

# EDITORIAL *Technology and Mississippi Families*



## By Beverly Howell

State Program Leader, Family and  
Consumer Sciences, MSU Extension Service

Technology has changed the way we work, the way we play, the way we learn, the way we relate to others and even the way we think. While technology has forever changed our lives, it's imperative that we critically assess the impact that this modern advancement has on families today and on generations to come.

### *Advantages of modern technology for the family*

Technology is today the invisible thread in the social fabric of our lives, touching almost every aspect of family life.

In the area of personal finance, we are banking on-line, trading stocks and securities on-line, filing our taxes on-line, shopping on-line and even going into debt on-line. We keep our budgets electronically, receive our paychecks electronically and pay our bills electronically.

Cell phones and text messaging provide instant contact for latchkey children of working parents. Electronic mail and digital pictures shrink the miles for teenagers away at college or grandparents across the country. Crib monitors ease the fear of a young mother who is so close, yet feels so far away, from her baby in the nursery down the hall.

Technology has helped us learn how to become better parents through distance education seminars, podcasts and chat-room groups. Elderly family members are maintaining their independence longer than ever before through robotics, remote monitoring of vital signs and housing adaptations.

### *Concerns about modern technology and the family*

For all of the advantages that technology has provided to families, there are pitfalls and challenges associated with technology-based consumer convenience.

While the Internet lets us keep in touch at almost any distance, it also presents threats to our marriages, our children's safety and well-being and our financial stability by literally bringing the world into our homes.

Research has found that as people spend more time in the virtual world of the Internet, they spend less time in the real world with their family and friends. A Stanford University study suggested that "the Internet could be the ultimate isolating technology that further reduces our participation in communities even more than television did before."

As a society, we are experiencing increased "connectivity," but at the same time finding ourselves sometimes disconnected from our families and local communities.

The development of a world-wide electronic consumer credit bureau network has speeded up the process for acquiring consumer credit, but it has also created privacy issues for credit consumers. The ease of access to personal credit histories by multiple credit bureau subscribers, as well as the range of personal, financial and legal information included in today's credit bureau files, leave a once protected credit consumer in a state of unprecedented vulnerability to multiple infringements, including identity theft.

Satellite and cable television can provide hours of entertainment and education for family members by offering hundreds of viewing options, but the wrong choices of programs to view and poor choices on length of viewing time can be detrimental to family members. The over-indulgence of television viewing has helped create a society of "couch potatoes," threatening the health and well-being of the family.

### *Building social progress on technological advances*

Technology is not going away—and it should not, for technology is a sign of progress.

What is important, however, is to keep technology in perspective. When home computers were first introduced, there were some who thought they would solve all their home management problems. They certainly can help, but just as with any other tool, we have to recognize their limitations and potential dangers and educate ourselves and our children to be responsible users of computer technology.

Computers, cell phones and other communications devices certainly help us stay in touch, but problems can arise if we are too busy taking advantage of the technology to communicate face to face with our families and friends.

Through Extension Family and Consumer Sciences programs, in collaboration with our partners, the Mississippi State University Extension Service educates families on how to use technology to enhance physical health, financial health and personal relationships.

These services are as close as your county Extension office or if you prefer to take advantage of technology, on the Web at [www.msucares.com](http://www.msucares.com).