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December 13, 2000

One Family Uses Technology To Better Communication

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IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN any ordinary family conversation. "Can I use the phone?" Sandy Schwartz asks her teenage son, Greg.

WORK AND FAMILY

By

Sue Shellenbarger

"Yeah, let me know when you're done," he replies.

Later, Greg wants to know the family's holiday travel plans. It's all on the family calendar, she reminds him, then answers his question.

But there's a novel twist to the dialogue: Greg and his mother can't see or hear each other. They're not even on the same floor. Instead, they're instant messaging each other on two of the family's six powerful networked computers.

Behind the modest façade of Sandy and Jeff Schwartz's cozy two-story house in Palo Alto, Calif., a tech revolution of sorts is under way. The couple and their children, Greg, 17, and Lauren, 14, are pushing the envelope beyond the usual family technology uses -- shopping, doing homework, sending e-mail to far-flung friends and relatives -- to include intimate family chats, gift giving, household management and even practical jokes. If you're wondering how technology will shape communication in families of the future, a visit with the Schwartzes sheds light.

THEY HAVE BEEN early adapters from the start. Mr. Schwartz, 46, an entrepreneur, started bringing high-tech gear home in the early 1980s. Ms. Schwartz, 44, found household applications years before other families. Since selling their successful business, Techs International, an online technology encyclopedia, in 1992, the Schwartzes have been working from home on several ventures, including 1calendar.net, a vendor of software that transfers online data into e-calendars and organizers. Old family photos include a shot of Greg tapping on a keyboard in his playpen while Lauren, in diapers, looks on.

Today, the kids use computers, handheld

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organizers, MP3 players, cell phones, electronic remote controls and digital cameras as casually as pencils.

Critics say heavy technology use in the home can isolate kids and reduce face-to-face interaction with adults, and I share that skepticism. But a recent visit with the Schwartzes suggested no such problems. With both parents working at home, they have strong relationships and lots of time together at breakfasts, after-school snacks and family dinners. The kids are active and involved: Greg is an Eagle Scout and rock climber; Lauren, a budding political activist, loves acting and playing guitar.



In a healthy family like the Schwartzes, technology seems to deepen communication, and even facilitate expression for the children. When Mr. Schwartz travels, the family finds four-way instant-message chats superior to the telephone. On a recent trip to San Diego, Mr. Schwartz logs on from Ms. Schwartz's parents' house, where he is staying. The family holds several conversations at once. Mr. Schwartz tells of his meetings. Ms. Schwartz types, "Greg, don't forget to get your laundry," which is folded downstairs.

Lauren teases her father about his sweet tooth: "BTW [by the way], Dad, I noticed you took all the chocolate-chip cookies."

Mr. Schwartz denies it, but Greg joins in the teasing. Meanwhile, Ms. Schwartz's dad, Tom Nickols, chimes in, "Slow down, you guys!" The generation gap looms large, with Greg and Lauren juggling multiple conversations far faster than their elders; often, they serve as tutors. The chats, Lauren says, "let people be a little more themselves -- and be funnier"

TECHNOLOGY FOR THE Schwartzes is a natural means of emotional expression, too. Missing family members last Christmas, they staged a toast around the table, photographed it and sent the shot by e-mail to Ms. Schwartz's parents. By 10:30 a.m., Mr. Nickols and his wife, Pat, were enjoying the photos -- a "very meaningful" experience, he says.

The network also eliminates the "ships-passing-in-the-night" problem parents have communicating with teens on divergent schedules. The kids often send late-night messages their parents don't get until morning. Their parents' replies are read hours later.

Ms. Schwartz says chatting online reduces family conflict. Instead of yelling room to room to get the kids to do their chores, she engages in "Internet nagging." Greg and Lauren say the e-messages are less intrusive and lead to accountability. If the kids forget a chore, their mother's instant messages are on record. When Ms. Schwartz thinks she's assigned jobs and hasn't, the computer reveals her lapse.

The family has developed a knack at high-tech fun. All are music lovers, and as a gift to his mother, Greg rigged up a remote-controlled MP3 player on her computer and hid the speakers in a kitchen cabinet, giving her access while she works to 1,047 songs. They play pranks, too. After his mother pressed him to get to bed one night, Greg used the X10 remote control on his computer to switch off her bedroom light several minutes before she was ready.

"It was like, 'Gotcha, Mom,' " she says.

As much fun as they're having now, the Schwartzes are even more optimistic about the future. "By the time I'm a grandparent," Mr. Schwartz says, "our ability to stay in touch as families is going to be awesome."

- *Send your comments to sue.shellenbarger@wsj.com.*

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