DVD Newsletters: New Ways to Encourage Communication With Families

Video technology is a powerful communication tool, especially for today’s young families, many of whom are English language learners. Find out how to encourage information sharing with families and boost their involvement in early childhood programs through electronic newsletters.

The positive benefits of family involvement for children’s learning and development are well documented (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Delgado-Gaitán 2004; Hamilton, Roach, & Riley, 2003; McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). Parenting support strategies that encourage children’s learning at home are especially helpful to promote learning in classrooms (Illinois State University, 2004).

Early childhood educators are always looking for accessible, easy-to-use strategies to enhance communication with families. Technology innovations have the potential to enhance and create more meaningful school and home communication that involves families and encourages them to support their children’s learning at home (Graham-Clay, 2005; Kenner, Ruby, Jessel, Gregory, & Arju, 2008; Lewis, 2009; Vanderpool, 2009).

The idea of DVD newsletters combines the traditional newsletter concept for family involvement (Epstein, 1995) with the modern concept of digital versatile disc (DVD) technology (Sanchez, Walsh, & Rose, 2009; Walsh et al., 2008).

In 1997, DVDs began replacing video home system (VHS) tapes as a medium (Kim & Lee, 2003). Two years later, DVD technology was already popular and fast growing (Consumer Electronics Association, 2002).

Given the earlier common use of VHS tapes, DVD technology is likely to be widely adopted for school-home communication. Despite the prevalence of DVDs, the potential of DVD newsletters as tools to enhance communication with families has been explored in few studies (Walsh et al., 2008; Sanchez & Walsh, in press). Some pertinent findings about the use of VHS technology are cited here.

One-time VHS videos were created for early childhood classrooms in an urban, public school. They provided an overview of the school as well as parenting advice (Calabrese, 2006).

• Videos were considered to be better suited for families to view, particularly for families with low literacy rates (Calabrese, 2006; Shepherd & Roker, 2005).

• Parents’ verbal responses were positive about video technology as a mode of parental involvement (Calabrese, 2006). Families of pre-kindergarteners on average reported watching the video at least twice. Some parents reported learning new information about their child’s school day, ways to support the child’s education at home, and ways to become more involved at school.

Effective technological tools for family involvement that help support children’s learning at home include

• the telephone (Harrison, 2001; Kasprowicz, 2002),
• email and Web sites (Lopez, 2005; Tobolka, 2006),
• school video (Calabrese, 2006) and, more recently,
• technological classroom newsletters (Walsh, Buckley, Rose, Sanchez, & Gillum, 2008).
VHS tapes of middle school students were prepared to encourage parents to help their children with school projects. Clevenson (1999) found that the videos were well received by parents and families.

More recently, Walsh et al. (2008) piloted monthly DVD classroom newsletters. The experiences with implementing this project (Walsh et al., 2008; Sanchez & Walsh, in press) led to these practical recommendations for teachers and program directors.

**Content for DVD Newsletters**

DVD newsletters can be used for a variety of purposes to further the goals and philosophy of any early childhood program. For example, DVD newsletters can

- update families on their children’s daily learning experiences, enabling families to see everyday classroom interactions among children and their teachers
- feature classroom and program announcements, in multiple languages as needed
- demonstrate parenting strategies to support children’s learning at home
- offer culture- and age-relevant child development, wellness, and parenting information
- inform families about community resources and events
- recruit volunteers to make meaningful contributions to the program
- smooth transitions between preschool programs and elementary schools by introducing new settings and teachers
- highlight staff professional development progress and achievements

**Demonstrate the link between curriculum goals and classroom practices.**

**Ideas to Highlight Curriculum Standards**

To demonstrate the link between curriculum goals and classroom practices, this sequence of activities might be part of the content in a newsletter.

First, a teacher might point out how specific classroom materials support science learning standards such as investigation and observing the properties of matter—in this case, floating and sinking. A chart of children’s predictions about what they think will float, and what will sink, might be included.

Then, a video clip could show children experimenting with a variety of objects to see whether they float or sink. Children’s work to record their findings on a chart would also be detailed. A few bold-faced words related to the concepts, or translations of important points, could be featured at the bottom of the screen.

At the conclusion of the segment, a group of children might be recorded as they review their findings with a teacher, compare their findings with their predictions, reach possible conclusions, and think about what objects to explore next to test their predictions.

**Other DVD content related to curriculum might also include**

- an overview of the children’s classroom schedule and routines
- demonstrations of tips on sharing books with children, such as asking questions about comprehension, making predictions, and observing details in the illustrations
- footage of children playing and working, both alone and in small groups, such as painting at the easel, engaging in pretend play, or building with blocks
- video demonstrations of how children care for class pets and plants
- introduction of an upcoming area of inquiry and suggestions for ways that families might contribute to the exploration, such as sharing food traditions, loaning cultural artifacts, or collecting recyclables for science and art investigations

**Why Use DVD Newsletters?**

Teachers often communicate with families through Web sites, email,
paper newsletters, as well as during in-person and telephone interviews (Walsh et al., 2008; Sanchez & Walsh, in press). Use of podcasts, videotapes, audiotapes, DVDs, and electronic newsletters was rarely reported in these studies.

At the beginning of the 2008 project, after teachers were introduced to the concept of monthly DVD newsletters, most agreed that these newsletters could facilitate communication in ways that traditional communication tools do not. DVD newsletters were considered to be a more efficient tool for communication than other electronic tools, such as Web sites or email (Sanchez & Walsh, in press). Why might they be seen as more effective?

- DVD newsletters enable families to see and hear classroom activities, as well as receive teachers’ tips for encouraging learning at home. The teachers interviewed felt that watching a DVD is often more effective than reading traditional newsletters on paper, especially for parents with emerging literacy skills (Sanchez & Walsh, in press; Walsh et al., 2008).
- A DVD format makes it possible for teachers to share much more information with families than they would be able to do via traditional forms of communication, such as printed newsletters or parent conferences (Sanchez & Walsh, in press; Walsh et al., 2008).

Families not only welcome DVD newsletters, but also are often very enthusiastic about receiving them every month (Walsh et al., 2008). Families in this study reported that they valued the information provided and were more likely to implement the ideas in the DVDs to help their children practice newly developing skills. Also, families reported that their children enjoy seeing themselves on television at home.

How to Create DVD Newsletters

Typically, teachers and administrators collaborate with families to make the decision to publish monthly DVD newsletters. Boards, parent advisory groups, and other stakeholders are best integrated early in the DVD newsletter proposal and planning process. These are the basic...
steps involved in the development and publication process, some of which can take place simultaneously as soon as program leaders agree to explore the DVD newsletter as a tool for family involvement.

**Step 1. Get Families’ Permission for Photos**

Video recording can take place only if families give consent for their children to be videotaped. The likelihood that families will give their consent usually increases when they feel ownership of the project, which is why it is so important for families to be part of the initial planning.

In seeking consent, emphasize that children’s participation is voluntary. Table 1 contains a sample permission form that can be adapted as needed. If any families have first languages other than English, translate the form to make sure that the intent of the request is clear. Walsh et al. (2008) received photo consent forms for 95% of the children participating in their project, and the children whose families did not give their consent were always edited out of the footage.

**Family access**

Families who have easy access to DVD technology are far more likely to view the newsletters than are families for whom access is more difficult. A few quick questions, asked in person or on a survey, will provide information about access. Surveys should be brief and clear, and in the languages families use when communicating with the program. Table 2 is an example of a simple survey.

**Production resources**

Creating a DVD newsletter is a rewarding endeavor, but it can also be an intense and demanding one, because its production goes beyond traditional teaching responsibilities. Staff and volunteers need time and readily available, easy-to-use equipment for DVD newsletter production (Walsh et al., 2008).

Publishing a DVD newsletter is very much like directing an orchestra, so it is recommended that one person be designated as the lead editor, or orchestra director. Program resources needed include time to learn how to use the equipment, a process for making decisions about the content, and skills for editing and copying each issue of the newsletter.

If a school has an instructional technology staff, those people can share in the design and creation of each issue. They can also train teachers, supervisors, and volunteers on how to use recording and editing equipment.

Table 2. Sample technology survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Where do you watch DVDs?</td>
<td>at home, public library, other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How do you watch DVDs?</td>
<td>computer, DVD player with TV, portable DVD player, other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Who knows how to set up the equipment?</td>
<td>adults, children</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Please return your survey by ______________________________.

Thank you!
Training, recording, and editing time

Before launching a DVD newsletter, everyone involved will need to learn how to use the recording and editing equipment. Technology-savvy teachers can train other staff, or volunteers may be recruited, to do the recording and footage editing. In either case, those involved with DVD newsletter projects may wish to determine who will specifically handle the technical aspects of the project and the nature of the assistance to be provided.

It is very helpful if someone other than the teacher records the raw footage for the DVDs, especially in cases where the teacher is demonstrating an activity or working with children. In concert with the newsletter editor, teachers determine which parts of learning experiences to record and how much footage to record. A review of the quality of the video by the editor and teacher—for both content and images—is essential.

Sometimes the footage just does not measure up, and another video must be made.

DVD newsletters usually contain several brief recordings that last for a total of about 15 to 20 minutes. To produce each newsletter, Walsh et al. (2008) edited about an hour’s worth of footage from a classroom into a 15-minute piece. Editing of raw footage is a creative task that usually takes between 3 and 6 hours per newsletter. This work can be done by the teacher or an assistant who is guided by the teacher.

Production equipment

At a minimum, this equipment is needed to create and publish DVD newsletters:

- digital camera with video capability
- camera batteries (preferably rechargeable)
- tripod
- FireWire cable
- computer with a DVD burner and video-editing software
- DVDs and slipcases

Computer software programs such as Apple’s iMovie®, Pinnacle Studio®, and Windows® Movie Maker® make it possible to edit the footage and add features such as text and clip-art images.

Table 3. Sample family interest survey

| Dear Families, |
| We are designing a DVD newsletter to share information with you. Please check the topics of most interest to you. Feel free to add other ideas! |
| children exploring curriculum topics |
| children working with a teacher |
| children learning through play |
| demonstrations on the value of learning centers |
| adults and children sharing stories |
| parenting strategies |
| tips on how to help your children learn at home |
| children’s art and constructions |
| caring for classroom pets or plants |
| program announcements |
| accomplishments of children, staff, and families |
| community resources and events |

others (please list) ____________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________
Family members may be willing to donate equipment, photography skills, or editing expertise. Everyone can easily learn to record classroom events with simple-to-use digital cameras!

**Step 3. Plan Content**

Asking families for their insights—about the information they would like to see in the newsletters, as well as any volunteer equipment or time, for example—is essential to assure their input into each issue. By ensuring that the newsletters are relevant, families are more likely to be satisfied with the content, and the production process itself can lead to greater family involvement.

Table 3 contains a brief survey to poll families about their interests for content of DVD newsletters. Again, adapt the survey to fit families' languages and program needs. Use this information to prepare and fill each issue with a rich array of family-friendly resources!

**Additional Opportunities to Use DVDs**

In addition to promoting school-home communication, DVD recordings offer several other potential uses. The recordings can be saved as time capsules for families and schools to document children's growth, showcase the best teaching practices for professional development purposes, be used by principals or mentors to provide one-on-one feedback to teachers, promote teachers' action research in their classrooms, document teachers' professional growth, and be used to build a school-wide DVD newsletter. They can serve as a collaboration opportunity within a school district (for example, a high school technology club could record and edit material).

In summary, DVD newsletters can be an effective form of communication with families (Sanchez & Walsh, in press; Walsh et al., 2008). DVD newsletters appeal to viewers and have the potential to increase family engagement and comprehension. Some teachers have found that the lack of training, materials, and assistance required to produce DVD newsletters can be major obstacles (Walsh et al., 2008). This concern underscores the critical need for teachers and preservice teachers to know how technology works and what it can do to enhance their practice (Kay, 2006; Kearsley & Lynch, 1992; U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, 1995).

Teachers who commonly use Web sites and email to communicate with families often welcome the integration of DVD newsletters. They find this approach effective in promoting family involvement (Walsh et al., 2008). All early childhood programs are encouraged to make use of the latest technology to enhance communication with families and promote professional development.

**References**


THANK YOU, REVIEWERS

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