

Skype won't combat loneliness of elderly like a hug and cuppa, says Esther Rantzen

By Gabriella Swerling, Social Affairs Editor

DAME ESTHER RANTZEN has warned against using Skype as a substitute for a “hug and a cup of tea”, as figures reveal that two-thirds of adults rely on technology to keep in touch with elderly relatives. The 79-year-old journalist and founder of multiple charities has spoken out about the severe impact loneliness can have on old people.

Dame Esther's comments come as research shows how family contact is changing, as traditional means of popping in for a chat are increasingly replaced with modern technology.

In a survey of 2,000 UK adults, 59 per cent say that they are visiting family members less, while 55 per cent say their extended family relies on technology to keep in touch. Researchers said that this means traditional visits are being replaced by texts, social media posts and video calls. Responding to the figures from Simplicity Cremations, which published the data, Dame Esther Rantzen DBE, who founded ChildLine which promotes child protection, and The Silver Line, which combats loneliness in older people told the Sunday Telegraph that “communication is not the same as company”.

“I am thrilled that the internet has opened up the world to us and means that even if our children and grandchildren are scattered around the world we can still stay in touch,” she said.

“But let's not pretend it's the same as sharing a pot of tea together, or a loving cuddle. Some of the saddest conversations I have ever had were on Christmas Day for the past six years, speaking to older people who spent Christmas on their own, with only the occasional phone call to break the silence in their homes.”

“Many of them have memories to provide a painful contrast, of times in the past when the day had been filled with happy noise and excitement. So I just hope that the frantic busyness that afflicts so many of us, partly due to technology, does not prevent us visiting our nearest and dearest, does not mean that we prefer a Skype call to a cup of tea and laugh together.

“Someone defined loneliness as having plenty of people to do something with but nobody to do nothing with. It may feel like nothing, to drop by and chat with someone who has been alone all day, and give them a hug, but it can be transformational.

“A hug reminds us that we are still human and still valued.”