative with a mean rating of 3.25. Given 18 issues to consider on the survey, this sample perceived that the Internet was affecting 10 issues in a positive way (See Table 1). Analysis revealed two broad categories of positive Internet effects (a) enhancing opportunities for knowledge and personal empowerment, and (b) supporting certain types of relationships.

Table 1

### *Perceived Effect of the Internet on Issues Important to Families*

(Issues listed in order from most positively affected to most negatively affected)

Critical Issues	Internet Effect Score (1-5)
Positively Affected Issues (Above 3)	
Equitable access to knowledge	4.16
Personal empowerment and autonomy	3.90
Ability to understand people	3.90
Ability to succeed economically	3.79
Ability to form relationships	3.69
Pace of life	3.51
Creativity and imagination	3.50
Capacity for reflective problem solving	3.49
Participation in grass-roots social action	3.49
Personal responsibility and commitment	3.28
Negatively Affected Issues (Below 3)	
Justice and fairness	2.98
Problems already in society	2.78
Sense of community, caring, relationships	2.77
Emotional development of adults	2.74
Standards of moral thinking/behavior	2.67
Emotional development of children/youth	2.65
Family unity and strength	2.60
Development of values	2.56
n=104	Mean 3.25

Access to knowledge and personal empowerment. Equitable access to knowledge was viewed as the issue most positively affected by the Internet, with a 4.16 rating and the only issue with a mean above four on a 5 - point scale. Respondents indicated that the Internet positively affected the ability to empower oneself with more choices and autonomy with a 3.90 score. Thirty of the 60 respondents adding open-ended comments seemed to associate the Internet's abundant information with the opportunity to expand knowledge, knowledge that can in turn be used in practical ways for self-empowerment. As one respondent wrote, "Everything is at your finger tips!" Another liked the "ready information when requested and needed--not intrusive."

Respondents indicated that abundant information helps people "make better choices," "make better use of resources," "make wise decisions," and "research personal areas of interest." Some specifically mentioned that the Internet enhances "availability of consumer and nutrition

information," and "helps with easy access to comparative shopping." Such comments also relate to the relatively high numerical score of 3.79 for the ability to succeed economically. In short, this sample believed that the Internet allows access to the information and knowledge that can expand personal power to solve problems and enrich life.

Improved understanding of others and relationships. The Internet's role in understanding people from other backgrounds was rated with a positive mean of 3.90, as was the related opportunity to form relationships with people from other backgrounds with a 3.69 rating. One person commented that the Internet "creates the ability to join chat rooms with individuals who have experienced similar situations such as loss of family members, cancer, bankruptcy." Although getting to know and understand people were rated as positively affected by the Internet, it is notable that only two open-ended comments specifically related to "global thinking" and "bringing people together around the world, to understand people from other countries and cultures."

Seventeen comments focused on the Internet's positive impact on improved relationships with extended family members. Respondents liked the Internet's role in facilitating "discussion with distant family members" and "spontaneous communication between far-flung family members." Others believed that the Internet created more time to build family relationships: "Meaningless tasks go quicker, leaving more quality family time," and "Shopping online can free up family time."

Issues considered to be positively affected by the Internet and slightly above the neutral score of 3 included (a) pace of life (3.51), (b) creativity (3.50), (c) capacity for logical and reflective problem-solving (3.49), (d) participation in grass roots social action (3.49), and (e) personal responsibility and commitment (3.28). The sample seemed to believe that the Internet can assist individuals as they try to save time, engage in creative efforts, solve problems, participate in social action, and pursue other commitments but it does not have a particularly strong effect.

### Negative Effects of the Internet According to Survey Questionnaire Results

Of 18 issues provided on the survey, this sample believed that the Internet was affecting eight issues slightly or somewhat negatively. Analysis showed two major categories of negative effects: detracting from good values, emotional development, and morals, as well as decreasing family unity and other social relationships.

Questionable morals, emotions, and values. As displayed in Table 1, the Internet was viewed somewhat negatively for its impact on affective areas of life (a) value development (2.56), (b) emotional development of children (2.65) and adults (2.74), and (c) moral standards (2.67). Thirteen of the 64 respondents with additional comments indicated concern that much of the available information promotes poor standards or destructive values: "Misuse of the Internet to communicate violent and immoral information is a serious concern." "What you have access to creates poor values, with the ease of getting to raunchiness." "I'd love to see this junk of gambling and pornography tossed out, because they are real negatives for family harmony."

Respondents expressed concern about broader justice and ethical issues, with a 2.98 rating. Several commentators noted that individuals with Internet access have a new privilege over those who do not: "Some do not have the money to keep up," and "Access by inner city and lower income families limits their opportunity." Other respondents expressed concern about the ability of strangers to invade our lives: "It is too easy for others to get private information," and "It is a new avenue for crime."

Detracting from family and other meaningful relationships. Respondents rated the Internet negatively for its effect on family unity and strength, with a mean score of 2.60. Respondents also believed that the Internet negatively affected existing social problems such as addictions and marital discord (2.78) and detracted from a general sense of community, caring, and relationship (2.77). It is notable that all these particular issues relate in some way to a negative effect on the quality of relationships.

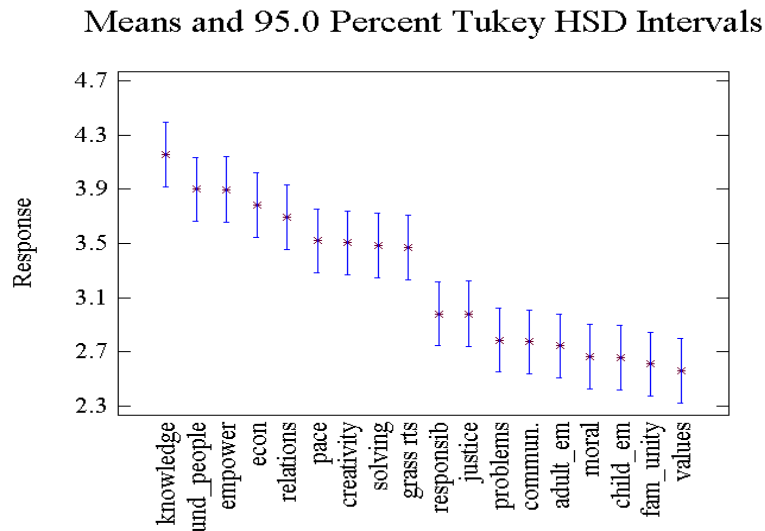
Twenty-eight out of the 64 respondents with written comments reflected a major theme: family time and family strengths are threatened when individual members spend too much time on Internet. Illustrative comments included: "Social interaction will decrease. People need the human touch!" "Too much time on the Internet will take away from family time, just like the television has done!" "It emphasizes personal fulfillment and time away from family, and we lose the appreciation of simple enjoyments."

Many respondents mentioned that children in particular suffer from too much time online with "decreased social skills," "negative impact on physical fitness," "stifled creativity," "neglected chores," and "addictive unless carefully monitored and channeled appropriately." The sample agreed that time on the Internet is not bad in itself, but it is easy to spend too much time, which in turn detracts from more valuable pursuits.

Relationships Between Issues On Survey Questionnaire

The Tukey HSD multiple comparison test was conducted to determine the significance of relationship and difference among the Internet's perceived effects on the critical issues listed in Table 1. Table 2 visually depicts the statistical test results: Intervals of issues that do not overlap are those that resulted in significant differences ( $p < .05$ ). Issues with overlapping intervals share some commonality.

Table 2  
*Multiple Comparisons of Perceived Effects of the Internet on Issues Important to Families*



Note: Statistical Test: Tukey HSD ( $p < .05$ )

As the issue most positively affected by the Internet, expanded knowledge was related to positive understanding and relationships with people, personal autonomy and choice, and economic success. Certainly, knowledge can be used to improve understanding and relationships, financial decisions, and almost any other type of personal or family experience. It is interesting that knowledge was statistically different from experiences related to the pace of life, creativity, logical and reflective problem solving, and grass roots social action. However, the difference was not extremely wide. Respondents may have viewed the pace of life, creativity, logic, reflection, and social involvement as more complex issues that include, but extend beyond, knowledge.

The most distinct pattern revealed by the Tukey HSD multiple comparison test was the clear differentiation of knowledge from the affective areas of emotional development, morals, family unity, social problems, and values. Respondents were concerned about the Internet's negative effect on qualities we typically associate with character and meaning; they did not think that improved cognitive knowledge enhanced emotional quality or values in life. Interestingly, the positive association of the Internet with understanding people and forming relationships with others of different backgrounds also was clearly distinct from the Internet's negative association with the moral and emotional value of relationships. While respondents seem to enjoy the Internet's role in expanding social linkages, they paradoxically appear cautious about the ways these new connections affect emotions, morals, and values.

#### Critical Internet Issues and Educator Roles According to Interview Results

All 15 interviewed educators were active in using the Internet for professional purposes such as staying knowledgeable about family and work trends and issues, identifying current research in areas of their responsibility (ranging from housing data to variables important in strengthening marriage to nutrition information), and communicating with other professionals. Because the interview questions were more open-ended and not specifically asking for a choice of either positive or negative effects, the comments add further insights into the beliefs of professionals.

Critical Internet issues. The most commonly identified critical Internet issue related to the theme of increased access to information, reflecting the focus of the larger survey sample. However, it is interesting that these 15 participants focused entirely on the caveats related to knowledge, with nine raising concerns about the emotional protection of children from pornography, enticements such as gambling, and dangers in chat rooms. As one person summarized, "Families have a hard time controlling the interaction of older children with inappropriate materials, pornography, and contacts that they might make through chat rooms." Added to the problematic "ease of getting into areas and chat rooms where children shouldn't be in," participants expressed worry that "children are often left alone without parental supervision."

Other concerns were raised about poor quality of information that students often include in classroom assignments and whether this confuses their overall understanding. Several teachers complained that "I have often seen students find information that includes great graphics and animation but is not backed up by research and is not reliable or valid." Indeed, what one person called the "massive overload" of information was thought to present a serious challenge to the ability to cull information, identify evidence to separate the valuable from the useless, and simply keep up with the latest research.

Another more specific theme of critical Internet importance related to potential problems with consumer activities and choices. Close to half of the participants were concerned about the

ease of purchasing without full knowledge of the quality and value of goods and services. For example, they stated that the Internet "makes it too easy to purchase items using credit cards" and "there is often a privacy issue there." They seemed to feel that credit and other personal information was not confidential and individuals could be susceptible to consumer fraud if they were not careful.

Finally, whereas all those interviewed indicated that the Internet was "useful as a tool," they illustrated the theme of vulnerability to "too much time on the Internet." Consequently, a critical issue was viewed as the need to learn to manage information and structure time purposively and rationally. Several stated that family time "must come first" and that the Internet should always be interpreted within the context of its effect on the quality of the family. Ironically, one person who taught in an inner city school felt that the most critical issue faced by her students was the lack of access. Whereas many educators are becoming concerned about overuse of the Internet, a few are still concerned about those who are disadvantaged by lack of access. Inequity remains a problem and perhaps is even widening.

What FCS educators should contribute to positive Internet use. A second key interview question related to the ways FCS educators and other professionals should help learners and their families use the Internet wisely. One important theme was the belief that educators should act as "gatekeepers" and identify helpful sites that families can use: "We can recommend sites that we know are reliable." "I have helped conduct workshops throughout our county in which we go online, share sites, and share what we have learned." "We could develop systematic ways to review sites and disseminate user-friendly information to families."

A second theme emerging from interview respondents was that FCS educators must go beyond disseminating good sites to share and promote "critical thinking principles and guidelines for problem solving." Because "sites change so rapidly," they argued that FCS educators must "educate about Internet management" and "help families know how to put knowledge gained from the Internet into their real lives." Other comments included: "We can assist families in creating criteria about what to seek and ways to ensure quality regarding Internet communication and activities." "Teachers need to help students go to a site and evaluate the information, whether or not it is useful and applicable to other ideas they have discussed." "Teach students common sense, that not everyone thinks the way they do and they need to be careful. We are all allowed to have opinions, but we don't always need to agree."

Time management skills were also suggested as a leadership theme. "The Internet can demand, take, and use more time than families realize. We need to teach how to structure your life so that you are using the Internet for the most value without infringing on other valuable parts of family life." In summary, FCS educators can work with families so they can "help themselves, take responsibility, and gain tremendous power."

### **Discussion and Implications**

In a broad analysis, this sample of FCS educators believed that the Internet affects individuals and families somewhat more positively than negatively, both in number of issues and strength of beliefs. They associated knowledge with personal empowerment, choice and autonomy, economic benefit, and relating to others from different backgrounds. This finding is consistent with other research that suggests the Internet offers a wide knowledge base that individuals and groups can then apply to accomplish goals and enhance the quality of life (Croxtall & Cummings, 2000; Devaney, 1999; Kapica, 1999; Kato & Hackman, 1997; Manley, Sweaney, & Valente, 2000; Meszaros, 2002).

Although the sample believed that the Internet positively affects the ability to solve problems and relate to people, they simultaneously expressed concern over questionable values and morals suggested and advocated over the Internet. Comments about isolation, loss of privacy, illegal gambling, excessive pornography, negative emotional development, and loss of family unity reflect the concerns of other writers (Lockhard, 1997; Seel, 1997). Given the FCS mission, it is not surprising that professionals think that the Internet empowers choice and autonomy but cannot replace the nurturing, caring, and intimacy functions of the family.

Several interesting contradictions appeared between the numerical scores and the written comments within the questionnaire. First, in light of the positive numerical ratings for better understanding and relationships with others from different backgrounds, only two commentators mentioned global thinking and improved cultural relationships. Although information and chat opportunities over the Internet theoretically foster multicultural relationships, communication with immediate family members and friends likely is more emotionally binding for people. Second, although the Internet was rated as having a negative effect on family unity, many commentators wrote about the ways that the Internet enriches family life among distant family members and can free up more time for family activities. They seemed to like the Internet as a way to communicate primarily when physical time together was impossible and liked some of the time saving conveniences--but were guarded about the amount of time one should spend on the Internet.

At the same time this study underscores FCS educators' beliefs that the Internet is affecting families in both positive and negative ways, the study points to a number of implications for future practice and research:

- Families need critical thinking skills regarding wise Internet use (Croxall & Cummings, 2000; Manley et al., 2000), and teachers in the FCS profession are poised to take leadership concerning the evaluation and direction of the Internet's role in the home (Meszaros, 2002). Educators can create and offer hands-on workshops, formal classes, sessions at local, state, and national conferences, print and video resources, and community programs. We must continue to offer a variety of formats that teach people how to evaluate information, seek evidence, determine reliability of web sites, and predict consequences on the quality of everyday life.
- Educational programs and resources should be developed to focus on evaluating issues related to morals, values, and emotions promoted by the Internet--both in terms of individual students as family members as well as the family as a whole. For example, child development teachers could teach proactive ways to address the vulnerability of children in chat rooms; family extension specialists could help families reflect upon and identify solutions to concerns about family unity and privacy identified by this sample.
- Family and Consumer Sciences educators should provide leadership in the analysis and development of Internet policies that affect families. This study brings to light specific issues that have implications for policies (a) protection of children, (b) prevention and control of illegal gambling and pornography, and (c) equitable Internet access in education. Educators can identify valuable findings and gain a better understanding about legislative issues from sources such as The David and Lucile Packard Foundation. A recent "Children and Computer Technology" issue of their online journal (available at <http://www.futureofchildren.org/homepage2824/index.htm>) provides information and insights into significant issues and federal initiatives.

- As Meszaros points out, there are unlimited challenges that demand to be addressed with future research: "Technology-impact questions about the environment, life cycle possibilities, and attitudes, values, and ethics abound and are virtually unexplored" (p. 14). Action research should be conducted to "clarify and articulate realities and problems, analyze alternative possible actions, identify resources, reach consensus, take action, reflect on actions taken, and plan future actions and policies" (Peterat, 1997, p. 103).
- Interpretive studies (Daines, 1989) would reveal the meanings involved when the Internet is introduced into the student's family, the nature of Internet experience, and what it is like to experience positive and negative effects as an individual and family. Critical studies (Strom & Plihal, 1989) would illuminate how the Internet is transforming power relationships among families and within society; researchers should critique Internet interactions and suggest ways to promote stronger intercultural relationships.

### **Conclusion**

Family and Consumer Sciences educators firmly believe that the Internet is a useful tool for expanding knowledge and facilitating interpersonal understanding. However, they show concern about the Internet's impact on morals, emotions, values, family unity, and ability to gather valid information. As one respondent noted, "Family members must be aware of the importance of communicating daily and spending real time together." Family and Consumer Sciences Education should take leadership by promoting and critiquing the Internet within the much richer context of meaningful family and community life.

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