Creating Positive Family/School Connections Through the Development of a Web Community

Special Area: Preschool
Written By: Lana Carpenter, Arkansas City Better Chance Preschool, Arkansas City, Arkansas

I. ABSTRACT
This session will illustrate how to involve parents and extended family members in their child’s preschool classroom experiences through the establishment of a web community. The presenter will share the web community that she has created for her own classroom, “Sweetie Pie and Friends,” and will provide step by step directions so that participants can create their own community.

II. WHAT IS A WEB COMMUNITY?
A web community is a web site where common interests can be shared with others online. The site can be customized to include the features that best suit the needs of the person creating it. Calendars, picture albums, document storage, message boards and community e-mail are a few of the features that are available at no cost to the user!

III. WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF A WEB COMMUNITY?
The anecdotal evidence that I have seen with the two preschool web communities I have created had the following commonalities:
A. Parents were excited to be able to see pictures of their child involved in preschool activities. They were able to print pictures that had particular importance to them to enjoy with friends and family.
B. The parents developed a sense of pride in the preschool program that their child was enrolled in. They expressed pleasure in knowing that their child was involved in a program that utilized current computer technology.
C. Parents stated that they felt like they were more connected to what their child experienced at school. Several parents commented that by viewing the web community with their child they were able to learn more about what their child was doing at school. The parents who set aside time to view the site with their child said they were delighted to hear their child’s detailed descriptions of the events they were involved in at school. Prior to being able to view pictures of the events at school, the parents said that the typical response by their child when asked what they did at school was “Nothing.”
D. Working parents commented that they liked being able to see pictures of the support staff, adults and classmates that their child interacted with at school since their jobs prevented them from attending events at school.
E. Parent participation in our activities has increased.
F. Parents expressed gratitude that the web site enabled family members who live apart from the child to have an important connection with the child.

IV. WHAT COMPUTER SKILLS AND EQUIPMENT ARE NECESSARY TO SET UP AND MAINTAIN A WEB COMMUNITY?
The computer skills that are needed to set up and maintain a web community are very basic. The skill level is about the same needed to be able to send and receive email. The only piece of equipment that you must have is a computer that is online. A digital camera is a nice extra, but not necessary. The film from a regular camera can be put on a disk for a couple of dollars more than for regular processing.
V. OTHER ISSUES TO CONSIDER:
A. Privacy issues are of utmost importance. Web communities can be public (anyone may view and become a member of the community without the permission of the manager); public restricted (anyone may view the community but needs to be approved by the manager to join); or private (no one can view the community without first applying and being approved for membership by the manager). Classroom web communities should only be set up as “private” to insure the highest level of protection and privacy for the students and their families.
B. Membership policies should be clearly defined as to who may be accepted into the community. Parents and legal guardians of the students are accepted into the web community if they have signed the photograph release form and the membership agreement form. The parents and legal guardians may recommend others to become members of the community. The web manager has editorial discretion regarding who is allowed to join the community.

VI. WHERE CAN WEB COMMUNITIES BE ESTABLISHED?
There are several providers of free web communities. MSN Web Communities, Yahoo! Geocities and Netscape Communities are a few of the providers. There are many more available, but in my experience MSN Communities was the most user friendly.

VII. MISCELLANEOUS IDEAS FOR CLASSROOM WEB COMMUNITIES:
A. Create a parent involvement opportunity by allowing parents who have computer skills to volunteer their time to upload pictures and update the classroom calendar on the web community. This is a great way for the parents who want to help in the classroom, but do not feel comfortable working with groups of children.
B. Set up one of the parent meetings to teach parents about how to join and navigate the web community.
C. Use the web community to acquaint the parents with the therapists and other support staff members who are involved in some capacity with the preschool students.
D. Select a student’s family to highlight on the web community on a regular basis through the year until all families have been recognized. Information that the family would like to share about themselves could be posted with a picture of the family.
E. Extend the concepts introduced in the classroom by creating links on your web community that the parents and students can visit together. For example, after doing a storybook unit on Jan Brett’s “The Mitten”, provide the link to her web site that will give fun activities that the parent and child can do together.

VIII. APPENDICES
A. Sample Photographic Release Form
B. How to Create an MSN Community
C. Sample Membership Policy Form
D. Links to Preschool Web Sites
Appendix A - Photographic Release Form

During this school term we will be having many fun and exciting learning activities. We would like to document these activities by photographing and/or filming the students. We need your support and agreement to allow us to do this. The pictures/filming will be done during classroom activities, field trips, etc. The pictures may be posted at school, used in our newsletter, slide shows, and school web community or for school projects.

Please fill out the form and return it to school.

☐ Yes, you may photograph/film my child for the purposes stated above.

☐ No, I do not want my child photographed or filmed.

Student’s name__________________________

Date_______________

Parent/Guardian signature__________________
Appendix B - Creating an MSN Web Community

1. On your computer, go online and type in the MSN web address: http://communities.msn.com
2. Click on “Create a Community.”
3. The next step is to create a Passport. If you have a Hotmail account you may use that as your passport. If you do not have a Hotmail account, you will need to click on “Get a Passport.”
4. Follow the directions on the screen by filling out the information that is requested. Click on “I Agree” when you have completed the forms.
5. Now it is time to create your community! Follow the step-by-step guide. As you complete the information be sure to select “Private” when you designate your membership policy. Also, be sure to select the option of “Unlisted” under the “Directory Listing.” This will assure your web community will provide the highest level of privacy for its members.
6. Now you are ready to invite others to join your community. After typing in the email addresses of the persons that you want to join, be sure to write a note to encourage them to become part of the community.
7. The site is ready to be personalized. Click on “Add a Page” under the Manager’s Tools heading. Select “A Photo Album.” To load pictures in the album from a disk, insert the floppy disk with your pictures into the [A:] drive. Complete the form that asks you to name the album and write a description of what the pictures are about. Next, you will need to select who may add, delete, or edit photos. It is very important to select the choice that allows only the album creator and manager to add and delete photos.
8. To create a calendar, select under the heading of “Manager’s Tools” the feature “Add a Page.” Next, click on “A Calendar.” Once again, be sure to select the option that allows only the manager and assistant managers to add, edit and delete events in the calendar. Select the month and year for the calendar that you want to post events on. Click on the calendar the date that you want to add an event. Fill out the information that the form requests. Repeat the same procedure for each event that you add to the calendar.
9. The other features listed on the “Add a Page” are what you will use to personalize your community. Acquaint yourself with the features on this part of the site. Think about what would be of practical use for your members to have access to on your web community. Newsletters, lists, rosters, etc. can be stored in document folders. A message board may be an effective way to disseminate information to the parents of your students. By thinking of what the needs of your community are, you will be able to create a community that is a valuable asset to your class.
Appendix C - Web Community Membership Policy

The parents/guardians of students enrolled in our class are automatically given membership into the class web community. The parents/guardians may request permission for extended family members or friends to join.

The classroom teacher is the manager of the web community. Only the manager has the authority to add or revoke memberships. The teacher at his/her discretion may choose to invite other educators, support staff, or persons who may have a professional interest in the community.

The parent/guardian requesting membership for another person is attesting to that person’s good character.

I, ________________, understand and agree to the membership policies as stated above.

Parent /guardian signature                            date
Appendix D - Great Web Links for Preschool Children

http://www.fmnh.org/sue/kids.html  This site has fun activities from the Museum of Natural History featuring T-Rex Sue.

http://www.randomhouse.com/seussville/  Kids can play games and find out about Dr. Seuss books

http://www.ajkids.com/  Ask Jeeves for Kids is a site that is easy for children to find answers to questions.

http://www.yahooligans.com/  Yahooligans! is a directory of Internet sites for kids.

http://www.bennysmart.com/  A fun website designed exclusively for preschoolers and their families, featuring "The Big Comfy Couch"!

http://www.randomhouse.com/kids/  Random House has a site that has games and books for kids.

http://www.sesameworkshop.org/  Sesame Street fun for preschoolers!

http://www.fmnh.org/sue/kids.html  Funschool.Com for preschool age students

http://www.crayola.com  Fun web site for creating cool stuff

http://www.eric-carle.com/  Eric Carle’s official web page

http://www.janbrett.com  Jan Brett has a web site that has fun activities for those who enjoy her books.

http://yucky.kids.discovery.com/  This a really cool site by the Discovery Channel for kids.