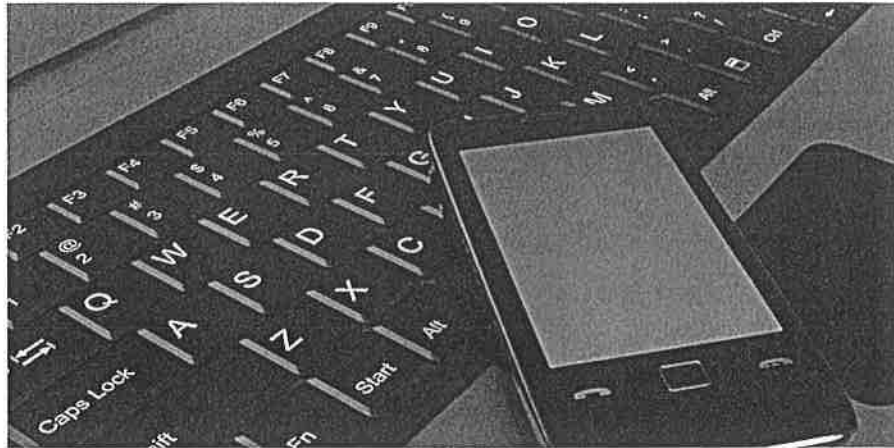


A Challenge to Child Welfare Professionals: Using New Communication Technologies with Young People and their Families

Susan Tregeagle, PhD

Communication is a core skill in child welfare practice, yet few social workers are taking advantage of the revolution brought about by new communication technologies (Sapey 1997; Tregeagle and Darcy 2007). The Internet is an important vehicle for communication which is used actively in the community and by other human service providers (Christensen, Griffiths et al. 2004). It has been shown to enhance communication in some settings by facilitating self-disclosure and the development of identity & relationship (Bargh, McKenna et al. 2002; Ben-Ze'ev 2004). Internet use for social networking is increasingly popular among disadvantaged young people and families. This article challenges social workers to responsibly re-examine their use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in communicating with service users and warns of the risks in failing to do so.

The reasons that many workers have been reluctant to use computers with service users are complex. Computers were initially used in human services for management purposes which social workers identified as disadvantaging service users. Databases have been associated with: strengthening 'governance', cost cutting, monitoring productivity, directing information flow, and



There are, however, some misconceptions which may underlie willingness to use ICT. The first is that disadvantaged families don't have access to computers or online skills. Use of computers varies internationally; however, studies of service users show the vast majority of families had access to the Internet (McLaren and Zappala 2002; Tregeagle 2007). Despite problems caused by the cost of software, Internet connection and technical support, some families were very dependent on the Internet. They found innovative ways of using the Internet. Examples included mothers using Instant Messaging to keep children in contact with violent fathers.

- Service users may use technology differently from workers. For example, families using child welfare services are unlikely to use e-mail as workers do (They may not routinely check communication or have the necessary literacy required.).
- There are subtle communication differences between face to face and computer-mediated modes. ICT should be used as part of a wider relationship, interspersing face to face contact with an on-line relationship
- Social workers have a duty of care to service users and have obligations to follow up electronic communication. Workers own on-line communication habits, such as disinclination to respond immediately, maybe problematic.

Service users need to be educated regarding Internet safety. See www.cybersmart.gov.au. It is also important to be vigilant about new learning about Internet-based communication. We are yet to fully appreciate the implications of communication over the Internet (Wyn, Cuervo et al. 2005 p.4) An important reason for social workers to use ICT for communication is to assist service users to be more broadly engaged with the wider community.

In their consideration of ICT, social workers must include the possibility that they may contribute to ongoing exclusion of service users' dominant ways of communicating. "The people to be worried about are those who are growing up in a digital age but who are not learning these sophisticated information-gathering and information-processing skills, or creating things on their own based on what they learn and share with others (online) (Palfrey and Gasser 2008p.241)." Social workers

ICT can open opportunities for participation of service users, allowing family members to initiate communication. ICT can allow service users to time interactions so that geographical, social embarrassment and emotional distance can be overcome.

controlling recipients of public assistance by detecting overpayment or fraud (Henman and Dean 2004). More recently, computer databases have been criticized as shaping 'proceduralised social work knowledge' (Parton 2008).

Social workers may also harbor real concerns about computer-mediated communication. ICT has the potential to distort communication and to open service users to 'online exploitation.' Computer mediated communication is different from face-to-face contact, and the implications are not well understood. Self-disclosure may be increased on line, but so may deception. Some individuals are reluctant to use ICT, such as older family members. Children may be more vulnerable to online-predators. Social workers, themselves, sometimes have poor ICT skills, or communication habits.

A second limitation is the belief that computer-mediated communication is not appropriate to professional practice. This view underestimates the advantages that the Internet may bring. ICT can open opportunities for participation of service users, allowing family members to initiate communication. ICT can allow service users to time interactions so that geographical, social embarrassment and emotional distance can be overcome. ICT assists service users to overcome limitations in literacy and 'status' differences. ICT may allow service users to better prioritize issues and communicate those issues most important. Furthermore, service users may be able to exercise greater control over what is written about them and who has access to it.

When using computers and the Internet, social workers should understand that —

Continued on page 27

**A Challenge to Child Welfare Professionals:
Using New Communication Technologies
with Young People and their Families**
Continued from page 24

are well placed to consider the impact of ICT on communication. Social workers need to cautiously engage with ICT for communication. To fail to do so denies service users important communication possibilities and may further disenfranchise them.

Susan Tregeagle holds a PhD from the Social Policy Social Change Research Centre, University of Western Sydney. She has been Senior Manager at Barnardos Australia for over twenty years. Barnardos is a specialist out of home care and family support agency. suetreg@barnardos.org.au.