Evaluating Family Life Web Sites

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The Internet may be one of the fastest growing resources for both parents and family life educators. Information is available through e-mail, mailing lists, chat rooms, bulletin boards and Web sites. The number of family life educators and parents who access the Internet is consistently growing. In 1997, 36.6 percent of households owned a computer, while 18 percent of households reported in-home internet access. In 2003, 61.8 percent of households had a computer and 54 percent of households reported in-home Internet access, highlighting a substantial increase from 1997 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).

The Internet has served many different purposes within family life. Children often use the Internet for educational purposes while adolescents and adults tend to use it for social networking and entertainment. Shopping, paying bills, and searching for information are other common Internet uses (Hughes & Hans, 2001). The Internet has also played a role in family life by providing social networks or support groups that are accessed online. Support groups dealing with family-related issues, such as divorce, death, having a child with special needs, or depression, may be a valuable resource through which family life educators or therapists can help

individuals and families (Hughes & Hans, 2001; Stjernsward & Ostman, 2007).

In May 2008, there were over 100 million active registered websites operating on the World Wide Web. Of those websites, 74 percent are registered under the commercial or ".com" domain (www.domaintools.com). A great deal of family life and parenting information is on the Web and the amount is growing exponentially. A January 29, 2002, Yahoo search (www.yahoo.com) using the keyword "parenting" found 764 hits; one using "family life" found 561 hits. A January 29, 2005 Yahoo search using the keyword "parenting" found 11,300,000 hits; one using "family life" found 71,300,000 hits. A March 12, 2008, Yahoo search using the keyword "parenting" found 270,000,000 hits; one using "family life" found 1,420,000,000 hits. Deciphering which of these websites provides educational, accurate, credible, relevant, and useful information can be quite a challenge for families.
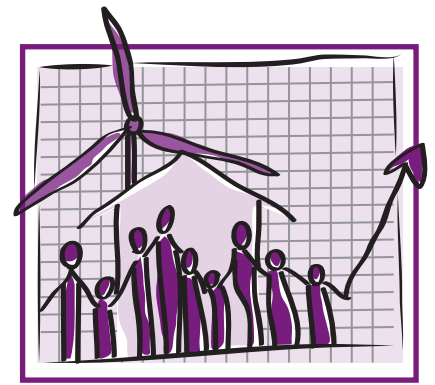
Need for Guidelines

Of course, there is information and there is Information. Colorado State University's former Provost, Loren Crabtree (1998), drew the following continuum.

Data ------- Information ------- Knowledge ------- Wisdom

He pointed out that the World Wide Web currently has a great deal of data, a fair amount of information, some knowledge, and very little wisdom.

With millions of family life and parenting sites, and with those numbers constantly growing, how can you decide which site is an authoritative one and which is not? Which sites provide quality information? Whom can you trust?

Hughes (1997) says: "At present Web site developers have yet to establish professional standards and conventions to document the sources of their information and the necessary standards to ethically

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Quick Facts

- A March 2008 search using the keyword "parenting" found about 270,000,000 Web sites; one using "family life" found about 1,420,000,000 sites.

- The Web currently has a great deal of data, a fair amount of information, some knowledge, and very little wisdom.

- This fact sheet presents some simple, practical guidelines to evaluate the quality of information in family life education Web sites.

present credible information. In many cases the conventional ethical standards that govern teaching family life and conducting clinical work still apply, but the brevity and anonymity of the electronic communication programs pose significant challenges."

Suggested Guidelines

Here are some simple, practical guidelines to evaluate the quality of information in family life education Web sites.

1. How strong are the *training and background* of the author or developer?

Weak 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Strong

Look for sources with solid, well-founded backgrounds.
❑ What is the author's name, title and position?
❑ What is the author's educational background, training and work experience in family life?
❑ What is his or her organizational affiliation and certification or licensure in professional groups? Are there links or addresses and telephone numbers to these organizations? Some professional organizations to look for are the American Psychological Association, National Association of Clinical Social Workers, American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, American Psychiatric Association, National Council on Family Relations, and American Society on Aging.
❑ Does the author or developer have credentials that you value, such as a grandfather with 25 years experience in being a father and grandfather, or a Ph.D. with 20 years experience as a licensed marriage and family therapist? Ultimately, you must decide which factors make the site credible to you.

2. How *credible* is the sponsoring *entity*?

Unbelievable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Credible

Look for authoritative sources, ones that supply good evidence that encourage you to trust the information provided.
❑ Usually educational institutions, professional associations and professionals with demonstrated track records provide the most consistently reliable information. Web addresses for college and university Web sites end in ".edu." Public schools have "k12" in their Web addresses.
❑ Look for a link to the sponsoring entity's Web site, along with an address and telephone number to verify that the entity truly is who it says it is.

3. How *credible* are the documented *sources* of information and knowledge?

Unbelievable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Credible

Look for sources that are up to date and that provide convincing evidence for the claims made, a source *with at least two other sources that support the findings*.
❑ Is the information based on the author's experience with children and youth?
❑ Is it based on practical resources? Which ones? Are they ones you trust?
❑ Is it up to date, factual, accurate, exact and comprehensive?
❑ Is it based on scientific research? Are there references to scientific sources? Scientific information has limitations, but there is much we know about healthy and resilient individuals, families and communities. Generally, readers can be more confident of information that includes research findings and conclusions, especially research that has been replicated, as well as clinical observations and practical knowledge.
❑ How recently has the page been revised and updated?
❑ Is the source a commercial organization with something to sell? (Web addresses for commercial sites usually end in ".com.") Judge the credibility of the information in the context of the larger picture in which it is found.
❑ Who else links to the site? How credible are they?

4. How *reasonable* is the information?

Slanted 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Balanced

Look for sources that discuss the topic thoughtfully and reasonably and are concerned with providing the truth.
❑ Is the information fair, reasoned, objective and balanced?
❑ Is it free of fallacies and biases?
❑ Is there a conflict of interest?

5. How *relevant* is the information or knowledge to your situation?

Irrelevant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Relevant

Look for sources that acknowledge their limitations and that are as relevant as possible to your situation.
❑ Does the information include examples of children, youth and families similar to yours?
❑ Are the life situations described similar to yours?
❑ Does the site mention that the information may not apply to everybody because of differences in age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic level, or educational level? Sites that acknowledge limitations are generally more credible than those claiming to provide the right answer under all circumstances.

6. How *accessible* is the author or developer of the site?

Inaccessible 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Accessible

Look for sources that offer follow-up interaction.
❑ Does the author or developer include an e-mail address?
❑ Can you contact the author or developer and ask questions directly?
❑ Does the author or developer respond in a timely manner to these questions?

7. How many questionable *warning signs* are apparent?

Many 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Few

Look for sources that are accurate.
❑ How dramatic are the claims? The stronger the claims, the more skepticism is appropriate, especially with information that conflicts with common knowledge and wisdom. New information may be true, but expect it to be supported by strong evidence from highly credible sources.
❑ If it sounds too good to be true, it probably isn't true.
❑ Complex issues like violence or alcohol and other drug abuse need more than simple solutions. If the information provides guaranteed, simple solutions to difficult problems, ask questions.
❑ Raising resilient children and youth and developing healthy families require many different healthy coping strategies. Question sources that suggest only one way to handle a parenting problem.

8. In how *useful* a manner is the information and assistance provided?

Not useful 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Useful

Look for sources that are user friendly.
- ❏ Is the information well organized?
- ❏ Is the site searchable?
- ❏ Is related material connected in an easily understandable way?
- ❏ Can you easily find what you want?

References

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Elliott, M. (1999). Classifying family life education on the World Wide Web. *Family Relations*, 48, 7-13.

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Resources

These guidelines are offered as quick and practical ones. For additional in-depth guidelines on how to critique family life sites, see the following (Elliott,1999; Morris, Dollahite & Hawkins, 1999):

Colorado State University Libraries: manta.library.colostate.edu/howto/evalweb.html

Ohio State University Extension:
www.hec.ohio-state.edu/famlife/technol/guide/standard.htm
www.hec.ohio-state.edu/famlife/technol/webcon.htm
www.hec.ohio-state.edu/famlife/technol/webpro.htm

Yahooligans!:
www.yahooligans.com/content/tg/evaluatingwebsites.html