

UN Dept. of Economic and Social Affairs webinar: International Day of Families

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United States - The International Day of Families was commemorated by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs with a webinar on May 14, 2021, on "Families and New Technologies." This was co-sponsored by the NGO Committee on the Family, of which UPF is an executive member. The webinar offered a wide array of examples of advantages that technology provides parents and families and examined the need to address digital inequities by increasing access to the internet to families in every corner of

the world.

The panel noted the negative impact on families of new technologies. However, the main emphasis for this program was the positive use of technology for families in offering more educational opportunities, as well as enhancing parent education and parents' capacities for the well-being of their families. The importance of parenting education has been emphasized in the recent report by UN Secretary-General António Guterres, who recommended to member states to, "Invest in parenting education programs in cooperation with families and relevant entities at the national level, as well as with regional and international organizations, civil society and academics and ensure that the programs are inclusive of grandparents and other relatives raising children; maintain a gender perspective and recognize the role of men in families."

Susan K. Walker, Associate Professor of Family Social Science and former director of Parent and Family Education at the University of Minnesota, presented the keynote address, "Digital Technologies and Parenting Education." Professor Walker presented a world map displaying the presence and lack of internet accessibility in different areas around the world. Certainly, there is a digital accessibility divide in the world, increasing the disadvantages poorer countries already suffer. Her main point was that when made accessible, technology-based parenting education not only empowers parents with new parenting skills but also familiarizes parents with technology itself. She stated this can "help promote the value and how to use these new media and possibly create new rules for parent - child communication" as well as "help parents acquire 'digital cultural capital.'"

Zach Simms, Co-founder and CEO of Code Academy, spoke on "Online Education Tools for the Family and How to Keep Parents in the Workforce." His organization teaches online skills in 190 countries around the world, which expands online accessibility to areas that often lack accessibility. Simms pointed out that this fosters entry to informational sources, services, and increased employability. Parents' increased technology skills assist working parents balance work and family by providing more employment options as well expanding the educational opportunities for adults and children.

Professor Mary Dozier, Professor of Psychological and Brain Sciences, University of Delaware, addressed, "Pivoting to Telehealth Implementation of Attachment and Biological Catch-up." She described the evidence-based ten-session home visiting group called the Attachment and Biological Catch-up Program (ABC). This method uses the simple phone internet connection enabling parent educators to conduct one-on-one sessions with parents as they interact with their young children in their home. The ABC program teaches parents of young children the fundamental skills of (1) responding appropriately when the child is distressed; (2) "following the lead," or sensitively responding to the cues of a child; and (3) avoiding frightening behavior or intrusiveness. Professor Dozier explained that research shows that these parent - child interactions, the negative or positive, directly impact stress hormones, brain development, and the child's ability or inability to regulate their behavior. In her video clips, after receiving the ABC interventions, parents demonstrated newly acquired positive skills and sensitivities with their children. One video revealed the child as having healthier reciprocation and more secure attachment to their mother after the ABC sessions. Professor Dozier's review of the ABC program was very encouraging in itself, but the fact that very simple technology enabled this effective parent training to occur during Covid-19 restrictions was even more promising.

Amina Fazlullah, Director, Equity Policy, Common Sense Media, gave her talk on "Access to the Media and Technology Families Need: What the Government and the Private Sector can do to Support the Technology Needs of Families." She advocated for governments to increase access to technology so that families can take advantage of online learning, information access, and supports.