

EXTREME Makeover TECH EDITION



Sophie thought it would be cool to have a second computer to share with mom.

Angela wanted to use technology to get organized but had no idea where to start.

Michael dreamed of networking the computer and TV for seamless entertainment.

Max hoped to play Web-based games without getting clobbered by viruses.

Simple upgrades—from a paperless calendar to software for worry-free Web surfing—helped this family function more smoothly. Download these ideas (and more), and you too can conquer the digital divide.

by **Christina Wood and Dan Tynan**

Meet *Family Circle* reader Angela Crickman, mother of three and a nurse in California. "I desperately need a way to sync my family's schedule," said the mom of Max, 13, Sophie, 11, and Jake, 5, when she petitioned us for tech help. "I'm guessing it should involve the computer, but I have no clue how to set something up. I'd also like to create a system to manage our digital pictures so I can actually retrieve what I want. And while we're at it, is there a way we can allow my son to use the Internet to do homework but block the downloading of games that crash the computer? What about a digital music library I can access without having to ask the kids for help? Oh, and my husband, Michael, wants the television and the computer networked—is that possible?"

In other words, this talkative yet tech-challenged mom wanted to harness today's innovations to make life easier for herself and her whole clan. What she learned can help you too.

Problem | 1 **Time management**

"Between our work commitments and all the kids' stuff—music lessons, baseball games, orthodontist appointments—the paper calendar on the fridge just isn't cutting it anymore. Ideally, my husband and I would have the ability to check a master schedule from anywhere and receive a reminder if we're on the verge of missing something."

The Solution → Google Calendar

This ingenious invention allows for easy management of dozens of different schedules; you can access them from any computer or even your cell phone. Within minutes Angela had set up individual calendars for every member of the family and plugged in school functions, sports events and appointments. "Where has this been all my life?" she asked when she had everyone's lives mapped out in front of her.

One of Angela's favorite features allows her to update her schedule via cell phone. She can shoot a quick text message to her calendar with the phrase "swim meet 3 P.M. Monday" and it gets noted in seconds. She can also receive texts to remind her when an event is imminent or something needs to be taken care of.

Getting her kids to interact with the calendar was a tough sell, so she came up with an incentive plan: "I added fun events to their calendars that rewarded them for checking, like 'ice cream at 2 P.M.' Imagine my son's disappointment as he watched his sister down a cone simply because she checked her calendar and he didn't!"

Problem | 2 **One weak PC, many users**

Angela and her tweens, like many other families, were sharing a single desktop computer. That was fine when Sophie and Max were younger, but now it causes arguments. The machine was agonizingly slow and kept crashing because the games Max downloaded were rife with viruses and spyware.

The Solution → A new Wi-Fi-enabled laptop and a do-it-yourself PC tune-up

Angela needed her own machine, so she tried an HP laptop with a 15-inch wide-screen display and built-in wireless networking. "I had no idea how much I would love being able to head to a coffee shop and just hang out with a computer," she says. (To win one, see box, left.)

But the family PC was still a problem. The hard drive was packed with electronic junk, and dust bunnies had accumulated inside the case, causing the system to wheeze and run slowly. Dust can make a computer overheat and shorten its life span. After unplugging the machine Angela carefully took off the outer case and removed the dust with a handheld vacuum. "It made a big difference," she says.

The machine's 150 GB hard drive was equally clogged, with barely 1 GB available for storage. (You should always leave at least 20% of your hard drive free, so Windows can use it to store temporary files and do other necessary house-keeping chores.) To clear it out, Angela turned to the PC Tuneup tools in Symantec's Norton 360 software suite, which deletes unnecessary files and reorganizes the drive's data. She also had Max trash 30 GB of old Pokémon videos.

To create even more room, she moved the family's iTunes library onto an inexpensive external hard drive. Some models (such as the LaCie Ethernet Disk mini—Home Edition Personal Media Server) allow numerous networked computers (like the family's PC and Angela's new laptop) to access its stored data.

Problem | 3 **Internet safety**

Besides safeguarding the computer from Max's downloads, Angela wanted to protect her kids on the Net. "They should be able to do school research without having pornography flash in their faces," she says.

The Solution → Security and Web monitoring software

Security software is a must for every computer used for Internet access, especially those with broadband. In addition to PC tune-ups, Norton 360 also provides tools to keep hackers at bay while protecting against viruses and spyware. There's an add-on pack you can download from Symantec's website that filters out nasty sites and stops creepy spam from landing in kids' in-boxes. While other tools on the market (such as Net Nanny) offer more parental control, Angela decided to start with Norton's basic filtering options. "I have to be in the room anyway to make sure they're not playing games instead of studying," she says. "There's no substitute for being present when a child is online."

Problem 4

Digital photo disarray

Angela switched to a digital camera a few years ago, but now the family photos are less organized than when she got envelopes full of prints. "I know my photos are on my computer—somewhere," she says. "I used to make albums so we could look at pictures whenever we wanted. Now you need a degree in computer science to find a snapshot in our house."

The Solution → Picasa and digital photo frames

Picasa is another convenient—and free!—tool from Google. It scans your computer's entire hard drive, extracts images and neatly displays them as thumbnails. You can cherry-pick the best and delete the duds, then upload to popular sites like kodakgallery.com, shutterfly.com or snapfish.com or share via Picasa's Web album feature.

The next step was putting a few favorite photos on display where everyone could enjoy them. Angela plugged two Pandigital frames into her computer and dragged the photos onto the frames' icons on her desktop, then set the frames to display a continuous slide show of images. She liked them so much she decided to buy a frame for her parents.

Problem 5

Subpar entertainment

Angela was intrigued by the whole digital music thing but had yet to give it a shot. "I once borrowed my son's MP3 player, and it made my workout much more enjoyable," she says. "But the Beastie Boys? No thanks. And I want something I can operate without help." Meanwhile, her husband craved a seamless entertainment system that combined the TV and computer.

The Solution → Sansa Clip MP3 player and TiVo home network

Sandisk's Sansa Clip is a tiny music player with a bright LCD screen you can wear clipped to a shirt or jacket like jewelry. The 2-GB model is available in four colors; Angela's is hot pink. Getting it up and running was a snap, and she soon discovered the beauty of portable tunes. "I can throw it in my purse whenever I'm off somewhere," she said. "I can also listen to the Black Crowes while writing up my shopping list."

Michael, on the other hand, had grand visions of a tricked-out home entertainment system that operated wirelessly via their Wi-Fi network. "It seems like there are a lot of cool things we could be doing with our home network but aren't," he said. For example, he wanted to listen to MP3 music files in different rooms of the house, and record TV shows on the TiVo box downstairs to watch on the 56-inch flat-screen TV in the master bedroom.

Michael ditched his old cable box and added a second TiVo—the Series3 HD DVR, which records shows in high definition. By plugging Wi-Fi adapters into the back of both TiVos and downloading the TiVo Desktop software to the family PC, Michael would be able to select movies and music stored on the computer and play them back on his home entertainment system using the TiVo remote. He could also use his PC—or any machine connected to the Net—to set his TiVo to record.

The makeover was a big success. Angela quickly noticed the household was running more efficiently. "I love how the tools help me stay in control," she says. "Simple improvements are a beautiful thing!" ●



"I loved everything about the makeover," said Sophie. "It's awesome to watch time-killing YouTube videos on Mom's laptop and borrow the pink MP3 player. My friends like to check out the digital frames."

Fast Fixes

Problem Managing the family schedule

Solution Google Calendar

Cost Free, google.com/calendar

Problem Aging communal PC

Solution New HP notebook computer and PC tune-up

Cost HP notebook, \$600 and up, hpshopping.com. LaCie Ethernet Disk mini-Home Edition, \$150, lacie.com

Problem Internet safety

Solution Norton 360

Cost \$80, symantec.com

Problem Disorganized digital photographs

Solution Google Picasa; Pandigital photo frames

Cost Picasa, free, picasa.google.com. Digital frames, \$100 and up, pandigital.net

Problem Sharing music and videos

Solution Sansa Clip MP3 player; adding TiVo to wireless network

Cost Sandisk Sansa Clip, 1 GB (\$40), 2 GB (\$60), go.shopsansa.com. TiVo HD DVR, \$300 and up (depending on plan), tivo.com. Linksys Wireless G USB Network Adapter, \$60, amazon.com