Details

How to Use Tech Tools to Stay Connected with Families with Amber Peterson - *130*

In this episode, educator Amber Peterson joins me to discuss how to use technology to stay connected with families. You'll also hear about how to use digital tools to build a community and establish a sense of belonging for caregivers.

Introduction

Hello there and welcome to today's episode of the Easy EdTech Podcast! If we haven't met before, my name is Monica Burns. I'm a former NYC public school teacher and I've been out of the classroom for a few years leading professional development for teachers, and writing about all things EdTech on my blog ClassTechTips.com

Before we jump into today's episode, a quick reminder — you can head to my website classtechtips.com/podcast for all of the show notes and resources from today's episode, and if you're listening to this episode on a podcast player like Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or Google Podcasts, you should see a link in the description that you can click on as you listen today and it will take you to all of the resources I mention.

And this month of September, I have a few special bonus items for anyone who grabs a copy of my new book EdTech Essentials. Already have your copy? Send me a message on Instagram or Twitter @ClassTechTips or go straight to ClassTechTips.com/bookbonus to request your bonus items!

Promotion/Reminder

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Today's Intro

This week's podcast is titled: *How to Use Tech Tools to Stay Connected with Families with Amber Peterson*. I have known Amber for many years and we've worked

together at LitWorld, a fantastic non-profit organization where I did part of my doctoral research for my dissertation, and at Dewey, a resource platform for families. Today we'll talk about how to use technology to stay connected with families and I'm excited to share this conversation with you.

Episode Transcript

Monica:

Welcome, Amber, to the podcast. I am so excited to have you on to chat today about all things using technology tools to stay connected with families. Let's jump right in. Can you share a little bit about your role in education, and what does your day to day look like?

Amber:

Absolutely. I am currently the director of program innovation for Lit World. Lit World is a nonprofit focused on social emotional literacy programming that we deliver in partnership with community-based organizations all over the world. My day-to-day consists of everything from auditing or creating or advising our curriculum products to working directly with our on the ground partners to support implementation and innovation around programs, presenting on best practices, and contributing to more academic conversations when it comes to the importance of storytelling and social emotional development, and when it comes to the literacy.

Amber:

I am also a co-founder and the podcast constant lead at Dewey. Dewey is a learning platform for parents and caregivers focused on providing resources and strategies to help families learn, bond, and thrive. In that role, I get to speak to and learn from amazing people, yourself included, and all types of caregiver and caregiver adjacent roles about best practices around supporting young people and empowering and protecting our own mental spaces and sense of wellbeing.

Monica:

It's just been so wonderful working with you for the past, I don't know, I'm afraid to count how many years, many, many years with both the Lit World and of course the Dewey connection. Mentioning Lit World, which I love, I know Lit World uses the seven strengths model in a lot of its programming. One of those seven strengths is this idea of belonging. So, when we think about staying connected with families,

right? This idea of making sure that families know that they belong, right? Creating a space where they feel that sense of belonging is so crucial about what does that term belonging mean to you?

Amber:

Belonging is definitely one of my favorite of Lit World's seven strengths. It's the first one that we often focus on because it's so important. Lit World defines belonging as identifying as a valued, represented, and respected member of a larger community. That community can, of course, be family. It could also be school, it can be work, it could be our neighborhood, it could be our city, it could be our friend group. The thing that I love about that Lit World definition is the emphasis that it puts on the importance of feeling respected and represented and how important those two emotions in particular are to that sense of belonging, that we belong somewhere when we feel like our voices and our feelings matter, and when we feel some sort of agency in shaping that community and some ownership over what the experience of being part of that community is like.

Amber:

When it comes to communities like our families, it may be easier to claim that sense of ownership and agency, but as in all communities, I think the clearer and the easier those pathways for community members are for expressing their voices and their feelings, the more accessible that sense of belonging to that community becomes.

Monica:

Well, I love that definition that Lit World uses that you just helped unpack for us, because it's so much more than just having our name on a list, right? Or saying, "I'm a member," and pointing to say you can tell this way. Right? But it really is about that feeling, right? That someone has that respect, that they know that their voice is being heard, that they're being listened to. If we're talking today about this idea of belonging, of course, but also staying connected when we are making sure families know that they're a part of a community, and growing up, you might've had a similar experience as a student, and I know it was true in my first years teaching too, right?

Monica:

I would've said that staying connected with families means I've stashed that flyer in a folder, and I hope that someone looked at it, right? Whether as a student, that was my mom checking in on things after school, after her own busy day as a teacher, right? Or as a teacher myself, hoping that someone took a look at that thing, I made

sure we all put in our folders. But now when we talk about staying connected, it is an entirely different ball game when thinking of ways families get information and all of that. When we think about this idea of staying connected when technology is part of the equation, what does that really mean?

Amber:

I have a similar experience with you, and thinking about connecting with families in those first years, and it really did feel so much harder in a lot of ways than I think it does now because of technology and the fact that technology does unlock so many different options for connecting with families for us, especially thinking about this last few years and how accustomed we all have become to using technology to just communicate in general. So, I think a big part of figuring out how to communicate with families is figuring out the type of community with those families that you're trying to create. So, again, thinking back to those early days in the classroom, for me, I think a lot of the communication and the connection with families that I requested was very reactionary. So, this thing happened in the classroom, please respond.Or, here's this thing that I'm looking for from you, please give it to me in some way or another.

Amber:

I didn't provide, I think, a very clear pathway for parents, for students, or for families to really express their voices and feelings in that process. There was no invitation for them to become more deeply involved in the community that I was trying to create. In the olden days, creating that invitation might've looked like a newsletter that went home once a month talking about what was happening in the classroom. Today, it might look like a classroom blog that you have. Because we have tools like Google Classroom and Google Suite, it could be a blog that you create with your students or with your parents. That accessibility is something that wasn't always there. That invitation could also come in the form of quick and easy surveys that parents can respond to via text, where you can get information from them about the percentage of students who are struggling with a particular homework problem or concept, or the type of support you might have if you wanted to host some sort of family clinic or workshop in addressing a problem or some specific content together.

Amber:

In the olden days I think getting parents, getting classroom communities to come together actually meant getting families to physically come into a space. While that's always nice, I think today there's so many more options for that. You can gather

families via Zoom, you can provide much more accessible ways for working parents who have lots of other responsibilities, lots of other things going on to connect with you and with other members of your classroom community as well. So, technology, I think, provides lots of options for creating those pathways that we were talking about earlier for people to share their voices and share their feelings, and the more that they can do that, I think the more that they feel like they belong to your classroom.

Monica:

So many wonderful things there. I was jotting down as you were talking, Amber, about this idea of really going beyond the reactive nature of communication. Like, "I need this from you. The field trip is tomorrow. Make sure you do this thing." Right? Or responding to a problem or issue. So, really just inviting those folks that you are working with, building that community so that everyone knows that they don't have to wait for someone else in the school to start the conversation, that they can really be part of that in a way that might feel different than perhaps when they were a student themselves or when their older children were working through different schoolings.

Monica:

You mentioned some really important things to consider around technology, whether it is using a video conferencing tool like Zoom to make sure everyone can participate, or creating a class blog and having students be part of the storytelling for a classroom. Are there some other EdTech tools for family communication, family engagement, that you'd recommend listeners to take a look at?

Amber:

I love this question, because I think there's so much out there. I'll say that in the work that I do, accessibility is always a huge concern. So, for that reason, I think that sometimes the answers are a little bit closer to our own comfort spaces than we think. A lot of the technology recommendations that I have are really centered on maximizing the way that we're using the tools that everybody in our community is already using. So many people have access to Google and to Gmail and to the Google Suite tools, and you're able to meet people where they are with that. There are so many different, amazing tools in Classrooms, Google Classrooms for creating protective communities, and so many tools like Forms that allow you to survey and talk to parents in very targeted and clean ways.

Amber:

Texting is another great way to communicate with parents. SMS or group chat platforms like Remind or Class Parent or Class Pager allow you to meet with parents and families and meet them where they are, so they don't have to download anything new or learn how to interact with a new type of platform, but you are still creating that community. Again, it's with tools that already exist that everyone has access to already.

Monica:

Yeah. Just that maximizing, right? Maximizing or optimizing or all the izing or any words you can throw in there, right? The tools that families are already using I think is really crucial. There's a huge step for onboarding anyone into something new, but if we know where people are or we can find something that looks like a space that they're comfortable with, that's going to really be a game changer. Besides some of those event reminders or schedule updates or things that we might naturally have on our list for reaching out to families with, what other type of messaging is important to share with families? Would you suggest sharing specific resources with families?

Amber:

Yeah. I think one of the things that you had said earlier about just the types of communication that we have, I think there is a need for us just as a community to reshape the relationship that parents have with the classroom. So, that idea that that communication's not going to be all reactionary is something that I think everyone has to get used to in some ways, that's the expectation that a lot of parents have, and that's the expectation that a lot of teachers have going into this relationship. So, I do think that some of the things or one of the things I mentioned before was a classroom newsletter or blog that provides some sort of window or invitation to your life in the classroom.

Amber:

It can include those things like even updates or homework announcements, but it can also be a space where you talk about the content of your study, where you provide resources for parents to get background on those conversations they might have with their kids about the things that you're studying, activities that they can do with each other connected to the work that you're doing in the classroom, and invitations for them to share the ways that they're extending the classroom learning that you're doing in school at home. It's also a space where you can share the stories

of the success. I think a lot of times when parents get information from school, there's an expectation that if somebody's contacting me, it's because it's something bad.

Monica:

Yeah.

Amber:

But thinking about all the ways that you can talk about those wonderful things that are happening in your classroom, and posing those challenges in real time so that this is something that happened, but here's a challenge that we're facing in the classroom, and here's a clear way that I'm asking you as parents to be part of this. It takes a village, right? We're all part of that same village, and educating and providing spaces for these young people to grow.

Monica:

I love that idea of having an action item alongside any communication that you might share. I almost feel like, and I don't know that there's a magic math number to this, but just having a ratio in mind, right? What does that ratio look like of saying, "I am sharing things that are just event updates and reminders, and now I'm sharing this amount of success stories, celebrations, things that we just want to give attention to." I don't know about you and what kind of newsletters fill up your inbox, but there's ones that I get every week from people, and I'm clicking on them, sometimes not for the main reason of the newsletter. Right? I'm there, yeah, sort of, for the content, but I also know that every week they share a funny quote, or that they always have a meme of the week or something that's going to get me to just scroll down to that section, but probably pick up some other gems along the way.

Monica:

As we are thinking about all these pieces, we know that of course it's important to stay connected with families throughout the school year, and the beginning of the school year is often a time where this is more in front of mind, we might build in routines or we might establish something. But if someone is listening to this episode later in the year, or they're a few weeks into the school year, or maybe it's during the winter time, is there something that they can do? Is there a quick action they can take to reconnect with families?

Amber:

Yes. I think it's never too late to send that update, to put together that newsletter, that blog that says, "Here's what's going on in the classrooms. Here are the clear ways that I'm asking for your input, that I'm asking for your perspective." I think the more we can think about the things that we're doing in the classroom, the challenges that we have, all of these things as opportunities to crowdsource solutions. Especially as you get into the year, you are starting to figure out those things where sometimes the perspective of the families that you have, perspectives of the people who spend all day with the kids that you are teaching can really help to shape what's happening for the rest of the year.

Amber:

I think that there's never a time that it's too late to reach out with that invitation to families to be involved and to be engaged. Sometimes, it can start small. I mentioned some of those text messaging and SMS platforms, a text that simply says, "Hey, here I am. This is what's going on. Here's an invitation to a conversation," to a workshop, to whatever. I think, again, that invitation is never not useful.

Monica:

No. I agree. Yeah. No, I completely agree. I think all the reasons you said, don't doubt it, send that update, recommit to some level of consistency with that communication. I don't think there's ever a bad time to jump in, especially with school years that have a lot of things going on. As we finish up today, Amber, I'd love for you to tell us more about your work, where listeners can connect with you. I'm going to make sure to put some links in the show notes, so wherever anyone's listening to this in the description, they'll be able to find that. But, yeah, can you tell us a little bit more about your work and the best way for folks to stay connected?

Amber:

Yeah. Definitely checking out litworld.org. There's so much wonderful work that's being done by the organization, and so many different ways that people can get involved. Check out litworld.org, World Read Aloud Day is February 2nd, 2022, which is super exciting. 2/2/22.

Monica:

Oh no. Oh my god. That is incredible. I needed you to tell me that, because I did not put that together automatically. That is really fun. Oh, fun.

Amber:

Yeah. Yeah. We're still not sure how we're maximizing that yet, optimizing that, but we're going to figure it out, but definitely check out the website. Also, don't forget to go to deweycommunity.com to learn more about the Dewey platform and to listen to some of the amazing conversations that we've had, including the one that we had with yours truly.

Monica:

So much fun. Right? That was so much fun chatting with you for that one. I'm just so excited, of course, that all the work that Dewey and Lit World are doing, and now my wheels are spinning about World Read Aloud Day, 2/2/22. That is just so fun. Well, Amber, I really appreciate you taking time to talk about how to use tech tools to stay connected with families. Thank you so much for your time today.

Amber:

Thank you so much. This was so much fun.

So let's make this EdTech easy...

First, create a sense of belonging.

Next, invite families into the community.

Then, go beyond reactive conversations,

Finally, maximize tools families already use.

Remember, you can find the show notes for this episode with all of the resources

and tools I mentioned today by heading to ClassTechTips.com/podcast and finding

today's episode #130

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A big thank you to our sponsor for this episode, Kokomo 247. This health and safety cloud platform instantly gives power not only to manage health and safety concerns, but also mitigate and be compliant -- all not only for students, but also for faculty and staff as well. You can ask for a no-string attached 15 minute demo at www.kokomo247.com -- and you'll see how much they are passionate about school safety and how they have been helping many - from small districts and

colleges to some of largest school districts and universities like 2nd largest school district in the US and Big 10 Colleges.

Outro

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Have a great week and check back on Tuesday morning for next week's new episode.

Episode Resources

- Learn more about Amber Peterson's work at Deweycommunity.com and LitWorld.org
- GoogleDocs
- Google Classroom
- Remind (Family communication app)
- ClassPager (Family communication app)
- ClassParent (Family communication app)
- Zoom (Video Conferencing tool)
- Microsoft Forms (Data Collection tool)
- Google Forms (Data Collection tool)
- 5 Ways To Kick Off Your Next Zoom Call (Podcast Episode)
- How Google Forms Transformed My Data Collection (Podcast Episode)
- Save Time and Streamline Your Workflow with JotForm Approvals (Blog Post)
- 5 Tips for Sharing Online Learning Resources with Families (Podcast Episode)
- How to Create a Class Newsletter with Spark Page (Blog Post)
- 3 Tech Tips for Parent Newsletters (Blog Post)
- How to Create Top Five Lists of Resources for Families (Podcast Episode)
- Reach Every Family with ClassTag Parent Communication App (Blog Post)

- [Mobile-Friendly, Meaningful Family Engagement from PowerMyLearning](#) (Blog Post)
- [3 Ways to Use Google Docs When You Don't Have Google Classroom](#) (Podcast Episode)
- [The Next Generation of School Communication](#) (Blog Post)
- [How to Customize Your Google Classroom Banner](#) (Blog Post)
- [6 Reasons Bloomz Video Tool Can Energize Parent Communication](#) (Blog Post)
- [Must-Try Updates from Microsoft Teams Assignments](#)(Blog Post)