Presence as a Foundation for Information Exchange between Parents and Pre-School Teachers

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ABSTRACT
Information technology has not yet fully penetrated the work with pre-school children. We have interviewed parents and pre-school teachers to investigate how they exchange information. Findings show that the information flow relies heavily on presence. The information is concentrated to physical places in the pre-school and in the home which means that information problems arise when children are absent from pre-school or the family is absent from home.

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information exchange, pre-school, parents.

ACM Classification Keywords
H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION
Taking care of young children is by tradition a low tech activity where even common technology such as email is rarely used for communication and information spreading. However, parents of preschool children get a lot of important practical information but also information about their children’s development from preschool teachers. They also need to convey information about their children to the teachers. The main information channels used are oral information and paper notes. We have investigated the practices for spreading information at a Swedish preschool.

This paper is based on interviews with four parents of preschool children, and a preschool teacher. The purpose of the study was to inform future introduction of information technology in preschool activities and here we focus on the present handling of written information. Our findings suggest that the existing routines for keeping track of information rely heavily on presence (at home and in preschool) and that the information usually is non-portable.

METHOD
The target preschool in this pilot study is located in the suburbs of Stockholm, Sweden. It gives daily care to 37 children divided into two groups, 16 children aged 1-2 years, 21 children aged 3-5 years. The younger children are taken care of by three teachers, while four teachers take care of the older group. The children spend in average 30-35 hours a week at the preschool.

The routines for information exchange between parents and preschool teachers have been examined through interviews. Four individual interviews have been conducted with parents of children attending preschool. One interview has been conducted with a preschool teacher. The interviews focused on how teachers work to inform parents, how parents inform teachers, and where the break-downs occur. The interviews lasted for 30-60 minutes and were recorded.

THE INFORMATION FLOW
The interviewed preschool teacher reported that they try to present as much information as possible in written form.

“We have learned that written information is taken more seriously.”

Paper is used for information about dates, events, decisions and reminders. A monthly information letter is distributed to the parents, complemented by reminder notes and extra notes when something comes up. Email is only used occasionally in the studied preschool. No routines have been established yet as to what information could be distributed electronically.

The written information is organized around a number of physical places both in the preschool and in the homes.

Places for information in pre-school
The most important source of information for the parents is a toilet paper roll. Each child has paper roll attached to the wall besides the entrance which serves as a mail box. All the written information from the teachers is put in the roll. The interviewed parents reported that the first thing that
they did when entering the preschool was to check if there was anything in their child’s roll. Three of the interviewees said that the person that picks up the children also brings home any note that is found in the roll. Taking the note in the morning had proved to be a bad strategy.

“I don’t dare to take it in the morning, I did it once and it got lost and we missed something. It’s better to take it directly home and write down the info in the wall calendar”

There are several message boards in use. At the entrance there is one with general information to parents, such as the pedagogic plan, documentation from PTA meetings, important phone numbers, the menu for the week etc. Each of the two child groups also has a message board where information about the daily activities is posted. Parents with children in both groups thus have three message boards to keep track of.

Extra important information is posted on the front door so that no one can leave the building without noticing. An example of such information is when school is closing early.

**Places at home**

A wall calendar in the kitchen is a common way to organize information concerning various family members [1]. Three of the interviewees reported that their family had one where everything was written down. One of them usually looked at the calendar in the evening, after dinner, another one looked at least every morning.

“I look at the calendar several times a day. Don’t know why, guess I’m afraid to forget something.”

One family had a poster on the inside of the front door with a list of things that needed to be remembered or packed for each day of the week: fruit on Monday, sports clothes on Tuesday, picnic lunch on Wednesday etc. However, such a reminder easily gets ignored after a while:

“Maybe we should move the poster around once in a while so that we notice it. Now we almost don’t see it anymore.”

**DISCUSSION**

The routines of spreading necessary information both to parents and to teachers rely heavily on physical presence in the facilities. In many cases this works well since parents drop off and pick up their children every day, which allow them to both get information from and give information to the teachers. However, if a child is absent due to illness there is a problem. Very little information gets through if you are not coming to the school. The interviewed parents reported that they sometimes call the preschool or other parents to check if something has come up while they have been at home with sick children.

The other central information place is the home. Most of the interviewed families had a wall calendar in the kitchen and a message board for notes. This information is accessible even when children are staying at home sick, but when the family is traveling or the parents go to work they lose access to the information. Picking up children in the afternoon is for example an activity that does not start from home. Parents go from work to the preschool to pick the children up which means that they cannot check the kitchen calendar during the day to see if there is something special to adapt to.

An example of where the information practices fall short is when the preschool closes early (happens one day a month). These dates are announced in a special note that is distributed in the beginning of the semester, it is mentioned in the monthly letter and it is posted on the front door on the actual day. Parents reported carefully noting these dates since they need to depart from their established routine of picking up their children. However, staff reported that in average one family per occasion were late to pick up their children the day when they close early, and needed a reminder by phone. A probable reason for this is of course that deviations from routines are always difficult [2]. But moreover, it is very common that one parent drops the kids off and the other parent picks them up which breaks the principle of presence. The parent that sees the reminder in the morning is not the one that needs to come early in the afternoon. For some families, nannies and/or grand parents are also involved in picking children up from day care. The usual case is also that the parent picking up the children comes directly from work which means that they do not have access to the family’s central kitchen calendar.

It was obvious from the interviews that there is a discrepancy between how information technology is used in the preschool and how the interviewed parents used it in other parts of their lives. Information technology has only to a small extent entered the preschool while the parents were frequent users of for example email and the Web.

**FUTURE WORK**

The findings presented here will serve as input in a project where the potential role of information technology in preschool will be investigated. Based on these findings, means for providing reminders, pushing information, and providing mobile information will be further investigated.

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**REFERENCES**
