



# 5 Ways Technology Can Bring Your Family Closer Together

ENOUGH WITH THE DOOMSDAY WARNINGS—  
CHECK OUT THE HALF-FULL SIDE OF HOW EXPERTS ARE  
CONNECTING WITH LOVED ONES DIGITALLY.

By Sharlene Breakey

1

## Share a family photo book.

My husband and I love to travel, and our relatives love that we love to travel. We began to upload photos to the album we created on Google Photos so our family could join our adventure. When we had our daughter, the album became a space where we could easily keep grandparents and siblings connected, from the minute she was born, even though we are all scattered. Everyone shares photos now, especially if we visit each other. The albums foster discussion, eliciting comments and starting chats; they make a delightful repository of connection in the cloud. And the service sometimes sends reminders of posts from the past, each its own lovely visual memory. It's the modern equivalent of a slideshow at a family gathering.

**ALEXANDRA BROWN** IS A COAUTHOR OF *A YEAR OFF: A STORY ABOUT TRAVELING THE WORLD—AND HOW TO MAKE IT HAPPEN FOR YOU*. SHE AND HER HUSBAND AND COAUTHOR, DAVID BROWN, LIVE IN PORTLAND, OREGON, WITH THEIR NEARLY 2-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER—ACROSS THE COUNTRY FROM THEIR PARENTS.

2

## Fill the gap with games.

The popular social video game *Fortnite* gets lots of criticism, but I love the way it keeps my sons close to friends who are far away—and to each other. Through headsets, they talk in real time, critiquing tactics, joking around, and trying to save each other: teamwork. My boys are five years apart, 12 and 17, but it is one thing they can do together. I'm so happy when they've negotiated with me for screen time and then use it to play with each other. And yes, I've even gotten on there with them.

**KJ DELL'ANTONIA** IS A FORMER LEAD EDITOR OF THE *NEW YORK TIMES* MOTHER-LODE BLOG AND THE AUTHOR OF *HOW TO BE A HAPPIER PARENT: RAISING A FAMILY, HAVING A LIFE, AND LOVING (ALMOST) EVERY MINUTE*. SHE LIVES ON A FARM IN LYME, NEW HAMPSHIRE, WITH HER HUSBAND AND FOUR KIDS.

3

## Join the moment—remotely.

We live in a different city from our grandchildren, so my wife and I use FaceTime to take virtual strolls in the park with my daughter and her daughter and son. Sometimes we chat during dinner or read to the grandkids at bedtime. FaceTime during daily routines keeps us close, even though we see one another in the flesh only every six weeks or so. We avoid FaceTime during significant moments like recitals or sporting events, though, because it disengages the caller from the pleasure of the moment. The real connection comes from just happening to be present as the children say a new word or respond to a joke. Or to my clucking. I have a silly cluck I use just with them. The kids are only 5 and 2, but that two-by-three-inch version of me on the screen is an extension of Grandfather. Grandfather 2.0!

**ALAN LIGHTMAN, PHD**, IS A PROFESSOR AT THE MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY AND THE AUTHOR OF *IN PRAISE OF WASTING TIME*. HE LIVES IN THE BOSTON AREA.

See how technology has helped other *Real Simple* readers' relationships at [realsimple.com/techlove](https://realsimple.com/techlove).

4

## Find a common language.

My family loves music, so when we go on long road trips, my wife and I break our no-screens-in-the-car rule to let our boys, who are 15, 12, and 7, create Spotify playlists for everyone to listen to. We often end up singing along or engaging in rich conversations about the music. The trick is to use the technology to create a shared experience that increases bonding, rather than isolating us. We continue to reap the benefits at home, as we lug around a Bluetooth speaker so we can access the lists as we work out, cook and clean, or play hoops or Frisbee together. We've even all gone together to see concerts of the bands we learned to like along the way. It's a bit magical.

**MIKE BROOKS, PHD**, IS A COAUTHOR (WITH JON LASSER, PHD) OF *TECH GENERATION: RAISING BALANCED KIDS IN A HYPER-CONNECTED WORLD*. HE LIVES IN AUSTIN, TEXAS.

5

## Pick your spots.

**The trick is to use the technology to create a shared experience that increases bonding, rather than isolating us.**

My two grown sons and I limit phone use when we're together, but the communication that technology affords us when we're apart is a gift. One of my sons is an artist, and he shares his creative process with me by sending photos or videos. When he created a seven-foot Venus de Milo sculpture out of 130 metal isosceles triangles, for example, I felt I understood his work so much better after seeing the process unfold—how he used geometry to configure things, welded the pieces together, experimented with variegated shades of gray to paint it. I never could have gotten that from a phone call. As a neuroscientist who is often worried about technology's impact, I think it's important not to let tech detract from our interactions when we're together. The key is to find an intentional and thoughtful balance.

**MARYANNE WOLF** IS THE AUTHOR OF *READER, COME HOME: THE READING BRAIN IN A DIGITAL WORLD* AND THE DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR DYSLEXIA, DIVERSE LEARNERS, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE AT THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AND INFORMATION STUDIES AT UCLA.