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Supporting Families Through Gaming

Communication Has Changed!

I have worked with families and children for more than 30 years. My culmination of experience includes child welfare, private foster care and adoption, and private practice as a therapist. During this time, I have witnessed lots of changes; societal, business, policy and otherwise, and these changes have impacted the way we communicate and interact.

For instance, I recall my early years with child welfare which were pre-high tech. I remember using typewriters without auto correct, using carbon paper to make duplicate prints, and manually sorting and stapling documents because our copier had no sorting or stapling capabilities.

In time, we graduated to typewriters with auto correct and computer screens. And boy, we thought we had really moved up when we were assigned pagers. This was a blessing and a curse because pagers allowed constant contact between supervisors and field staff. But when contacted via pager, field staff were forced to locate pay phones and use their personal funds to make phone calls.

This posed challenges as there was no petty cash for pay phone use and the agency did not reimburse staff for phone calls rendered.

After several complaints and much debate, the agency purchased unit cellular phones to use in the field.

This was too good to be true and because having an agency phone was new, some employees abused the “no personal cell phone use” policy placing calls to family and friends, not considering that cell phone logs were maintained by cell phone service providers.

Phone misuse led the agency to transition staff from using the unit phone to purchasing personal cellular phones and reimbursing a percentage of the cellular phone bill dedicated to business use.

In the late 1990’s, we got our first desktop computers, IBM to be exact, and they looked like huge plastic monsters. They were bulky, heavy, ugly, and required lots of wiring and hook-ups. Talk about a scary time for us because neither myself nor my co-workers were computer literate. And because we were used to paper and pencil, many seasoned (retirement eligible) staff retired, and others resigned.

To reduce turnover, improve morale and confidence, the agency provided us with

computer training and soon we got the hang of it. But just when we thought we had it beat, a second wave of technological changes came and this time, there was emphasis on going paperless which meant proficiency in our work. We soon learned that paperless didn't really mean paperless as we were still required to print documents for our case records.

Change was quick and change changed the way we worked as well as the way we interacted and communicated with each other. Morning and afternoon strolls to the secretary's desk to submit typing requests and lollygag ended as workers were required to complete their own work products. Employees worked in silos, hardly leaving their offices to laugh or to chat. Lunch hours formerly spent together and away from the office became working lunches.

And because technology afforded multitasking, we worked longer, which was often after hours. Work-life balance was non-existent.

Congestion at water stations, in hallways and in kitchen areas subsided and this scarcely used space became the new home for cubicles and trained computer personnel who ensured we were up and always running.

The newfound joy of access to the World Wide Web (WWW) was exciting and everyone wanted access to what we had at the office at home. But personal computers (PC's) were not available, and neither was home internet. Not long though, PCs became the rave and nearly every home had a computer with a dedicated workstation. Dial up service was our gateway to the world and despite its snail speed, we waited, and waited until we were connected.

This really changed the game in terms of communication because although we had access to millions of people via the web, we spent less time talking to one another face to face. Communication was reduced to email or text. And again, because this was new, we failed miserably at email etiquette. For example, we used colored font for business letters and memos because it was cute. We used all CAPS when writing which indicated yelling, and we used lowercase letters which reflected passivity and so on.

We made many mistakes during this learning curve, but we worked through them by acquiring additional training. However, as technology advanced and the internet became faster, we were challenged with a whole new set of problems. We no longer worked a few hours after quitting time but now worked around the clock as technology made it possible to work anytime, anywhere.

What's Happening Now?

What does all of this have to do with families? Stay with me while I get to that. Recall I mentioned that PCs inundated homes. This still holds true today, but we have graduated from PCs (desktops) to laptops, tablets, watches, and cellular phones that are loaded with capabilities. And with every advance in technology, we work longer and harder to afford the latest and greatest!

Access to the web is instantaneous and from everywhere. Entertainment choices are vast, ranging from very clean and appropriate to outrageous! Vloggers, bloggers, influencers- and because there is a plethora of entertainment choices on the web, offerings appeal to nearly everyone transcending age, race, gender, and nationality. Adding to this, technology is

relatively inexpensive and virtually every parent or caregiver has invested in some form of technology dedicated to personal use, work, or entertainment.

To give you an idea of how vast technology ownership and use are in the world, Forbes (April 2023) conducted a study regarding technology purchases in 2022. Their study revealed that over 300 million homes purchased some form of technology in 2022.

Taking this a step further, as it pertains to technology use per day, the University of Pennsylvania (2021) revealed in its study that American's spend 10 hours and thirty-nine minutes a day on the web or are involved in some form of screen time. The study further revealed that out of a 168-hour week, 50 hours weekly are spent with some form of technological device.

Here's the tie in for this article. StudyFinds.org sought to learn the number of hours families spend together for quality time during a day. Their study results (2021) revealed that families spend an average of 37 minutes a day of quality family time. That's 37 minutes of face-to-face interaction.

These results are mind boggling and reflect how little time we spend connecting and interacting with family. This explains why we are so dysfunctional, disorganized, and distant.

The University of California, Northridge (n.d.) in its article, Social Media Use and Quality Family Time found the following:

- Families today spend less quality time together, contributing to negative youth development, poor family fitness and lack of family communication and trust.

- Youths get involved in risky and delinquent activities.
- The family's health and wellness is passed over and forgotten, and families either do not trust one another or do not know how to work together as one.

The study continued by presenting the positive implications of spending family quality time together: a) Positive youth development, b) Family fitness, c) Family team building, interaction, and communication.

Researchers considered the schedules of working parents, school/daycare for children and other factors deterring quality family time, and they suggested that families be more intentional about creating quality time moments. They added that this can be achieved through family fun nights. The study further suggested that family fun nights:

- Allow families to come together as a unit and participate in different sports, activities, arts, and crafts, and promoting healthy lifestyles. It also supports spending more time with children.
- Family fun night is also a great family support night in that family members can provide high levels of love and support.
- Through gaming, positive family communication is fostered.
- Positive communication occurs between young people and their parents.
- This is also a good time to seek advice and counsel from adults.
- Children learn how to integrate fitness and fun into play.

- Children improve their teambuilding skills and learn how to use those skills within their family.
- Parents become asset builders and play a vital role in their children's development.
- Finally, and more importantly, parents learn how to have fun with their children and other families within the community.

About Games, Communicating and Interactions

Personal technology use in the home has created opportunities for family members to silo. How often have we found that comfortable spot with the best internet connection and made that our safe space. I'm guilty of this and I'm sure many of you are as well.

But there is a way to get everyone off the screens, into the same room at the same time besides dinnertime and that is by using tabletop games (AKA board games or card games).

Kansas City State University (2023) published an article: Bonding with Board Games which discussed how being glued to technology has deterred communication and relationships and has added to a further divide to intergenerational communication.

The study further stated that playing board games, "can gather families and friends together, across generations, to connect, compete and have fun." Moreover, youth today often lack skills to build relationships with others, including their grandparents. Board games are an entertaining and clever way to develop relationship skills without resistance."

Adding to this, the Child Development Clinic (2023) reported that board games contribute to developing critical social skills, improving cognitive function, allowing time away from screens, and improving symptoms associated with ADHD.

As a mental health therapist, mother, and grandmother, I see the ills of excessive screen time use on individuals and families. And as a result, positive attachment goes lacking.

A dual role in which I serve is Program Manager for [Arms Wide](#), a foster care and adoption agency. In this capacity, I am charged with overseeing a post adoption program that provides services to post adoption families. As I engage with families, I hear parents' complaints about their children and typically these complaints encompass active listening, responding appropriately, and communication styles.

When I observe parents and children interacting, I see more talking at each other than talking to each other. Children with their slickness present requests to their parents while their parents are distracted. Children ask and answer their own questions and run away leaving their parents guessing what happened.

This frustrates parents because their children seize their distracted moment as an in for personal gain. And chances are, when the parents realize what transpired, consequences for actions are rendered and they are often not pretty.

As a result of the dynamics between parents and their children, I have committed myself to helping families improve communication and interactions, reduce stress, deter foster care/adoption disruption, achieve family

wellness, and increase understanding through games.

Initially, when I considered gaming to meet foster family and adoptive family needs, I knew my approach had to be out of the box, meaning that the game(s) had to be meaningful, relevant, and real. There was no room for cookie cutter approaches as the “everybody is doing it approach” leads to copy games that address surface feelings only. The games I contemplated had to help families dig deep, afford truth, transparency, vulnerability, trust, and introspection.

To start the development process, I considered past survey results related to my program goals, family needs, program perceptions, and attitudes regarding offerings to post adoption families. I also deferred to home study scripts which provided question and answer templates regarding personal histories, education, trauma, relationships, and finances.

I brainstormed family needs and cross-referenced survey results and thus, developed 22 mental health, foster care, and adoption games.

After developing the games, I secured the assistance of fellow therapists to vet the games and provide feedback. Modifications were made and an adoptive family game vetting and infomercial event was planned for May 28, 2023.

Two games were vetted in May. The first game, Googly Moogly the Foster Care and Adoption Game, is a board game where players are presented scenarios pertaining to actions, comments, events, and situations that may have occurred in their foster care or adoptive homes. The aforementioned are presented from the child’s perspective and

the parent’s perspective. Game dynamics support critical thinking and allows players to see situations from other viewpoints.

An example of a scenario in this game is of a frustrated foster/adopt parent who comments: “These foster children/adopted children are so broken that they are frustrating me!” As the card reader shares the card with the other players, the other players critically think about the scenario the card reader shared. In short, they must assess the information from several points of view and determine how they will approach/respond to the matter.

The second game played was Unpack That Stuff! This is a card game with each card possessing an open-ended question, closed ended question or scenario. The cards require a card reader (each person has an opportunity to be a card reader). The card reader must also respond to the card subject matter while the other players listen. They do not offer an opinion regarding the matter but support the card reader emotionally. Questions are designed to help players unpack feelings/emotions that weigh them down, create an environment of transparency and vulnerability and teach players how to support others.

The Outcomes

To conclude this article, I decided not to write the outcomes of our May 28th game vetting event, but to allow you an opportunity to view the outcomes on the Arms Wide YouTube channel ([@ArmsWideTX](https://www.youtube.com/@ArmsWideTX)).

Happy viewing!