

**“Virtual” Parental Involvement:  
The Role of the Internet in Parent-School Communication**

**Suzanne M. Bouffard**

Department of Psychology, Duke University  
and Harvard Family Research Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education  
suzanne\_bouffard@harvard.edu

**Purpose:** Parent-school communication has positive effects for students of all ages and also facilitates other types of parental involvement. Effective methods for facilitating parent-school communication are needed, particularly those that reduce barriers to traditional involvement, such as work schedule barriers. Also needed are methods to facilitate involvement among parents of adolescents; parents are less involved in some ways as children get older, but their involvement continues to confer benefits. Internet websites and email offer the potential to reduce scheduling barriers, increase parent-school communication, facilitate other types of parental involvement, and improve student outcomes. However, to date, no large-scale research has examined the potential of Internet-based parent-school communication.

**Research questions:**

- Which families are most likely to engage in Internet-based communication with schools?
- Is Internet-based communication associated with positive academic outcomes for students? How?

**Methods:** The study used the nationally-representative Education Longitudinal Study 2002 (ELS). Participants were 14,387 10<sup>th</sup> graders, 92% of whom participated two years later. Data were also collected from 88% of parents and 99% of school administrators. Data analysis included regression analyses and structural equation modeling.

**Results:**

37% parents use Internet-based communication with schools; 53% have Internet access but don't use it for this purpose; 10% have no access. Average frequency of use is only once or twice/ year.

**Which families are most likely to use Internet-based communication?**

- Parents with higher incomes and more education are more likely to have access and to use it.
- Hispanic families are less likely to have access and to use it.
- Native English speakers and families with at least one full-time working parent are more likely to have access, but not more likely to use it.

**Is Internet-based communication associated with achievement and student expectations?**

- Students whose parents use Internet-based school communication have higher math test scores and higher expectations for educational attainment two years later, even when controlling for previous achievement and other forms of parental involvement.
- Internet-based communication is positively associated with other forms of parental involvement, but these other forms do not mediate, or explain, the direct relationship between Internet-based involvement and positive academic outcomes.
- There are no differences in these relationships according to SES, ethnicity, or gender.
- Parents use Internet-based communication when their children are doing well in school. In contrast, they use other forms of communication when their children have academic problems.

**Conclusions and implications:**

- Internet-based communication benefits adolescents from all demographic groups.
- However, there is a “digital divide” in access and usage affecting lower SES and Hispanic families.
- The Internet is currently an under-utilized resource for parent-school communication.
- Randomized intervention studies and Internet-based communication initiatives are warranted, especially targeting lower SES families.