

## Using Computers to Keep Loved Ones Near

By Jennifer Connors

You live in Virginia but your son and his family live in Missouri. The grandchildren grow so quickly, yet you only see them once or twice a year. Sound familiar? You're the perfect candidate for a computer!

It's the little things in life that KEEP you close to the ones you love. SOME EXAMPLES ARE NOTICING your daughter-in-law's new haircut, AND (COMPLEMENTIN HER ON IT?) singing with the grandchildren, AND being able to give your grandson some encouragement for the football game that night. YOU MAY BE ABLE TO THINK OF SOME OTHER THINGS THAT YOU CAN DO. Those are important for both of you and can be very difficult when you live hundreds or thousands of miles apart.

Computers are an easy, yes EASY, way to stay in touch with your family and friends. If you don't have a computer yet, buying one has never been simpler and cheaper. Computers have come down in cost and if you're intimidated about connecting it yourself, there are now many services out there that you can call to assist you, just ask the sales associate.

E-mail is the most popular way of communicating. Free email accounts are a great option because they give you lots of account space for receiving pictures of those amazing grandkids. Plus if you don't want to purchase a computer, you can access it through the Internet in free public library computers. You can sign up for a free email account with Yahoo at <http://mail.yahoo.com/> or with Microsoft (MSN) at [www.hotmail.com](http://www.hotmail.com), which is not nearly as immoral as the name may imply. Once you have an account, you can send and receive letters and pictures without delay or cost of a stamp. You can let your son know how your doctor's appointment went, or share your recipe for banana bread quickly.

Instant messaging is another easy way to communicate. Once you have a free email account, you also have a user name or ID with Yahoo or MSN. Both companies offer instant messaging (IM) services. You can quickly and easily download Yahoo's service at <http://messenger.yahoo.com> or MSN's at <http://messenger.msn.com>. Once your family member or friend has an account as well with the same service, and they may already due to the popularity of the services, you just sign in while connected to the Internet and if they're online at the same time, you just simply type messages back and forth like a conversation. Pictures and files can be sent back and forth in the messages too. An added bonus of chatting with your grandchildren online is the kick they'll get out of knowing that their grandparent can use the same modern technology they use.

A microphone is usually included with the purchase of your computer and instant messaging is a great way to use it. Once connected with your son through IM, you simply hit the "talk" button on the screen. He can hear you and you can hear him, just like a phone conversation. Children are frequently become shy once a phone is put to

their ear but with a microphone and instant messaging, you can sing a lullaby together just like you were there.

Instant messaging is a good way to see your loved one on a regular basis too. Web cams can be used like videophones and a good quality one can be purchased for under \$100. It is easily connected to your computer and once you have your instant messaging program turned on, you simply click another button in the IM program and your family can see you. It's most effective if they have a web cam too so you can see them. Hearing from your son that your granddaughter can walk, isn't nearly as impressive as being able to see it for yourself. You can show your new puppy to your family instead of just telling them how cute he is. The best part is, except for the cost of setting it up, it's free.

Missing your distant family doesn't have to be as hard as it once was. You can write to them, talk to them and see them on a regular basis without leaving your house or even using a stamp. Email and instant messaging are an economical and quick way to remain an important part of your far-away family. While nothing can replace a visit in person, your computer can help make the time in between valuable too. **COMPUTERS CAN HELP YOU TO SAY "I LOVE YOU" WHEN YOU CANNOT SAY IT IN PERSON!**