



# FAMILY

---

## Evaluating Family Life Web Sites

no. 10.253

by R.J. Fetsch and R. Hughes Jr.<sup>1</sup>

### Quick Facts...

A January 2005 search using the keyword “parenting” found 11,300,000 Web sites; one using “family life” found 71,300,000 sites.

The Web currently has a great deal of data, a fair amount of information, some knowledge, and very little wisdom.

This fact sheet presents some simple, practical guidelines to evaluate the quality of information in family life education Web sites.

The Internet may be one of the fastest growing resources for both parents and family life educators. Information is available through e-mail, mailing lists, chat rooms, bulletin boards and Web sites. The number of family life educators and parents who access the Internet is growing exponentially.

According to Morris, Dollahite and Hawkins (1999), “as of October 2, 1998, there were over 4.8 million registered Web sites with a weekly growth rate of over 75,000 (www.domainstats.com).” Morris and colleagues reported nearly 3 million commercial sites and fewer than 5,000 educational sites. The number of domains requested worldwide is exploding from 2,154,634 on July 1, 1998 to 26,161,187 on November 27, 2000 to 29,629,818 on November 17, 2002 to 44,158,128 on November 14, 2004 (www.zooknic.com/domains/counts.html, retrieved January 29, 2005). Of these, 31,931,475 were commercial and 7,449 were educational

A great deal of family life and parenting information is on the Web. A January 29, 2002, Yahoo search (www.yahoo.com) using the keyword “parenting” found 764 hits; one using “family life” found 561 hits. A January 29, 2005 Yahoo search using the keyword “parenting” found 11,300,000 hits; one using “family life” found 71,300,000 hits.

### Need for Guidelines

Of course, there is information and there is Information. Colorado State University’s Provost, Loren Crabtree (1998), drew the following continuum.

Data ----- Information ----- Knowledge ----- Wisdom

He pointed out that the World Wide Web currently has a great deal of data, a fair amount of information, some knowledge, and very little wisdom. With the number of parenting sites and family life sites surging, how can you decide which site is an authoritative one and which is not? Which sites provide quality information? Whom can you trust?

Hughes (1997) says: “At present Web site developers have yet to establish professional standards and conventions to document the sources of their information and the necessary standards to ethically present credible information. In many cases the conventional ethical standards that govern teaching family life and conducting clinical work still apply, but the brevity and anonymity of the electronic communication programs pose significant challenges.”

**Colorado  
State**  
University  
Cooperative  
Extension

*Putting Knowledge to Work*

## Suggested Guidelines

Here are some simple, practical guidelines to evaluate the quality of information in family life education Web sites.

### 1. How strong are the *training and background* of the author or developer?

W e a k    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    S t r o n g

Look for sources with solid, well-founded backgrounds.

- What is the author's name, title and position?
- What is the author's educational background, training and work experience in family life?
- What is his or her organizational affiliation and certification or licensure in professional groups? Are there links or addresses and telephone numbers to these organizations? Some professional organizations to look for are the American Psychological Association, National Association of Clinical Social Workers, American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, American Psychiatric Association, National Council on Family Relations, and American Society on Aging.
- Does the author or developer have credentials that you value, such as a grandfather with 25 years experience in being a father and grandfather, or a Ph.D. with 20 years experience as a licensed marriage and family therapist? Ultimately, you must decide which factors make the site credible to you.

### 2. How *credible* is the sponsoring *entity*?

U n b e l i e v a b l e    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    C r e d i b l e

Look for authoritative sources, ones that supply good evidence that encourage you to trust the information provided.

- Usually educational institutions, professional associations and professionals with demonstrated track records provide the most consistently reliable information. Web addresses for college and university Web sites end in ".edu." Public schools have "k12" in their Web addresses.
- Look for a link to the sponsoring entity's Web site, along with an address and telephone number to verify that the entity truly is who it says it is.

### 3. How *credible* are the documented *sources* of information and knowledge?

U n b e l i e v a b l e    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    C r e d i b l e

Look for sources that are up to date and that provide convincing evidence for the claims made, a source *with at least two other sources that support the findings*.

- Is the information based on the author's experience with children and youth?
- Is it based on practical resources? Which ones? Are they ones you trust?
- Is it up to date, factual, accurate, exact and comprehensive?
- Is it based on scientific research? Are there references to scientific sources? Scientific information has limitations, but there is much we know about healthy and resilient individuals, families and communities. Generally, readers can be more confident of information that includes research findings and conclusions, especially research that has been replicated, as well as clinical observations and practical knowledge.
- How recently has the page been revised and updated?
- Is the source a commercial organization with something to sell? (Web addresses for commercial sites usually end in ".com.") Judge the credibility of the information in the context of the larger picture in which the information is found.
- Who else links to the site? How credible are they?

## Resources

These guidelines are offered as quick and practical ones. For additional in-depth guidelines on how to critique family life sites, see the following (Elliott, 1999; Morris et al., 1999):

- Colorado State University Libraries: [manta.library.colostate.edu/howto/evalweb.html](http://manta.library.colostate.edu/howto/evalweb.html)
- Ohio State University Extension: [www.hec.ohio-state.edu/famlife/technol/guide/standard.htm](http://www.hec.ohio-state.edu/famlife/technol/guide/standard.htm)  
[www.hec.ohio-state.edu/famlife/technol/webcon.htm](http://www.hec.ohio-state.edu/famlife/technol/webcon.htm)  
[www.hec.ohio-state.edu/famlife/technol/webpro.htm](http://www.hec.ohio-state.edu/famlife/technol/webpro.htm)
- Yahoooligans!: [www.yahoooligans.com/content/tg/evaluatingwebsites.html](http://www.yahoooligans.com/content/tg/evaluatingwebsites.html)

## References

- Crabtree, Loren. *Personal communication, September 29, 1998.*
- Elliott, M. (1999). *Classifying family life education on the World Wide Web.* Family Relations, 48, 7-13.
- Hughes, R., Jr. (1997). Web site review form. Columbus: Ohio State University, Department of Human Development and Family Life.
- Morris, S. N., Dollahite, D. C., & Hawkins, A. J. (1999). *Virtual family life education: A qualitative study of father education on the World Wide Web.* Family Relations, 48, 23-30.

#### 4. How *reasonable* is the information?

S l a n t e d   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   B a l a n c e d

Look for sources that discuss the topic thoughtfully and reasonably and are concerned with providing the truth.

- Is the information fair, reasoned, objective and balanced?
- Is it free of fallacies and biases?
- Is there a conflict of interest?

#### 5. How *relevant* is the information or knowledge to your situation?

I r r e l e v a n t   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   R e l e v a n t

Look for sources that acknowledge their limitations and that are as relevant as possible to your situation.

- Does the information include examples of children, youth and families similar to yours?
- Are the life situations described similar to yours?
- Does the author or developer mention that the information may not apply to everybody because of differences in age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic level, or educational level? Sites that acknowledge limitations are generally more credible than those claiming to provide the right answer under all circumstances.

#### 6. How *accessible* is the author or developer of the site?

I n a c c e s s i b l e   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   A c c e s s i b l e

Look for sources that offer follow-up interaction.

- Does the author or developer include an e-mail address?
- Can you contact the author or developer and ask questions directly?
- Does the author or developer respond in a timely manner to these questions?

#### 7. How many questionable *warning signs* are apparent?

M a n y   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   F e w

Look for sources that are accurate.

- How dramatic are the claims? The stronger the claims, the more skepticism is appropriate, especially with information that conflicts with common knowledge and wisdom. New information may be true, but expect it to be supported by strong evidence from highly credible sources.
- If it sounds too good to be true, it probably isn't true.
- Complex issues like violence or alcohol and other drug abuse need more than simple solutions. If the information provides guaranteed, simple solutions to difficult problems, ask questions.
- Raising resilient children and youth and developing healthy families require many different healthy coping strategies. Question sources that suggest only one way to handle a parenting problem.

#### 8. In how *useful* a manner is the information and assistance provided?

N o t u s e f u l   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   U s e f u l

Look for sources that are user friendly.

- Is the information well organized?
- Is the site searchable?
- Is related material connected in an easily understandable way?
- Can you easily find what you want?

<sup>1</sup> R.J. Fetsch, Colorado State University Cooperative Extension human development and family studies specialist and professor, human development and family studies; and R. Hughes, Associate Dean, Extension, University of Missouri-Columbia.

We acknowledge and express our sincere appreciation to the following reviewers: Jerry J. Bigner, Colorado State professor, human development and family studies; Mitzy Forbes, Colorado State Cooperative Extension Computer Applications Specialist; and Ben Silliman, North Carolina University youth specialist.

We also acknowledge the following people who contributed to the development of these guidelines: Clifton Barber, Jerry Bigner, Karen DeBord, Mark Elliott, Ben Silliman and Charles A. Smith.

Colorado State University, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Colorado counties cooperating. Cooperative Extension programs are available to all without discrimination. No endorsement of products mentioned is intended nor is criticism implied of products not mentioned.