

Parenting,



A local stepmom discusses the ways she and her husband stay connected to his three daughters, even though they're an **ocean away**.

by Virginia Foley

An icon begins to flash at the bottom of my computer screen. Clicking on it reveals a message: "Is my adoring step-mother there?" Now how can I ignore a greeting like that? My oldest stepdaughter, Nik, who sits at her computer 3,000 miles away, wants to chat. Though I'm in the middle of a million different things, there is no way I can resist such an invitation. "Hiya!" I reply.

For the next 90 minutes I read about events from the past week in the life of this 15-year-old; her highs and lows, her hopes and dreams. She tells me about her friends, extolling their virtues, condemning their shortcomings. She details a shopping trip that resulted in the purchase of thong underwear. (Not sure if she is trying to shock me but I've already raised three teenagers — I'm shockproof!) She laughs often. I can't hear her laughter but memory serves me well.

Every once in a while she types "brb" (be right back) and heads off to grab a cold drink, tighten a guitar string or have a quick chat with her Mom. I sigh when that 'brb'

appears, but I'm patient. If she were here in the house with me she'd be chatting while carrying on with the bits and pieces of daily life. When communicating with any teenager, it often has to be on their terms, and I want her to know that I'm interested in what she is doing and saying. Nik suggests I download a song from one of her favorite artists. I'd better do so; I know I'll be questioned the next time we 'chat.'

It's been more than six years since my husband's three children moved back from this side of the world to the British Isles. I have been on the scene for the past five years, three in the capacity of step-mum. In the two years while my husband was on his own and his children lived only minutes away, visits with his girls were regular and cherished. But their mother missed her family, her homeland. After difficult months and buckets of tears, she purchased one-way tickets and flew them back to the UK.

I was initially introduced to the children during a brief visit overseas. To say that it was love at first sight might sound somewhat prosa-

ic, but for whatever reason the girls and I warmed to one another almost immediately. Rachel, the youngest, who was only 3 when I met her, was curled up on my lap within minutes. I easily related to Laura, who was 8 at the time and very shy. Introverted as a child myself, I knew the low-pressure approach was the best way to reach

her. Nik, at the ripe age of 12 wasn't overly interested in sharing her father with another woman. There were some tense moments, some sarcastic comments, but nothing a seasoned mother couldn't handle. From our first encounter we laid the groundwork for building relationships under the umbrella of a "blended family." And, added for

Websites dedicated to long-distance parenting

daads.com
(Dads at a Distance)
momsovermiles.com

These companion websites have been designed to help mothers and fathers who have to be away from their children for long periods for career or other reasons.

familyfirst.net •
familyfirst.net/parenting/
longdistance.asp
Long-distance parenting help from Family First, an

organization designed to strengthen the family.

vonage.com
This broadband telephone company offers affordable all-inclusive long distance rates.

transl8it.com
Having trouble deciphering text lingo? This website is sure to help.

good measure, were the subtle cultural differences — the myriad of colloquialisms and tuning in to the different accents that we all claim we don't have!

In touch through technology

I've had to learn a lot, not only about step-parenting, but also about the high-tech forms of communication that help keep us constantly linked to one another. E-mailing came easily. I've been sending notes and letters this way for many years.

But, then came Instant Messaging, or IM. In real time, and with the speed of flying fingers, conversations from computer to computer are made even faster by the use of a new-age type of shorthand, which definitely rivals the method secretaries used to study. I've had to get hip to jargon like "RU der?" "hwz evrtng?" "gtg" (got to go) "l8r" (later) and "bfn" (bye for now). Added to this are emotion-depicting graphics known as "emoticons." They add a personal flair to the conversations.

For Laura, the quiet middle child, e-mails and IM are a more comfortable way for her to communicate. Talking to her on the phone often elicits monosyllabic responses, but when she puts fingers to keys she's a regular "Chatty Cathy." Her e-mails are veritable short stories! Now, our next step is to purchase web cameras so that we can see each other while we chat.

Text messaging is yet another way to send the girls a quick note. Even though they are in a completely different zone, their cell phones can display a limited number of words — great for sending a quick 'I luv u' at any time of day.

Photos and videos strengthen connections

Before the girls had a chance to visit their Dad and me in our new home in Wisconsin, we videotaped each room of our house and I traipsed behind my husband while at work, catching a few of his daily tasks on camera. Sending the tape to England gave the girls an idea of what to expect when they came here to visit.

Digital photography is also a huge boon to this business of parenting from a distance. We purchased a couple of inexpensive cameras for them and now we can easily see Rachel playing the drums she got for her birthday, Nik on her guitar or Laura with her friends at a sleepover. They need only capture these moments on

camera, slip the digital card into their computer and — *voila!* Minutes later they've shared these special times with us.

While nothing can compare to being together physically, the day-to-day contacts help to keep us all connected. A few years ago I searched the web for information on long-distance parenting and found several sites offering firsthand advice on fostering such relationships. I signed up for a weekly newsletter that proved to be informative and inspirational while suggesting new and creative ways of communicating with children at a distance.

The helpful folks on this site suggest activities, some tried and true, others brand new. My husband and I plunged heart and head first into trying anything and everything that was suggested, grateful that we were not alone in our situation.

In addition to our regular phone calls, emails, text-messaging and online chatting, we now send postcards on a regular basis, that we collect wherever we go. We send "Thinking of You" cards with sheets of stickers, particular to the interests of each girl. We jot down questions to ask the girls during our weekly phone calls or ideas that might inspire conversation. We photocopy interesting newspaper articles to send to them for school projects, giving them a wider view of world issues. And so the list goes on and on.

Telephones, computers, text messages and snail mail can never replace those precious moments when we are all together with our children. But they do help to bridge geographical gaps, no matter how vast, and give long-distance parents a conduit through which to beam their love and care. Hopefully those same channels will convey the child's love in return.

It warms my heart when I read Nik's e-mails that always end: "Luvya, missya, wish u were here."

Virginia Foley is a freelance writer who lives in Kohler, Wisconsin.

Send your comments to:
metroparent talkback
P.O. Box 13491 • Wauwatosa, WI 53213
or info@metroparentmagazine.com

MP