

What Do You Do when the Internet Fails?

by Hal Young

About fifteen years ago my wife Melanie and I went to our first homeschooling event during a short stay in California. It was an exciting time to get involved. While we weren't pioneers, we met some of the families who were. The court cases that established homeschooling's legal status were still fresh in everyone's mind. It was plain to everybody that we were standing together for encouragement, edification and self-defense because we needed each other.

As we moved from place to place, local homeschooling groups became our first contacts in the community, our children's first playmates and our closest friends. We were hungry to know people who were a few years more experienced—both in homeschooling and in child rearing—and since there were only a couple of homeschooling magazines and no World Wide Web at the time, those meetings and those friendships were what kept us going between the tiny annual conferences we attended.

Of course, support group leaders spent a lot of time on the phone repeating the same advice again and again. They still do. But as more and more of us got online, we began to see what a great timesaver it could be and what a fantastic information bank it would become. At one time, I was excited to have a single pen-pal in Germany; now we can have almost instant correspondence anywhere in the world, with hundreds of people at a time.

I'm a big fan of the Internet. I get most of my news online, and I subscribe to a couple of dozen newsletters and email lists on everything from reformed theology to the latest developments in power line hardware. I read something several years ago that stuck with me.

Is this progress? Maybe, maybe not.

Ashley Montagu, a British sociologist, once observed that we have come to the point that if we can eliminate the human element from any system, then we believe we have made progress. He's right—it's all around us. We stopped talking to bank tellers when we got ATM cards. I scanned my own groceries at Wal-Mart today and didn't need a cashier at all. I get a discount to pay at the self-service pump and go inside a convenience store only to buy a snack or use the rest room. Airline e-tickets and kiosk check-in can eliminate everyone in our traveling path but the gate agent and the flight crew. Montagu said that it's a sad reflection, and I have to agree. People are not machines, and they aren't reference books, either. There's a lot of information online and quick ways to find it, but when the chips are down, it's the live people who are the key to what we need most.

Is our family-oriented educational movement paradoxically withdrawing from personal contact outside our homes? It could be. I'm concerned that many new families are trying to replace the local support network with email lists and favored websites. Recently, I've been hearing from support group leaders that their membership numbers are down. In fact, NCHE's numbers aren't growing as fast as the number of homeschooling families in the state, either. What may be

worse—they see a growing number of members who approach the group as a cafeteria line of services rather than a gathering for mutual help and encouragement. The spirit of community and volunteerism is giving way to a consumer mentality.

When we didn't have the convenience of the Web, but needed advice, we had to find a real person to get it. Groups formed to share experiences and encouragement. Now we can find a lot of that information online, around the clock and anonymously. That's handy, but it doesn't work so well when the going gets rough—beyond the relatively simple questions like, "Has anyone tried Five In A Row?" It's when we need more than information and have to have support, that the local group is so vital.

The fact is, we need both the online resources and the personal connections, one working with the other; each with a unique role. However, without our participation, the flesh and blood networks may just disappear from the scene.

I know that not everyone has a group nearby, and sometimes the convenient ones don't mesh with our way of thinking. To get the most out of a group, you may need to drive a bit or learn to be patient with the local group's idiosyncrasies. You may want to start your own support group. NCHE has resources to help if this is your choice.

I've learned from my own experience, that if you're not part of a group, when the difficulties come, it will be hard to talk openly with others about your needs. It takes time and involvement with a group—whether it's a homeschool association, a church or a neighborhood—to build enough trust that you can share your uncertainties or your hurts. Go ahead and make the investment now.

It's not just here

I recently met leaders from a New Zealand homeschooling organization. They told me their legal situation is fairly tolerant, with only occasional interference from the government; consequently, the fiercely independent New Zealanders don't join organizations—ever. The group this couple represents has resigned itself to the role of magazine publisher and tries to address people's needs through the printed word.

They said that when no legal challenges exist, that seems to work fine for everybody.

Unfortunately, when the regulating agency intervenes against a family, the family usually folds up their homeschool and regretfully sends their children off to public school. They feel they have no where to turn and no one to back them up.

This leader expressed tremendous frustration with this outcome, because most of the cases he knew were simple misunderstandings that could have been avoided or easily resolved. If the family had known where to turn for advice and moral support, they could have avoided a rash decision that restructured their family life. Many of them, though, would never contact a magazine editor with a family crisis, because it just seemed too distant and impersonal.

NCHE's sole purpose is to serve you. (That is, we come together to serve each other!) Besides our big, statewide events, we answer a lot of individual questions. I regularly get calls from people who are being harassed by neighbors, family members or local school districts, and I try

to help wherever I can. The office daily handles call after call, from all over the state, with all types of problems. The support of our members gives us the encouragement and the resources we need to keep everything running—the legislative watch, the conference, media contacts and publications, and one-on-one help when needed. We travel all over the state to meet with officials or speak to community groups. We can't do this for long without your backing, and I thank each of you who support NCHE through your membership.

But don't forget the importance of the local group, either. Those are the people who will know you the best and probably be able to help you with your immediate needs. And the local group, if you are a veteran, is the place you can reach the most people with your wisdom and expertise. Use the Internet for what it can provide, but don't forget the human touch—we all need personal connections, and local groups will not survive without your support.

Your obedient servant,
Hal

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