Situation
Technology plays an ever-increasing role in children’s lives. Parents today may sometimes feel left behind and seek to learn more about the emerging digital world in which their children are growing up.

Currently, many programs about digital media designed for parents focus on potential negative effects (for example, cyber-bullying and online predators) and how parents can protect their children. While these programs are valuable, they ignore the many positive aspects of digital media, such as its ability to contribute to child development; enhance the parent-adolescent relationship; and provide tools to strengthen parenting skills.

How can parents learn about the ways digital media fits into their children’s lives and enhances their role as parents?

Response
Strong research, consultations with national experts and a survey of middle school parents formed the basis of a new curriculum titled eParenting® High-Tech Kids developed by University of Wisconsin-Extension Family Living county educators and state specialists. The primary goals of the curriculum for parents of youth 9- to 14-years-old include: 1) helping parents understand the role that digital media can play in supporting their adolescents’ growth and development; and 2) developing strategies using digital media that can enhance their parenting skills.

In addition to being offered as a two-hour workshop, eParenting® High-Tech Kids was adapted to an online blog-based delivery format (http://fyi.uwex.edu/eparenting/). The online format divides the workshop content into weekly posts, or short articles, organized by parenting functions, child development and type of technology that can be read in any order.

In the pilot discussed here, the team collaborated with four middle schools to email weekly links to the posts to all parents. To make it easy to visit the website, article titles were sent to parents with direct links to the site.

Outcomes
For one school semester, from January to May 2014, over 2,000 parents of 5th to 8th graders in four Wisconsin middle schools received weekly emails from their school connecting them to the eParenting® High-Tech Kids blog. Nearly 100 of those parents provided feedback on an evaluation questionnaire.

Benefits to parents
Based on the questionnaire, after reading eParenting® High-Tech Kids, parents significantly increased their knowledge and attitudes regarding the role of digital media in parenting. Parents reported that after reading eParenting® High-Tech Kids, their understanding of, confidence in and use of digital media in parenting increased. The majority of parents (92%) said they used or intend to use at least one

“I didn’t realize the amount of resources available to help in this area. eParenting® opened my eyes to these resources and I will be referring to them more frequently.”
—eParenting® High-Tech Kids’ parent participant
new idea from the blog posts. Here are some ways parents said they used digital media because of High-Tech Kids.

- “Teaching my child about budgeting—whether it be money or time.”
- “…let your child be the teacher of technology sometimes. My son loves to do this.”
- “As a way to show support and encouragement during stressful times.”
- “Texting humorous and supportive notes.”
- “By being more knowledgeable my son is more accepting of my discussions with him about concerns and appropriate use.”
- “How to connect on topics important to my child.”

Most parents (87%) reported that they learned at least one new way to use digital media in parenting because of High-Tech Kids.

- One parent said: “I feel that it opens up a discussion in our family about the importance of technology and how it can be useful if used properly.”
- Other parents explained the positive impact of the program on their ability to understand teenage development: “I have also learned how to handle ever-changing teenage emotions with one of the eParenting® articles.”

School-parent connection
Both parents and school administrators found the weekly delivery of the emails to be a positive experience. The majority of parents (95%) reported that they appreciated receiving the High-Tech Kids information through their school.

- Parents commented that the delivery method was convenient and the content high-quality and informative: “I found email to be the most efficient way to receive the eParenting® blog posts. If it were an actual piece of mail I would have just set it aside and most likely forgotten about it.”
- Because the school sent the link, parents trusted the content: “If the principal thought it was worth my time, then I should read it.”
- Many parents also explained that they felt supported by receiving relevant parenting information from their school: “Nice reminder about sticking together with parenting/teaching to make a difference in your child’s life. Feels like the school wants to help us help our children.”

School partners (usually a principal) at each of the four school districts also reported that delivering the High-Tech Kids email was positive for the school. They valued connecting to parents because “the more information you can get to parents, the better” and would offer the program again and in other schools (“in a minute”).

One contact explained that since it can be hard to engage parents of middle school-aged children because they are busy, the project was a convenient and valuable way to connect with parents outside the school building and show the school’s partnership with an outside resource like UW-Extension.

Connecting parents to UW-Extension
Several parents also reported that the High-Tech Kids blog posts helped connect them to other UW-Extension resources: “I did not know Extension had this type of information available as a resource. I now check their website for more good information.” One-third of participants reported that they “liked” the Family Living Facebook site after reading an eParenting® High-Tech Kids’ post.

Responses to the online delivery of eParenting® High-Tech Kids through weekly school emails show it is an efficient and effective way to provide support regarding digital media to parents throughout the state. The program appears to work not only to increase parents’ knowledge and use of digital media in their parenting, but also to increase parents’ awareness of developmentally appropriate strategies and resources for parenting tweens and teens.