

Promoting family learning

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Six out of ten households now have a PC. A quarter of these homes have two or more computers in them. Ninety percent of these computers are being used on a daily basis, the majority of the time to access the Internet and send emails, and nearly half the time for children to 'do their homework'. That's a lot of computers, being used a lot of the time ... and all of it out of sight and sound of a classroom.

Increasingly more and more attention is being paid to the potential that the time children spend away from school has, for being a powerful learning experience. After all, up to eighty percent of a child's year will be spent outside the confines of the school. To really add value to this seeding educational practice, schools would be wise to look again at harnessing this potential and ensuring the home

learning experience complements and supports the school's educational diet in a structured fashion.

Already, commercial companies are lining up to step in where schools may fear to tread. Witness the growth in websites luring the parents of potential juvenile consumers with free webspace, email accounts and cheap access, all with tales of unsurpassed educational content. Watch the growth in SATs priming materials, on-line 'aptitude' tests, and even the virtual private tutor. It's beguilingly attractive, it's 'edutaining' and if the claims are to be believed, it works wonders.

So just what are those legions of net-happy children doing with their computers when they get home, and what can a school do to ensure the potential educational content can be harvested?

At St. Peter's CE Junior School in Harborne, teachers, SENCOs and Learning Assistants have been exploring some of these issues through a project developed through the State/Independent School Partnership Scheme. The project has a number of interesting features, including placing a video conference computer (together with ISDN line connection and call charges) into the homes of children with special educational needs. Over a year, the school developed a series of activities for the children that were designed to develop their communication skills, social interaction and confidence. Each activity took place outside the normal school day and required each of the six children to video conference with a partner.

Early on in the project, parents took part in some initial training relating to the use of the video conference equipment, as well as being fully informed about the nature and scope of the activities, including the built-in facility to access the Internet at ISDN broadband speeds. From the beginning, the parents' interest and commitment was complete. Not only were they enthusiastic about the potential the equipment had for impacting on each child's individual needs, but they were eager to explore the application of the technology and to help shape and direct the learning experiences.

One of the chief characteristics of the project became the family involvement in each activity. Once the equipment was installed in the homes (usually the child's bedroom), and the very first video connection was made from one home to another, the whole family became unwittingly signed up to the project aims. For an hour or more, the television became redundant, the play stations were reduced to silence and no one answered the telephone. Everyone crowded round the computer and became involved in the immediate educational challenge that had been set.

The activities were structured at first to introduce the families to the software applications. Video conferencing is more than merely being able to see and talk to someone on the computer screen. The software applications enable families to share virtual whiteboards, use chat facilities, send still pictures

and documents, and to share software packages. At its most creative, it enables pre-prepared camcorder footage to be shared across the connection, for remote access between the computers (the 'host' computer taking control of the 'remote' computer and its software), as well as multiple users to connect at once, from anywhere in the world.

A sample list of some of the activities gives a flavour of what took place:—

- **Talking to Santa**

An early exercise encouraging children to use the equipment and to feel comfortable with talking across the connection. At this point, the children refused to speak with Father Christmas, and instead asked that adults relate their requests to him.

- **Squiggle**

This early exercise was designed to get children used to using the virtual whiteboard facility. One household would draw a random 'squiggle' on the computer whiteboard, the other household would then take over the drawing and gradually change the squiggle into something meaningful. The activity became one of the children's favourites and encouraged concentrated use of language.

- **Mapping journeys**

The children loaded up a scanned map of the local area onto the whiteboard and used the virtual highlight pens to describe graphically and verbally their journey between the connected locations. This exercise was extended as it developed to make journeys that included posting a letter, buying food, and going to school etc.

- **Collaborative writing**

The children shared word processors to create a story for infant children. This became an extended writing activity as children sought to develop the story further and include illustrations, content pages and titles. The activity had many extensions including the potential to collaborate across all the project families to create a desktop published joint magazine.

- **The holiday brochure**

This involved exploiting the fast Internet connection. Each family was required to produce a brochure for a family visiting Birmingham, using information collected from the Internet.

- **Biographical buddies**

A number of video conference networks exist, albeit on an *ad hoc* basis, across the country and within countries. The children were able to take advantage of these from time to time, including meeting children from a school in Dorset. The children were required to select three objects each that illustrated something they wanted to share about themselves with the child from Dorset.

- **Global Leap 2000**

This unique event, set up by Arbour Vale Education Action Zone and Picturatel, enabled the

children to take part in a series of activities connecting them with children and specialists around the world. The day involved talking to ‘Amy Johnson’ at the Science Museum in London, talking to Captain James Cook in Scarborough, singing to up to twenty schools around the world, and taking part in a demonstration of didgeridoo playing from Australia. The culmination of the day was when the children, from their bedrooms, were able to speak to a NASA official about global warming issues, while also hearing from divers diving on the Great Barrier Reef.

The range of activities gave the children a very rich learning experience which they were encouraged to share with other children and their families. In turn, they have been involved in a number of conferences around the country, where they happily answer questions and talk about what they have experienced and learned – a dramatic contrast with the children’s reluctance, shyness and hesitation when the project began.

The effect of such concerted and regular activity on the children’s confidence, communication skill development and academic achievement has been marked. Evidence from teachers, parent diaries, tests, and the children themselves consistently provide a picture of great increases in confidence, enthusiasm for learning and ability to explain, discuss and interact with others.

Comments from parents include:

‘C—— said he felt able to talk more to people and that he felt more confident.’

‘There is an astounding improvement in our child’s level of confidence. He is able to take a lead role in activities that he would have previously found difficult, if not impossible. His enthusiasm for video conferencing is continuing as it has provided him with a skill that he can use in many situations’.

The children say:

‘It’s excellent – now I’ve got used to it I know how to do it. I’ve enjoyed it and I know how to do it. It has helped me with English and Maths – it has helped me with words and spellings.’

‘I found I couldn’t speak many words at first – I was quite shy. I have got used to it now and I can talk to people now.’

‘I think video conferencing is the best thing in the world. I’ve learnt to describe things and it is helping me to improve on describing.’

‘It has helped me with speaking and not being shy. I try to speak louder in class now as well. It has helped me to make new friends and to speak to new friends as well.’

As part of the on-going evaluation of the project, parents and staff involved in the projects were asked to keep a diary that would be used to record any changes, or anything of significance.

One thing is certain – the children in this project continue to be very clear about how useful their home computer is to their family as a valuable learning tool, and a source of stimulation, conversation, friendship and . . . fun!