

ONLINE

STORY BY MAGGIE JACKSON

*ALWAYS-ON
TECHNOLOGY
IS REDEFINING
TOGETHERNESS
AND CHANGING
THE BOUNDARIES
OF FAMILY LIFE*

ILLUSTRATION BY AMY GUIP



HI-TECH FAMILY



ricia Shiland, who owns a maternity evening-wear company in New York City, routinely gets messages at her office about teen pop stars, No. 2 pencils and Beanie Babies. But it isn't spam, and Shiland's not bothered in the least.

Sitting in a sunlit office crammed with elegant dresses and boxes of fabric samples, Shiland carries on a running high-tech conversation with her 10-year-old daughter, Devon, after school, at night when Shiland works late and on the weekends Devon spends with her dad. Using fax, email and instant messaging, mother and daughter catch up on the day and make plans—sometimes for a face-to-face talk later. "It's become such a central part of our existence—the computers, the IM. It's changed our lives," says Shiland, as she strides through the showroom of her firm, Mom's Night Out.

Fin! Shiland pauses at one of her two PCs to catch Devon's IM: "Hi, Mom! I'm home from school." A flurry of words passes between them—student-council elections, a mechanical-pencil breakdown—and then Shiland turns back to her work, a mix of pleasure and relief on her face. "It seems like she's always there," Shiland says.

In an age when so many families are apart from dawn to dusk, electronic communication devices are becoming the tools of choice for managing and connecting. Spouses trade emails, then call on cell phones on the commute home to cobble together supper plans. Business travelers read bedtime stories by phone to their children, tucked in bed thousands of miles away. Ex-spouses appreciate the neutral ground that email offers. According to industry research, about 40 percent of children over 12 have cell phones, up from 20 percent in 1999, and more than 20 million people now own a computer, a cell phone and a PDA.

But in forging this connectedness, wired families are doing far more than checking train schedules or grocery lists. They are living out more of their lives *via* technology—on air, so to speak—and, in so doing, creating a kind of "separate togetherness." Technology is building a new room in the house for family to gather in. First, it was work that became portable. Now, home life is becoming boundaryless and nomadic. "It really does add a layer of electronic space that becomes very real and very vibrant," says Andrea Saveri, lead researcher of the Technology Horizon Program at the Institute for the Future in Menlo Park, California. (See "Together Wherever," facing page.)

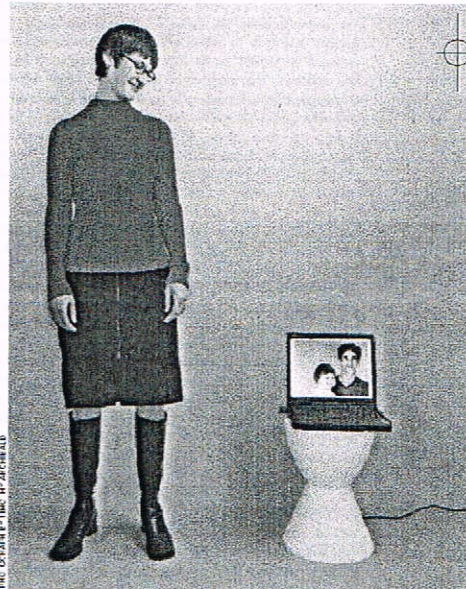
As a result, families are beginning to wrestle with the implications of relationships made portable. How do emotions echo in this new virtual room? Which tool is used for which message? (Is email best for breaking up with a boyfriend?

Some teens think so.) The ability to be in multiple places at once redefines togetherness in unexpected ways. You're chatting with your son by cell phone while he's also instant-messaging his friends. Does this count as family time?

Most wired families agree that high-tech connections don't replace old-fashioned togetherness—what Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Sherry Turkle calls the "gold standard" of human relations. But this new era is raising complex sociological questions: What is family life? Are virtual and physical relations equal? Such questions are ratcheting up a few notches the late-twentieth-century conversation about "quality time."

Ironically, even as families prize their all-too-rare moments of face time, they find themselves expanding their virtual connectivity. Just as the freedom of anytime-anywhere work morphs into the mandate of all-the-time work, family members are beginning to carry around both office and home: all-work, all-family, all the time. "In a way, they can never get away from the family," says Charles Darrah, an anthropology professor at San Jose State University.

And so another dilemma arises: Are we trying to substitute one impossible ideal of family for another? Think virtual Norman Rockwell. The Wiltons meet the Jetsons. Perhaps we shouldn't be asking how to forge more togetherness but



PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL J. SCHNEIDER

Saveri "with" daughter Gianna and husband Robert

whether it makes sense to judge families "bad" or "good" by the amount of time they spend together.

Lisa Ross, a Miami-based public relations executive, arrived at her 4-year-old son's Jewish preschool one Friday to watch his class participate in a candle-lighting ceremony, only to get a crisis call from a client. She contacted her husband, who rushed over to take her place in the audience. "Without technology, I might not have been able to reach him so quickly, and my client might not have been able to reach me so quickly," says Ross, who also has a 2-year-old. "I was able to satisfy my family's needs as well as my client's."

Such last-minute solutions, and other logistics, comprise the bulk of families' tech-assisted communications, Darrah has found, allowing for a sort of "just in time" family management. But Darrah sees some downsides to this immediacy. For one thing, there's a surprising lack of privacy in this new room of the house. "People never know when they're going to be 'in' their family," says the anthropologist. That's one reason he personally eschews cell phones and pagers. "To be honest, I don't think about my family or anything else during the day," he says. "When I'm here, I'm really working."

For many wired parents, though, such connectivity is comforting. Technology not only provides a safety net when

things go awry but also gives them a quick dose of family life when they're away for the day or for longer. "I love you too!" Teresa Dunn-Thordarson BlackBerryed her husband while he was on a trip last fall. "What time do you get home tomorrow? The kids had a good first day of school. I'm sure they'll have lots to tell you. Teresa. XOXO." Dunn-Thordarson is chief financial officer for Alvaka Networks, a company in Huntington Beach, California, that her husband, Oli, founded. The couple has three young children, so Teresa values being able to reach Oli when he's on the go. "It's not so much what you say—it's knowing that you're connected that gives me peace of mind," she says.

Another charm of high-tech connection is that life's important moments don't have to wait until everyone is back in the same physical space. Mara Aspinall, an executive at Genzyme Corporation, based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, went over her boys' final report cards last spring even though she was away on business. Her sons, 11 and 10, faxed the grades to her hotel and then called. "That was an important milestone," says Aspinall, who travels often. "You wouldn't want to miss that or hear about it later."

As families construct their new virtual rooms, they are testing what kinds of emotions they can share on air. Bone-deep email, for example, can be easily misconstrued. Oli Thordarson once emailed his wife to ask if she'd sent out a check; unwittingly, he used language—"What's going on with this?"—that offended her. "We've had some spats that have grown out of email," he says. By the same token, virtual communication can offer relief to divorced parents. "Email is a neutral zone," says Dawn Johnston, a trainer with the Texas state health department and a mother and stepmother to five children. That same bit of distancing is also a plus for some teens and college students, who find that apologies and confidences to parents come more easily via email. And since so many kids use these tools to talk among themselves, "a parent who can crack the code already has an 'in,'" says Cynthia Townley Ewer of the home-management website OrganizedHome.com.

Still, these useful distances can stretch the idea of togetherness. Virtual space is extremely permeable. As you chat with your husband by cell phone, he may also be emailing an officemate. Conversely, families may sit together in the same physical space but stay connected elsewhere, multitasking socially. "It's not enough to sit down to dinner or walk down the street—we have to have our cell phone and BlackBerry out," says Naomi Baron, a linguistics professor at American University and author of *Alphabet to Email: How Written English Evolved and Where It's Heading* (Routledge). This will "radically change our notion of what it means to be 'present' in a social relationship," Baron says.

So how far into this new room of the house do we want to go? Can virtual relations—novel and imperfect as they are—give us the togetherness we yearn for? For many, the answer is a resounding yes. "Why do we say the electronic doesn't count?" asks Severi, the futurist. To Shiland, IM love notes from her daughter count. To Thordarson, email bulletins from his wife count. "Technology is simply another tool in a toolbox we use to (CONTINUED ON PAGE 48)

TOGETHER WHEREVER

When Andrea Severi's mother-in-law was offered a hand-me-down swing set recently, she zapped Andrea an email and a digital photo, asking if her toddler would enjoy having it in the backyard.

Hardly a futuristic moment, concedes Severi, mother of a 22-month-old daughter, and a lead researcher at the Institute for the Future in Menlo Park, California. But it's a small example of the shared cyberenvironment that will soon be all-embracing and persistent, says Severi. "Anywhere families go, they can jump into a shared space. It's untethered connectedness."

At the institute, Severi's team maps out how technology will affect our lives decades from now, conducts ethnographic studies of gadget users and tracks related research. Among the ideas that now interest Severi is "shared browsing"—an application that allows people to surf the Web together from separate locations. Virtual togetherness is also the idea behind MIT Media Lab's prototype kitchen table with wall screen and "video tablets" that families can use to access the Web together, creating a new electronic "hearth," says its developer, Ted Selker.

Not everyone finds comfort in such visions. Severi herself bought a cell phone just two years ago and is not an avid Web surfer. "I'd rather be out hiking or gardening." Good ideas come from both cyber space and her own backyard, and she welcomes them all. —MJ



Ping!

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 47)

communicate with each other," he argues.

But not everyone believes that the tools are interchangeable. Paul Cleri, a divorced father of three, has made headlines in Massachusetts by appealing a custody arrangement—similar to some seen in other states—that includes twice-weekly webcam "visits" with his 5-year-old son and 2-year-old twin daughters. The visits are in addition to twice-monthly, in-person visits with the children, who live in New York. As Cleri explains his objections to the plan, he finds himself having to describe the virtues of in-person visits with a level of detail that would have sounded odd just a few years ago: "I like to pick my children up, give them hugs, put them on my shoulders, that kind of thing," he says.

For all the eagerness to connect, there are equally vital questions about how technology changes something at the other end of the spectrum: families' ability to separate. Consider that typical American rite-of-passage place designed for separation: sleep-away camp. No one tracks how many camps allow parents to email children, but a growing number do, printing out the missives and distributing them like letters. (Few camps allow children to email back, due to a scarcity of computers.) And now most camps have websites where digital photos can be posted daily.

"I've had closing-day ceremonies where I'll introduce the person who cooked three meals a day for seventy days, and they'll get polite applause," says Steve Baskin, co-owner of two camps in Marble Falls, Texas. "I'll introduce my webmaster, and they'll get a standing ovation."

Jennifer Seavey, an Alexandria, Virginia, high school teacher, became "addicted" to daily Web glimpses of her 17-year-old daughter at a camp in Texas last summer. "I felt as if I was a part of her day," she says, "that I was there with her."

Camp directors have mixed feelings. Some try to live up to families' demands for connectivity, yet they want to preserve camp as an experience away from

home. "You don't want to sabotage a child's sense of accomplishment," says Roger Popkin of Blue Star Camps in Hendersonville, North Carolina.

Families that want limitless connectivity may ultimately undermine the creation of trust and independence. Thordarson, for example, says that technology gives his 8-year-old son new freedom. But it may come with strings attached. The boy now bicycles the neighborhood with a walkie-talkie, and Thordarson figures his son will one day carry a cell phone equipped with GPS, a tracking system. "He may not be home, but I'll know where he is and how he got there," Thordarson says.

Perhaps we are asking the wrong favors of technology. After all, ideals of family togetherness are relatively new, says cultural historian John Gillis at Rutgers University. It wasn't until Victorian times that parents and children expected to live under the same roof day to day. In earlier eras, offspring rich and poor boarded in other households, and spouses interacted more with servants or fellow laborers than with each other. "This notion of intimacy was largely absent," says Gillis.

Rather than try to forge more togetherness—virtual or real—perhaps we should ask whether togetherness is the right yardstick of a family's success. Some families can be emotionally close while living apart. Others can suffocate each other—by email. Technology gives us a wonderfully mobile new space to dwell in, but if we come to expect spouses and children to live constantly in this portable room, we may simply replace old constraining ideas about family time with new ones.

The last time Shiland's daughter, Devon, went to camp, it was an unwired experience. "I really felt it when she went away," Shiland recalls. Yes, their emotional connection still comes from time spent in the same physical space, she says. But the allure of high-tech togetherness is too great, in an era of apertness, to ignore. This year, Devon will be at a new camp, one fully equipped with a website and email.

Maggie Jackson, an award-winning writer on work/life issues, is the author of *What's Happening to Home? Balancing Work, Life and Refuge in the Information Age* (Scribner Books).

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