
Families in Conflict: Moving Beyond the Assumption of Harmonious Homes

Svetlana Yarosh

AT&T Research Labs
180 Park Ave.
Florham Park, NJ 07307
lana@research.att.com

Abstract

Family members do not always agree on communication practices or priorities. I reflect on the role of conflict in the practices around remote parent-child communication in divorced and work-separated families and discuss questions to consider when working with conflicted families.

Keywords

Families, home, divorce, children

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.2 [Information interfaces and presentation]: User Interfaces. - Prototyping.

Introduction

Two complementary paradigms are frequently employed to understand human relationships. One is known as the "sociology of regulation," which is concerned with understanding stability, integration, functional coordination, and consensus [2]. This approach is common when considering the home and family as a unit with common goals, motivations, and needs. The other is the "sociology of radical change," which is more interested in change, conflict, disintegration, and coercion [2]. This approach becomes more relevant as we move away from the assumption of the "nuclear" family

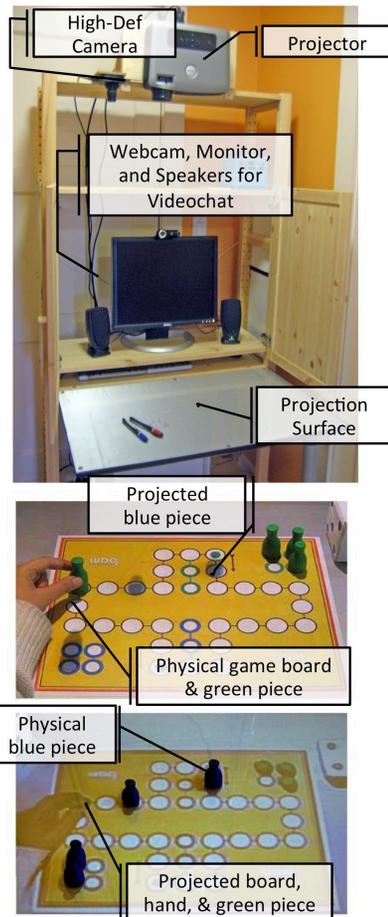


Figure 1. A diagram of ShareTable components and a close-up of the shared surface being used to play a board game.

to consider to the infinite variety of extended, distributed, blended, and unconventional family arrangements that are more common today.

In this position paper, I provide a brief overview of three investigations that highlight the role of conflict in communication between parents and young children who live apart: interviews about parent-child communication in divorced families, a deployment of a communication technology with divorced families, and interviews about parent-child communication in work-separated families. I conclude with three questions to consider when designing for families in conflict.

Interviews with Divorced Families

I conducted in-depth interviews with five residential parents, five non-residential parents, and five children representing ten divorced families [5]. I focused on identifying the tensions between these stakeholders, the challenges they experienced to communication, and the negotiation of contact over time.

I found that members of divorced families balanced two conflicting goals: reducing tensions between households and maintaining closeness. While both parents wanted positive outcomes for the child, they often disagreed about how to achieve this. Parents sought to reduce conflict by respecting each other's autonomy and minimizing unscheduled interruptions of the other household. However, this dynamic meant that residential parents often had little support as they struggled to provide the bulk of caregiving for the child, while non-residential parents lacked opportunities to provide instrumental care. The parents' need to minimize interruption also clashed with the child's goal of achieving spontaneous contact. Instead of the spur-of-the-

moment interaction desired by the child, the non-residential parent usually settled on a single brief phone call at bedtime.

Children were frequently sensitive to the tension between their parents, as one child said:

My mom has a way to make her voice sound like she doesn't care, but at the same time, you know that it's not true, and it really always hurts to hear that voice. And whenever I want to call my dad she always uses it saying, "Oh, so you're calling him?"

Children mentioned trying to reduce tensions between households by keeping the details of their involvement with one parent as private from the other as possible. This often led to the child avoiding use of technology that requires the residential parent's help to schedule and set up the connection. The child was unlikely to request this assistance in the interest of minimizing tension between the two parents.

Deploying a Communication Technology in Four Divorced Households

Informed by the interviews with divorced families, I designed a communication system to support contact between children and non-residential parents.

The ShareTable system (Figure 1) consists of two cabinets, one in the home of the parent and one in the home of the child. To make it easy to initiate a connection and to empower the child to connect without help, I used a physical metaphor. To place a call through the system, the user simply needs to open the doors of the ShareTable cabinet. Once a call is connected, the monitor screen of the ShareTable shows a standard face-to-face videochat view. Additionally, the local table surface

of the ShareTable shows a projected view of the remote table surface and vice versa. This allows the system to support the parent and child in shared activities rather than only conversation. For example, placing a board game on the table projects it to the remote side, which allows the two parties to play together. I deployed this system for a month in four divorced households [6]. Though overall, the system was successful in increasing the amount of contact between parents and children, conflict played a big role in how it was adopted and perceived by the participant families.

Families disagreed about the appropriate placement of the ShareTable in the home:

If I had known that this would be the outcome of putting it in [the child]'s room—that [his dad] feels like he can call night and day—I would have probably put it in the living room so that I could have more control over when it gets used.

In the study, only one of the four parents was happy with the system's placement; all others thought that the ShareTable would be better in a different location from the one chosen by their former spouse. The ShareTable became a meeting place, essentially making the room where it is placed part of both the local house and the remote one. It was hard for family members to develop practices around such a "cybrid misfit" [1].

Families also disagreed about practices around the ShareTable's use. In both families, the communication arrangement that was established did not work well for one of the parents. In the first family, the dad had to call the mom before using the system. This worked for mom, but curtailed available communication time for the father. The second family, on the other hand, got in

the habit of calling spontaneously throughout the day. This arrangement did not work for the mother:

If you leave it up to a child or the dad, they really just go "Ahhh!" and use it all the time. Sometimes it felt like "Enough calling! He just got to my house!"

Unfortunately, the ShareTable can only work in the long run if all parties can agree on acceptable practices.

I suggest that use of the ShareTable and similar technologies should be treated as a "virtual visitation" practice [3]. As such, decisions over its use need to be made explicitly and potentially with the help of a court-appointed counselor who can advise the parents in an objective manner. As it was, the ShareTable did introduce additional conflict into the lives of the families in the study. In the end, none of the four households rejected the ShareTable as the benefits of this technology were seen to outweigh the costs. However, appropriate considerations for the conflict introduced by such a system may help reduce barriers to its adoption.

Interviews with Work-Separated Families

Divorced families are not the only ones to experience conflict around communication practices. In my in-depth interviews with 14 parents and 14 children from families where one parent frequently travelled for work [4], I found evidence of conflict both between the two parents and between the traveling parent and child.

Though conflict between parents was not as commonly reported in work-separated families as in divorced families, it was still a challenge faces by some of the participants. One parent related:

"There were times when, if my husband and I weren't getting along ... he was short in answer and so then I'm

only able to email with [my daughter] and that was very upsetting.”

A major difference between divorced and work-separated families is the greater expectation of conflict in the former. When conflict is anticipated, families implement strategies to minimize the effect of this conflict on the relationship between the remote parent and the child. Work-separated families do not usually prepare alternative routes of communication and strategies for managing conflict. In this way, when the conflict does occur, its effects may be more serious.

I also found that there is often a lack of consensus between parents and children in work-separated families as to what constitutes “enough” communication. My study showed that the need to increase contact is a characteristic common of travelling parents, but less commonly seen in children. Spending more time communicating with the remote parent may in fact interfere with the strategies used by children to cope with the separation. To them, the time is better spent connecting with a collocated adult and focusing on things other than being apart. While only three children expressed displeasure with excessive contact from their traveling parent, a number of parents expressed frustration with short conversation and single-word replies. In designing new communication technologies for families, we are implicitly supporting the desires of the typical parent over the desires of the typical child. It is important for designers to consider the obligation to communicate that their system may impose on the child and what may happen if the parent’s expectations for communication are not met.

Questions to Consider

Families and households are composed of individual members with divergent goals, needs, and motivations.

As such, conflict plays a big role in how technology is perceived and used. In the process of doing the work highlighted in this paper, I found it useful to consider three questions to understand families in conflict:

1. How does each member of the family benefit from a particular technology in the home?
2. Who decides how other members of the family will use a particular technology? How do they decide?
3. Who am I trying to support with my design? Could it have unintended consequences for others?

I hope that these questions can be useful to other researchers who design for diverse families.

References

1. Anders, P. Cybrids: Integrating Cognitive and Physical Space in Architecture. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 4, 1 (1998), 85–105.
2. Hirschheim, R. and Klein, H.K. Four Paradigms of Information Systems Development. *Commun. of the ACM* 32, 10 (1989), 1199–1216.
3. Shefts, K.R. Virtual Visitation: The Next Generation of Options for Parent-Child Communication. *Family Law Quarterly* 36, 2 (2002), 303–327.
4. Yarosh, S. and Abowd, G.D. Mediated Parent-Child Contact in Work-Separated Families. *Proc. of CHI*, ACM (2011), 1185–1194.
5. Yarosh, S., Chew, Y.C., and Abowd, G.D. Supporting Parent-Child Communication in Divorced Families. *Intl J of Human Computer Studies* 67, 2 (2009), 192–203.
6. Yarosh, S., Tang, A., Mokashi, S., and Abowd, G. “Almost Touching:” Parent - Child Remote Communication Using the ShareTable System. *Proc. of CSCW*, (2013), To Appear.