

# Blogg

## Blogg as a Way to Promote Family–Professional Partnerships

**R**esearch has shown that strong school–home partnerships are critical to the success of intervention efforts aimed at improving the developmental functioning of young children (Dunst & Dempsey, 2007). Accordingly, family–professional partnering has been a recommended practice in effective intervention delivery for young children with special needs (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004). Collaborating with parents, gaining their commitment and trust, and empowering parents as key agents of change in their child’s development are just a few of the first steps needed to establish family–professional partnerships (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008). At the heart of these efforts is the need for frequent, open *communication*. Programs that embrace this core concept of communication are likely to foster more effective family–professional partnerships, thus leading to more favorable developmental outcomes in young children.

The Family Child Learning Center (FCLC)’s Integrated Research Preschool for Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is an example of a program designed around the concept of *family–professional partnerships*. The FCLC preschool is a combination

classroom and home-based intervention program for children with a diagnosis of ASD located in a Midwest suburb. The two classrooms serve children 3 to 5 years of age, with 10 children (5 children with ASD and 5 typically developing peers) and 3 to 4 adults per classroom. The classroom uses a developmental, social-pragmatic model, emphasizing enhancing social communication skills through interactions with children’s primary social partners. The home-based component consists of home visits designed to help parents use interaction strategies to promote their children’s development in their natural environment (Mahoney & MacDonald, 2004; Sanders, Markie-Dadds, & Turner, 2000). At the heart of the FCLC preschool are the *partnerships* that the staff forms with its families. Parents are viewed as central to their child’s development. This article presents the FCLC preschool staff’s recent use of technology as an innovative supplement to the program’s communication efforts. Steps toward establishing family–professional partnerships are suggested, and benefits, in relation to teachers, parents, and children, are discussed.

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## Importance of Parent–Teacher Communication

Parent–teacher communication is important for all children (Bredekamp & Copple, 2009), and perhaps even more so for children with special needs (Minnes, Nachshen, & Woodford, 2003). Parents are their children’s first and most influential partners (Voices for America’s Children, 2010). When this view of parental importance is embraced by the parent and the educator, the benefits of the resulting partnership are many (Schechter & Sherri, 2009). For example, research suggests that children show more favorable developmental outcomes when parents talk often with teachers and become involved in their child’s education (Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez, 2008; Winton, Brotherson, & Summers, 2008). In addition, ongoing communication allows parents to feel more connected to their child and to their child’s teacher (American Federation of Teachers, 2010), thus increasing parents’ confidence in their role in their child’s intervention. Furthermore, such dialogue provides teachers with valuable information about the children in their care as well as the families’ values and priorities (Schechter & Sherri, 2009). The result of such two-way communication is a richer, more comprehensive picture of a child, and thus a more individualized approach to intervention.

## Use of Technology to Support Home–School Communication

Many programs are turning to technology to aid in these communication efforts (Davenport & Eib, 2004). Given the ever-changing demands of our technology-driven society, educators are often forced to teach in ways that differ considerably from how they learned. New technologies are introduced each and every day. Educators are beginning to embrace this shift by exploring new avenues of communicating with families. Blogs are an example of an innovative way to augment the communication between teachers and parents (Nelms, 2002).

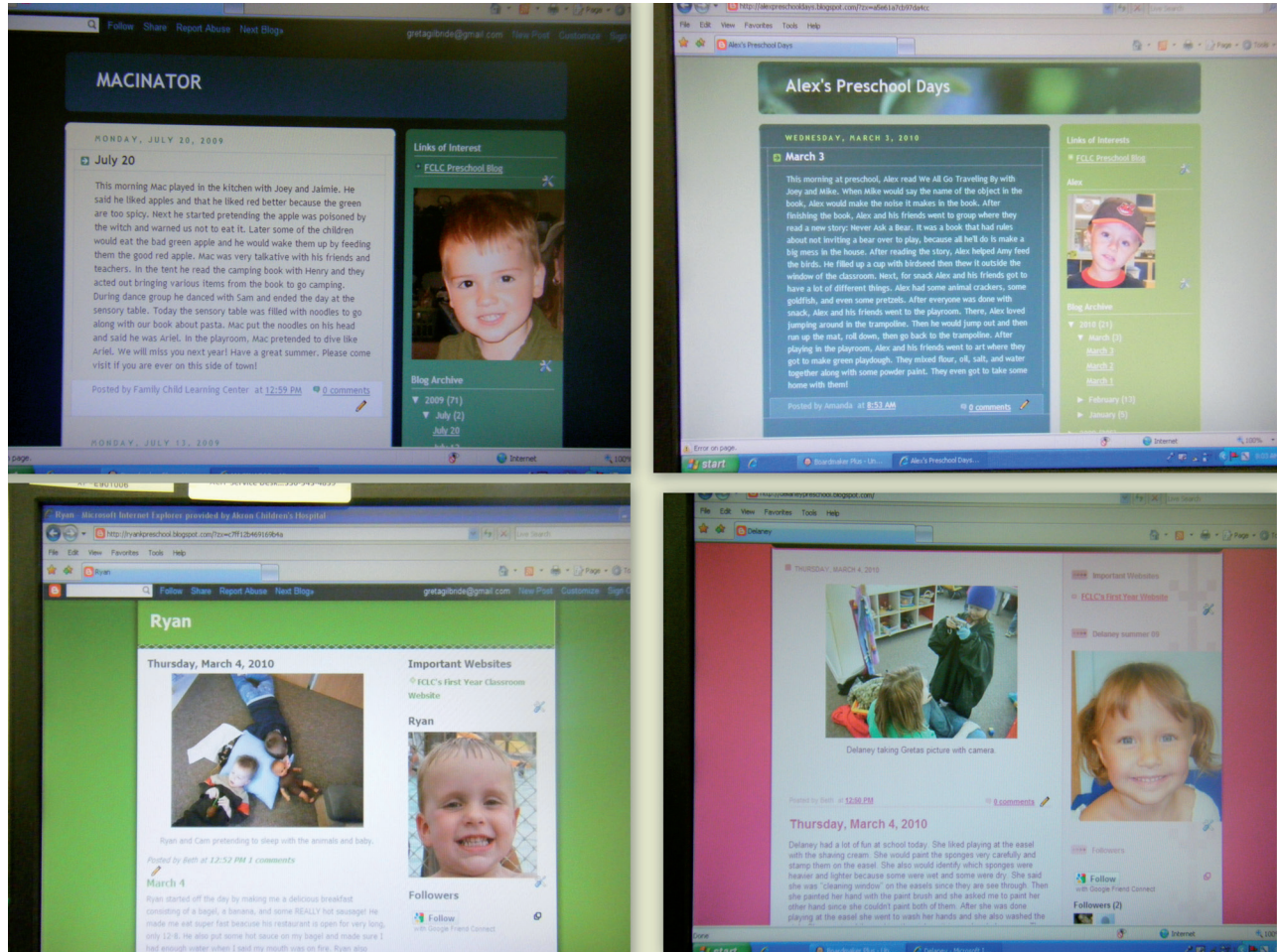
### What Is a Blog?

A blog combines the best of communication with the best of technology (Carr, 2006). A blog is an online, electronic journal, a small website, where regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as pictures, video, and/or links can be posted (Fioriello, 2009). Each post (i.e., blog entry) accumulates in reverse-chronological order and can be private for only selected readers, or open for any Internet viewer to see. Readers are able to leave comments in an interactive format.

The staff at FCLC has begun using daily blogs as a supplement to their program to help foster family–professional communication and partnerships. Below is an example of a blog entry.

**Photo Caption:**

Children chose the picture and color for their blog as a way to personalize it as their own.



**Photo Caption:**

Dash played with shaving cream at art today.



**Monday, February 22, 2010**

Dash had a good day today. He smiled and explored many different activities during free play. He painted at the easel with Andrew. He played with the animals and barn at the felt board, while singing a song. Dash also checked out the table of items to test if they were magnetic or not. We read a new book during our story group called, "I Love You Rebus". Dash helped count during one page, and he helped say the "I love you" on another page. During snack, he requested graham crackers verbally. In the playroom, he had fun going down the stacked block slide and knocking down a castle. He took turns with Jennifer doing this. He also enjoyed popping bubbles and requested more verbally. For art, we painted with colored shaving cream. He enjoyed using the colored squirt bottles. We sang a new mitten song and Dash popped his thumbs up when the song called for it. It was a good day and we look forward to seeing Dash again tomorrow.

Posted by Beth at 9:32 AM 1 comment

“  
Blogs provide a two-way  
opportunity for parents  
and teachers to  
communicate.  
”

**The Benefits of Blogging**

**Benefits to Parents**

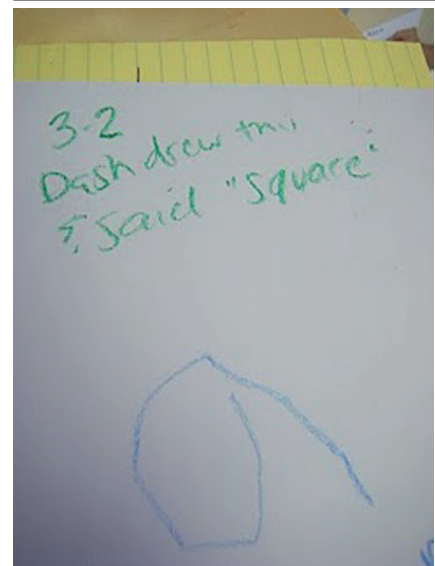
There are many benefits of using blogs (Carr, 2006; Kim, 2008). Perhaps the most obvious is the increased communication with parents. Blogs provide a detailed account of a child's day. This is critical for children with special needs, who often have difficulty telling their parents about their day. Blogs provide a two-way opportunity for parents and teachers to communicate. Each entry has a comment button where readers can type responses (see above entry). For example, Dash's mother responded to the above blog entry.

I am so happy he had a good day. He is singing songs and humming sounds in the car to and from school. The art activity with the shaving cream is an idea I can do here at home. He is also starting to repeat sentences at home. I hear and see his certainty and it is just beautiful to watch.

Dash's father also commented on the entry. "Thanks so much for

**Photo Caption:**

Parents are provided with explanations of the goals their child is working on. "Dash drew this and then labeled what he drew. This shows he is starting to understand the purpose of drawing/writing, and some early literacy awareness."



the comprehensive update on Dash's day at FCLC. We're so proud of him and all of the progress he's making, and it's so great to read such a positive report."

“  
Blogs allow working  
parents to feel more  
connected to their child’s  
education.  
”

Blogs provide a forum for rich dialogue between families and teachers (Tobolka, 2006). When children are absent from school, some parents write to update their child’s blog. As one parent wrote,

Since John missed school today, I thought I’d give you some updates from home. He mastered a new word! He started saying “please”! We’ve been working on just the sign and then all of a sudden he spontaneously said it! And he has been saying it ever since! He also picked up the picture of the Leap Pad to request it, and this morning he said “pad” and “play” when he handed it to me. Very exciting!

FCLC’s blogs are written with a strengths-orientation to portray children in a positive light. Such an orientation is critical to the development of trust and collaboration with parents, and is aligned with the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC) recommended practices in early intervention and early childhood special education (Dunst & Trivette, 1996; Sandall, Hemmeter, Smith, & McLean, 2005). Often professionals unintentionally relay information of what the child *cannot* do, and this can negatively affect how parents view their child. Parent feedback regarding the strengths-orientation of blog writing is apparent in the following parent responses, where it appears that such sharing can actually motivate parents to use more communication at home.

Thank you so much! His language is amazing in this entry. I need to try to get him to say more to me. He speaks and sounds out with daddy but still relies on non-verbal cues with me. I am encouraged by this entry and he was so joyful yesterday.

Another parent wrote, “So proud of our boy! Thanks for the information. I am so pleased.”

Another benefit is that blogs serve as a medium to provide information to parents. We include links to websites that may be of interest to parents of children with special needs. Other websites provided include those with printable materials for use in the home, which aid in children’s generalization and maintenance of acquired skills. Giving children the opportunity to practice and use skills in *both* home and school contexts may aid in accelerated skill mastery in children (Timler, Vogler-Elias, & McGill, 2007). In addition, we post videos of teachers implementing intervention strategies with their child. For example, one family had difficulty implementing the use of Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) (Bondy & Frost, 1994) at home, so the teacher videotaped its use during snack time and other classroom activities to aid in the parents’ efforts. Furthermore, after presenting a learning strategy at a home visit, we often provide written or video examples of teachers using the strategy. For example, the teacher wrote in one entry,

Adam used PECS to initiate a game of swinging in a sheet. When he handed us the PECS, we lay the sheet down for him to get in. We waited for a vocalization from him. Our goal was to make his vocalization more intentional (the strategy from last week). Once he vocalized, we started swinging him in the sheet.

Another benefit is the convenience of blogs. Parents can access their blog at any time of the day. Blogs allow working parents to feel more connected to their child’s education. One parent commented, “I read his blog during the day at work

**Photo Caption:**

Parents check their blogs at home and share the content with their children.



and see how my son's day went. I love that his teachers address his IEP goals in the blogs and also include pictures and positives from the day." Blogs are also a great way for parents who travel out of town to stay connected with their child's education. As one parent said, "I am traveling for work all week and nothing makes me happier than to be able to read this . . . it's almost like being there."

With parent permission, blogs can be made accessible to extended family members and other caregivers. Intervention works best for children when all caregivers are involved (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008). The following comment, made by a grandmother, shows her plan to use a suggested strategy when her grandson comes to visit. "I loved hearing about the 'turn-taking' with the *Break the Ice* game. I have that game here at home and will pull it out next time he visits." Positive blog entries help extended family feel connected to the child as well as to better understand the ways that the child learns best. For example, a parent shared,

Dan's godfather was able to login today! If you only knew how much the blog has meant to us. My mother tears up every time she reads it. My father-in-law, a very, non-emotional person, was reading it aloud to my mother-in-law and got choked up!

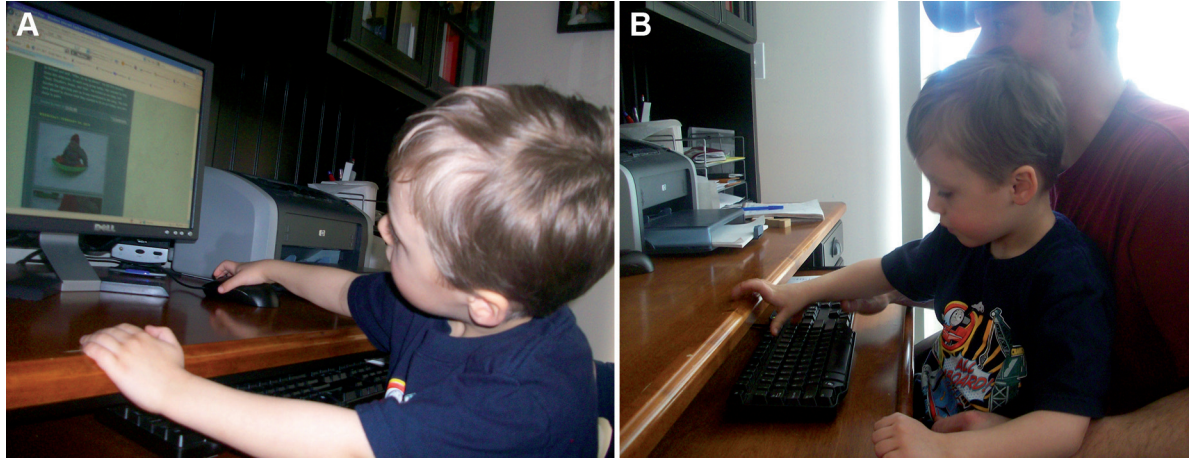
At FCLC, one child has extended family in India that reads his blog. The use of pictures reduces possible language barriers. Blogging is also a powerful communication tool for family members who may be overseas in the military.

**Benefits to Children**

Blogs can also benefit the children in a program. FCLC parents are encouraged to read blog entries with their child. This promotes a shared, comfortable context for parent-child interaction. It helps the child recall information about his day and promotes language-building skills and emergent literacy skills (Marvin & Ogden, 2002). Posted pictures and

**Photo Caption:**

Children are introduced to the use of technology and learn to navigate their blogs themselves.



“  
Tom is smiling at his  
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”

videos are particularly helpful for children with limited communication. According to one parent,

My son enjoys watching the videos and looking at the pictures. He has learned to navigate the site completely by himself! It's a great tool for us to use as a communication builder with him, as well as a motivator.

Another parent commented, “Tom is smiling at his picture on the blog right now and touching the computer screen. He brought his father over to the computer to see too!” A parent of a typical peer in the program shared this insight about pictures on their blog. “If I read him the blog, he agrees by saying ‘Yes.’ But, when he sees the pictures, he tells me every detail about his play.”

### Benefits to Teachers

Progress monitoring is a necessary component of educational programs. Data help determine

intervention effectiveness. There are many ways to document child progress. Blogs naturally lend themselves to collecting anecdotal data on children's skills. Blogs provide organized archives that document a child's progress over time. These archives can be easily viewed and aid in progress monitoring. Through the use of blogging, the FCLC staff have become more analytical in their ability to observe children and reflective about their own practices. Writing summaries about children at the end of the day helps teachers recognize children's interests and plan future motivating activities. It also helps teachers reflect on what was more and less successful in their instruction, activity implementation, or intervention.

### The Road to Blogging

The preschool staff at FCLC has been blogging with families for 3 years. At first, the idea intimidated the teachers because of the time

**Photo Caption:**

A mother and her child looking at their blog as an aid in sharing information about the preschool day.



investment; however, now it is second nature. The initial purpose of starting blogs was to increase the use of technology in the classroom, while encouraging family–professional partnerships. Traditionally, at the end of each day, teachers made handwritten notes for each child. These notes were placed in the child’s binder. Because the teachers wrote these notes *after* class, parents only had access to them the following day (i.e., then “old” information). The staff wanted another way for parents to learn about their child’s day. So, in addition to writing daily notes after class, the teachers wrote one bullet note about each child and hung it on the classroom door at pick-up time. Consequently, parents had one piece of current information about their child’s day.

After a few months of this “one-bullet-note” mode of communication, the teachers observed that some parents forgot to read the posted notes. Moreover, this strategy was not reaching

working parents, and there was no opportunity for reciprocal communication on a topic. The staff’s next step was to create a LISTSERV where teachers wrote one bullet note about each child and sent this electronically to all parents. This was also a great way to keep parents notified of upcoming classroom events. This was the staff’s first introduction to the use of technology (other than individual emails) in their communication efforts. By the end of the school year, though, the teachers wanted something more personal for *each* child. All parents in the classroom received the same message on the LISTSERV; therefore, it was not private. For some parents, reading about the abilities of other children may be a sensitive matter.

This is when FCLC started *individual* blogs for each of the children in the classroom. Because of the huge time commitment, teachers wrote *weekly* blog entries. It was an easy and comfortable transition. The teachers received



**Table 1**  
**Is Our Program Ready to Start Blogging?**

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Do you have access to a computer?  
 Do you have a digital camera to allow photographs to be part of the blogs, or will your blogs consist solely of text?  
 Do you have the time required to blog? (allow approximately 5-10 min per child)  
 What type of information do staff want to include in the blog?  
 Who will write the blog? (head teacher, paraprofessional, student teacher). Plan on spending approximately 30 min training others on how to write blogs that meet your expectations.  
 How often are you able to blog for each child? (for a larger class size, perhaps blogging for a child weekly/monthly rather than daily)  
 Have you reviewed your program's confidentiality policy to determine how to store blog content and photographs?

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“  
 Blogging may be a fun  
 and exciting way for staff  
 members to communicate  
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 professional partnerships.  
 ”

such positive feedback from parents that they decided to challenge themselves to write *daily* on each child the following year. The growth in their observation skills helped make this possible, coupled with the assistance of all staff. Each teacher writes on two or three of the children's blogs, making it less time-consuming. Many websites offer blogs (e.g., Google Blogger, Blogspot). Teachers considering the use of blogs are encouraged to review the questions presented in Table 1.

There are many different ways for parents and teachers to communicate. Blogs will only work if parents and teachers are committed to them. It is critical that teachers find out what works best for *each* parent. Parents at FCLC are given a choice between a blog and handwritten notes. This is critical, especially if parents do not have access to the Internet. Other factors, such as parents' comfort level with using computers and technology and their ability to read and write English, should also be considered when making these decisions. Some programs have a computer available on-site for parents' use. For the past 3 years, all

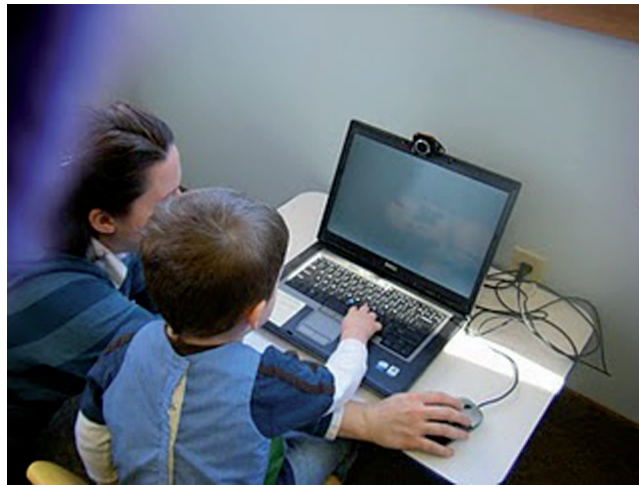
of the parents at FCLC have chosen the blog option for daily communication. Staff provide the parents with a brief overview/training on how to access and use their child's blog site. A month after school starts, a survey is distributed asking parents for input related to their blogs. This helps individualize entries and make writing notes more efficient, as well as determine whether blogging is a mode of communication that the parents and the staff choose to continue.

### Future Directions

As educators, it is critical to continue to explore ways of incorporating technology in the education of children with special needs. Blogging may be a fun and exciting way for staff members to communicate with families and to develop strong family–professional partnerships. Some next steps at FCLC are to teach the children how to use technology in the classroom. Children with verbal skills will dictate what they want teachers to write in their blogs, and children will observe teachers type what they are saying. Nonverbal children may be

**Photo Caption:**

A child using Skype™ to talk with his parents while at work.



able to share aspects of their school day by choosing from pictures that are preprogrammed on a touch screen device or from visual cues when given a verbal prompt such as, “My favorite activity was . . . .” Currently, the teachers and children at FCLC are exploring the use of a webcam in the classroom to connect to other classrooms and to parents in their homes or workplaces. Future work will focus on connecting the children with their parents (at home or work) through Skype™ as a way for parents to be even more involved in their child’s day as well as to encourage children to communicate about their day. Skype™ is a software application that allows users to make voice calls and chat over the Internet. Skype™ has also become popular for its

additional features that include instant messaging, file transfer, and video conferencing.

For preschoolers with special needs, it is not only about the number of adults in the classroom and the *extra* hands available for individualization but also about *effective* hands that reach out to create partnerships with parents in intervention efforts. Parents play a key role in the developmental progress of their children with special needs. Teachers must collaborate and form partnerships with parents. Blogs are one avenue that may help close the communication gap; promote a stronger, more collaborative partnership with parents; and improve the educational experience for teachers, parents, and children alike.

**Authors’ Note**

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