

Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Visit his website at:

<http://www.yoursocialworker.com>

Instant Messaging – get with the program

Notice your phone is more available these days. It's true. More kids are using Instant Messaging to keep in touch instead of the phone.

The Internet has made the world smaller and more accessible, not only for the grown-ups, but perhaps even more so for our kids. As we in the boomer generation get used to talking with our hands via email, youth have grown up tapping their way to instant communication. My son is incredulous about my use of email. He says it takes too long and questions waiting for a reply.

Upon his return from summer camp, he scampered to the computer to add at least a dozen new friends to his chat list. I remember the days when summer friends were forgotten amidst the return to school. Not so any longer.

The Internet and Instant Messaging has provided our children a way to keep in touch with each other like never before. They maintain friendships, strengthening social connections within their community and abroad.

While Instant Messaging may carry the risk of contact with unsavoury persons, the program can be set up to exclude contact from unknown sources. This will bring an added measure of safety.

Along with the breadth and depth of social relationships, Instant Messaging has other added benefits. The process requires literacy, even if spelling accuracy is compromised.

Further, kids these days are able to keyboard at breathtaking speeds – an absolute necessity in today’s computer world.

Many parents are worried though about the time spent on the computer and the content of communication.

As for time spent, admonishing your child to get off the computer will never work. Rather, parents must concern themselves with promoting or requiring alternative activities such as homework, athletics, hobbies, volunteer activity, part-time work, religious instruction, etc. The strategy is to engage them in other wholesome activities that compete for their time. Then when they want to chat, they’ll have earned it... and have much to talk about!

For parents who want to keep abreast of their child’s issue of the day, download the Instant Message program to your computer, get them on your chat list and check out their “away message”. This often leaves a clue as to what’s going on with them in the moment. Their “away message” may help you raise issues at suppertime. For parents who have separated and want to keep in touch, Instant Messaging feeds the need for an instant connection.

If you do start using the program, either to keep in touch or monitor your own kid, there is one cardinal rule to remember: Don’t annoy. If you do annoy, you may just find yourself on your kids “block list”.

My advice to parents when it comes to Instant Messaging is to embrace it yet direct it. Direct it the way you would any of your child’s other activities. Proper use has many up-sides.