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

IlLustRation By AMY GURP
rica 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 Shi-
land'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 18-year-old daughter, Devin, after school, at night when Shiland works late and on the weekends. Devin spends with her dad. Using fax, email and instant messaging, moth-
er 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.

Paggy Shiland passes at one of her two PCs to catch Dewin IM: "Hi, Mom! I'm home from school." A flurry of words passes between them—unstructured emails, a mechanical-pencil breakdown—and then Shiland turns back to her work, a mix of pleasure and relief on her face. "It works 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 in the common house to cackle together supper plans. Business travelers read bed-
time stories by phone to their children, nudged to bed thou-
sands of miles away. Everyone appreciates the neutral ground that email offers. According to industry research, about 70 percent of children under or have cell phones, up from 40 percent in 1990, and more than 20 million people now own a computer, a cell phone and a FAX.

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, on the phone 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 hunchable and nomadic. "We really do add a layer of electronic space that becomes real and very virile," says Andrea Savet, head researcher of the Technology Holes Program at the Institute for the Future in Menlo Park, California. (See "Together Whenever," 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 realm? Which tool is used for which message? Is email best for breaking up with a boyfriend?
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 2-year-old and Jewish preschool one Friday to watch her class participate in a candle-lighting ceremony, only to get a call from a shead. 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 3-year-old. "It was able to satisfy my family's needs as well as my shead.

Such last-minute solutions, and other logistics, exemplify the scale of families' unsolicited communications. Dvorish has found, allowing for a sort of "just in time" family management. But Dvorish says some drawbacks to these developments. 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 echoes cell phones in the house. "To be honest, I don't think about my family or anything else during the day," he says.

When I'm home, I'm really working."

For many wired parents, though, such connectivity can be 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 DeSantis-Thurber texted 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, 35, was in New York City when she sent the text. "I'm not that much what you say—it's knowing that you're connected that gives me peace of mind," she says.

Another thing that Dvorish sees is that kids' important moments don't have to wait until everyone is back in the same physical space. Carla Amstull, 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 son, 11, and 9, faxed the grades to her hotel and then mailed them. "That was an important milestone," says Amstull, who travels often. "You wouldn't want to miss that or hear about it later."

As families convert their new virtual routine, they are testing what kinds of emotions they can share on air. Berkshire email, for example, can be easily misconstrued. Oli Thordarson once emailed his wife to ask if she'd seen a check: unwittingly, he used language—"What's going on with this?!"—that offended her. "We've had some spots that have grown out of small," he says. By the same token, virtual communication can offer relief to divorced parents. "Email is a neutral zone," says Dawn Johnstone, a trainer with the Texas state health department and a mother of stepmother to five children. "That same kind of distancing is also a plus for some teens and college students, who find that apologies and confessions to parents can 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 Rowley, director of the home management website Outlookscout.com. Still, these useful distances can stretch the idea of togetherness. Virtual space is temporarily permanent. As you chat with your husband by cell phone, he may also be emailing an office mate. Conversely, families may sit together in the same physical space but see connected elsewhere,strandg routine. "It's not enough to sit down to dinner or walk down the street—we have to have our cell phones and BlackBerry on," says Naomi Baron, a linguistics professor at American University and author of Alphabet of Email: How Written English Beeok and Where It's Huluking (Berkeley). 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 relationships—more and important as they are—give us the togetherness we need? For many, the answer is a resounding yes. "Why do we say the electronic doesn't exist?" asks DeSantis, the future. To Shillman, it lose tones from her daughter. To Thordarson, email bulletin from his wife count. "Technology is simply another tool in a toolbox we use to..." (CONTINUED ON PAGE 43)
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But not everyone believes that the tools are interchangeable. Paul Chir is a divorced father of three, who has made headlines in Massachusetts by appealing to the higher courts for the right to visit his children regularly. In a recent interview, he said, "I believe that children have a right to visit their father regularly, just as they have a right to visit their mother."

Families that want limitless connectivity may ultimately undermine the creation of trust and independence. Chir explains that technology has given him "a new freedom. But it may come with strings attached." The boy now brings his cell phone to school, where he can be reached at any time. "I may not be home, but I'll be there," he says.

For all the convenience, there are equally valid concerns about how technology changes something at the other end of the spectrum: the family's ability to cope. Consider that typical American life is full of time, space, and privacy. Parents can escape their children for hours at a time, while kids can escape their parents for hours at a time, while kids can escape their parents for hours at a time.

Rather than try to forge more cohesive, virtual, or real—perhaps we should ask whether togetherness is the right yardstick of a family's success. Some families can be emotionally connected while living apart. Others can sacrifice each other—by cell phone. Technology gives us a wonderful new space to dwell in, but if we come to expect spouses and children to live in virtuality, we may simply replace old connectors with ideas about family life with new ones.

The last time Shalandy's daughter, Debra, went to camp, it was an unwritten experience. "I really felt it when she went away," Shalandy recalls. "Their emotional connection still comes from time spent in the same physical space, she says. But the allure of high-tech communication is so great, to an era of apprenticeship, to ignore. This year, Debra will be at a new camp, one fully equipped with a website and email.

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