

# Online message boards provide outlets for mothers' concerns, researcher says

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Parenting infants and toddlers can be challenging, and for generations, mothers have turned to other moms for advice. Now, with the availability of the Internet, mothers are consulting each other using modern venues: online message boards. Research from the University of Missouri indicates online discussion boards provide safe environments for mothers to anonymously express child-rearing concerns and receive support from other moms.

"[Mothers](#) have feelings that they might be embarrassed to talk about face-to-face with someone," said Jean Ispa, professor and co-chair of the MU Department of Human Development and Family Studies and study co-author. "Moms may feel ashamed if they have feelings like, 'My child is really stressing me out,' or 'My child is annoying me.' On message boards, with a pseudonym, mothers can say whatever they're feeling, and they can get [emotional support](#) and advice from other moms with similar experiences."

Ispa and Noriko Porter, who completed her doctorate at MU and now is an instructor of human development at Washington State University, monitored online message boards hosted by two popular parenting magazines. The researchers evaluated more than 100 posts from mothers of children two years old and younger and found the child-rearing concerns moms expressed related most often to feeding or eating, sleep, development, discipline, toilet-training and mother-child relationships.

"One of the benefits of message boards is that they are constantly

available, so parents can communicate with other parents anytime." Ispa said. "Instead of or after consulting with [medical professionals](#), some mothers look for quick feedback from their e-cohort. High [medical costs](#) and [waiting times](#) for appointments may be contributing to mothers turning to the Internet for quick and practical solutions from their peers."

Although message boards provide accessible communication outlets for parents, the information available on the boards sometimes conflicts with information in other messages or from health care professionals and can be inaccurate, Ispa said.

"Message boards are useful sources of social support, yet mothers need to be careful and realize the advice shared on the boards mostly represents the opinions of lay people," Ispa said.

Nurses and other health care providers could monitor parenting message boards to better acquaint themselves with mothers' concerns and the conflicting information they are likely to hear, Ispa said. Clinicians should be familiar with mothers' common concerns so, at doctor's visits, they can bring up the concerns moms might be shy to mention in person, Ispa said.

"Message boards are becoming popular because Americans are mobile and they're online," Ispa said. "Women aren't next door to their mothers anymore to ask parenting questions, so they turn to their peers over the Internet."

The study, "Mothers' online message board questions about parenting infants and toddlers," soon will be published in the *Journal of Advanced Nursing*. The study is part of a larger project completed for Porter's doctoral dissertation, for which Ispa served as adviser. The Department of [Human Development](#) and Family Studies is housed in the MU College

of Human Environmental Sciences.

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