

# Digital Age Family Engagement: The Role of Media Mentors

by Chip Donohue

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*“Strengthen a parent and  
you strengthen a child.”*

Fred Rogers, *You Are Special*

This article is based on a new edited volume, *Family Engagement in the Digital Age: Early Childhood Educators and Media Mentors* (Donohue, 2017). In the book, 25 contributing authors explore the meaning of family engagement in the digital age, the role technology can play in empowering parents and engaging families, and the emerging role for educators as media mentors to guide young children and their families in the 21st century. With or without technology we know that family engagement can happen anywhere, anytime that children are learning; is a shared responsibility among parents, families, educators, and communities, and is most effective when we build respectful relationships with families and value the diverse ways in

which they promote their children’s outcomes (Lopez, Caspe & Weiss, 2016).

Respectful relationships depend on a strengths-based approach to parent empowerment and family engagement, based on a deep understanding of child development theory, developmentally appropriate practices, and the effective and intentional use of technology to support learning, communicating, and collaborating. And there is an added benefit of digital media literacy when we “prepare families to use technology and digital resources to strengthen their participation in school and in the community as digital citizens and as advocates” (Garcia & Nemeth, 2017).

As early childhood educators, we need to connect the dots between what we know about family engagement that works and what we are learning about technology-enhanced approaches. When used appropriately and in innovative ways, digital technology can empower parents and families by improving communication, strengthening the home-school connection, increasing parent involvement, encouraging parent-to-parent sharing, enhancing family engagement, and promoting family well-being.

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*“Technology tools offer new opportunities for educators to build relationships, maintain ongoing communication, and exchange information and share online resources with parents and families. Likewise, parents and families can use technology to ask questions, seek advice, share information about their child, and feel more engaged in the program and their child’s experiences there.”*

NAEYC & Fred Rogers Center Joint  
Position Statement (2012)

The digital age has provided educators with new tools for communicating with parents. But before we get too excited about these digital devices and what they can do, let’s remind ourselves what they can’t do. Early childhood education begins and ends with relationships and that means continuing to create opportunities for face time (not FaceTime) when you meet and talk with a parent in person, one-on-one, in real time. Whether your engagement strategies fall into the ‘then’ or ‘now’ categories, we can agree that building relationships with parents and families has always been central to our work with young children.



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*“Digital media can be used not only to provide families with information, but also to increase their understanding to use that information effectively and creatively. By doing so, families take on the roles of lifelong educators and learners: they become powerful teachers for their own children who also gain new skills themselves.”*

Lopez, Caspe & Weiss (2017)

## Empowering Adults through Digital Communication

In the digital age, educators need to:

- Meet parents where they are — most families have access to a smartphone, but not all have a tablet or computer at home, use email, or send and receive text messages.
- Be aware of barriers to access — we can't leave parents and families behind who don't have access to the latest technology and broadband internet access. Use new strategies that address the digital use divide, not make it wider.
- Provide multiple pathways — ask parents about how they prefer to communicate. Some parents like a printed note or message from the teacher; others prefer an email or text, while others want both.
- Understand the power of ‘nudges’ — short and simple messages that affirm, encourage, and empower parents can provide them with prompts for action and encourage interactions ‘just-in-time.’
- Be media mentors to parents — in turn, they can be confident and competent media mentors to their children.

*“In addition to using email, text messages, and social media to make communication between early educators and families easier, technology can also be used to provide information and coaching to parents to reinforce at home what is learned at school... technology has tremendous potential to strengthen communication and connection between families and early educators to the benefit of children.”*

Department of Education and  
Department of Health and Human  
Services (2016, p. 6)

## Effective Family Engagement Strategies are:

- ongoing and two-way
- inclusive
- delivered in the context of a family's language, culture and community
- strengths-based
- intended to strengthen the parent-child relationship
- focused on family well-being
- empowering to parents
- engaging to families

*“Family engagement is not something we do to families; it is something we do with families.”*

## Strategies that Work

Here is a short list of effective strategies that are currently being developed or used to engage parents and families with behavioral ‘nudges,’ parenting tips, and digital skill building:

- On-demand, just-in-time and anytime, anywhere learning
- Hybrid models with in-person workshops, online resources, home visits, and coaching

- Email campaigns, e-news, and social media
- Websites and online resources
- Mobile apps and text messages
- Video clips
- Video chat
- Empowering messages that affirm, acknowledge, encourage, and empower parents

Learn more about innovative and effective programs that are enhancing family engagement using technology and the role of media mentors in *Family Engagement in the Digital Age: Early Childhood Educators as Media Mentors* (2017), and *Tap, Click, Read: Growing Readers in a World of Screens* (2016).

## Media Mentors in the 21st Century

- Every child needs a media mentor.
- Every parent/family needs a media mentor.
- Every educator needs to be a media mentor.
- Who Mentors the Mentors?

At the same time as new technology-enhanced strategies for family engagement were being developed, the new role of media mentor was being defined and described by children's librarians (Campbell & Koester, 2017). The definition of media mentors emerging in early childhood is anyone who works with or on behalf of young children and families in the digital age. This broader definition includes parents, caregivers, siblings, family members, neighbors, and friends. And, educators and teacher educators; librarians; pediatric health providers; child life specialists; early intervention specialists; disability specialists; parent educators; media developers; policy makers, and many more. Digital age

## Family Engagement for the Digital Age: Then and Now

<b>Then</b> — A program or classroom newsletter copied and handed out	<b>Now</b> — An email or eNewsletter distributed electronically or posted on social media or the website
<b>Then</b> — A reminder sent home in a lunchbox or pinned to a jacket	<b>Now</b> — An email or text message to remind parents and prompt action
<b>Then</b> — A hurried conversation in the hall at pick-up time while other parents and children vie for your attention	<b>Now</b> — A personal Skype or FaceTime conversation at a convenient time for the parent and teacher
<b>Then</b> — Handwritten daily notes to let a parent know about her child's activities during the day	<b>Now</b> — An online ePortfolio where teachers document and share stories, photos, videos, artwork and work samples with parents

children need guidance from digital age adults — from media mentors.

A worthy goal is to empower parents to become thoughtful media mentors for their own children, so early childhood educators need to support parents as they try to navigate the digital age for themselves and their children, in order to encourage a healthy media diet and family media ecology at home. The intersection with technology-enhanced family engagement strategies is the opportunity for parents to reflect on their own use of digital tools and to feel confident as their child's first and most influential role model for healthy media use. All children, parents, families need to have the support of a media mentor to navigate the digital landscape.

*“Today's young children who are using technology to learn and create while working with adults who can set good examples and guide them to new heights are receiving tremendous advantages.*

*If only the privileged few have the opportunity for that kind of tech-assisted but human-powered learning, divides will only grow wider.”*

Lisa Guernsey, *Why Media Mentorship Matters: Equity in the 21st Century*

And a final reminder for educators and media mentors:

*“The best app (or any other format) for young children is one that supports the development of a relationship with another human being. Relationships comes first, technology comes second.”*

Campbell & Koester (2017)

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## Resources for New Media Mentors

Media and Young Minds, AAP Policy Statement from the Council on Communications and Media (2016)

<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2016/10/19/peds.2016-2591>

Becoming a Media Mentor: A Guide for Children's Librarians, ALSC (2016)

[www.alastore.ala.org/detail.aspx?ID=11720](http://www.alastore.ala.org/detail.aspx?ID=11720)

Family Engagement in the Digital Age: Early Childhood Educators as Media Mentors (2017)

<https://store.naeyc.org/Family-Engagement-in-the-Digital-Age>

Help Parents Navigate the Digital Landscape, ALSC Blog (2016)

[www.alsc.ala.org/blog/2016/12/help-parents-navigate-digital-technology-landscape/](http://www.alsc.ala.org/blog/2016/12/help-parents-navigate-digital-technology-landscape/)

How to Make a Family Media Use Plan, HealthyChildren.org (2016)

[www.healthychildren.org/MediaUsePlan](http://www.healthychildren.org/MediaUsePlan)

Media Mentorship in Libraries Serving Youth, Association for Library Services to Children (2016)

[www.ala.org/alsc/mediamentorship](http://www.ala.org/alsc/mediamentorship)

Early Learning and Educational Technology Policy Brief, Office of Educational Technology, DOE/DHHS (2016)

<https://tech.ed.gov/files/2016/10/Early-Learning-Tech-Policy-Brief.pdf>

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[www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/public-libraries-a-vital-space-for-family-engagement?print=1](http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/public-libraries-a-vital-space-for-family-engagement?print=1)

Tap, Click, Read: Growing Readers in a World of Screens (2016)

[www.tapclickread.org](http://www.tapclickread.org)

The Mentorship Manifesto, Raising Digital Natives (2016)

[www.raisingdigitalnatives.com/mentorship-manifesto/](http://www.raisingdigitalnatives.com/mentorship-manifesto/)

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