

AAP

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Pediatricians not online risk being left behind

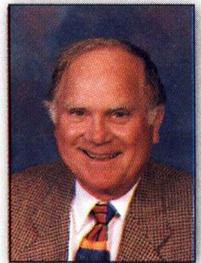
by Bruce Epstein, M.D., FAAP, and F. Lane France, M.D., FAAP

The global village has arrived, and the implications for pediatricians in terms of patient education and practice management are many. Powered by the Internet, cyberspace is now just a mouse click away. Internet service providers and high-speed modems are the modern counterparts to Alexander Graham Bell's breakthrough invention. Eager not to be left behind, today's parents are "surfing" the net in record numbers.



Dr. Epstein

Health and parenting sites on the World Wide Web are now taking their place alongside parenting handbooks as a source of advice on the many issues faced by today's parents. In short, your patients and parents may know more than you think about a particular medical subject.



Dr. France

There are a number of forces driving this trend. First is the accessibility and convenience of the Internet. The Internet is consistently available and easily fits into the lives of today's busy parents. The 3 a.m. episode of colic may one day (if not already) be handled by "logging on" rather than worrying need-

lessly until the morning. A second important factor stems from the changing demographics of the American family. Parents are now more isolated from advisers they trust, such as grandparents, aunts or uncles. Relatives are spread throughout the country rather than living across the neighborhood. Support systems have been stretched thin in society where only 9 percent of children live in the same city as their grandparents.

One answer to the problem is in cyberspace. The Internet, with its ability to put parents in touch with someone else, helps fill this void. The Internet offers a vast array of medical information. Cyberspace also offers parents something other resources cannot — advice from other parents. Discussions among cyberspace chatters are more supportive, almost always nonjudgmental and user-friendly. Parents can now turn to each other through cyberspace to compare notes and swap methods that work.

The anonymous nature of this form of communication is also appealing to parents. It fosters honesty and allows strangers to interact in a meaningful way, a term we call *Internet intimacy*. On message boards and in chat rooms, parents can talk one-on-one with other parents having similar concerns. Many of the questions received on Internet parenting sites might not have been asked in a doctor's office out of fear of embarrassment or because of time pressure. Internet sites also provide the necessary privacy so that parents can share their most personal thoughts. Parents are not "pressed for time" on the Internet, and they can surf the web of medical sites at their leisure. Many of the "hits" on the Internet are medical related.

Many books on child-raising become obsolete before they are published, but a well-administered Internet site that is constantly being updated will provide parents with the latest medical information.

The one danger of the Internet is the chance of getting the wrong parenting information. Therefore, parents should be reminded that cyberspace information should never be a substitute for a call or visit with their child's pediatrician.

Practice management changes are likely to occur because of the Internet. Some day, physicians may download patient charts, medical information, eligibility lists and more from the Internet. Every office will have a customized home page with a direct link to a drugstore. Patients may be able to make appointments online. Pediatricians can already earn CME credits online and discuss treatments with other pediatricians from around the world. Their offices can purchase

vaccines, supplies and other goods through cyberspace.

Some pediatricians communicate with patients through e-mail on a regular basis. Triaging may occur online, possibly 24 hours per day. Pediatric offices of the future will have to be technologically proficient. Patients will flock to those offices that provide not only good care, but also provide useful online information and online management services. One challenge will be to convince managed care companies that a doctor's online services are valuable and should be figured into reimbursement rates.

There is a new world coming soon in patient education and in practice management, and pediatricians need to be ready. Those not online will be left behind.

Drs. Epstein and France are co-editors of www.kidsgrowth.com.

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