Look beyond laptops and data to find solutions to 'digital poverty', says new report

For immediate release

Strong links between socioeconomic and education status and digital advantage suggest that digital poverty is unlikely to be overcome simply by handing out laptops or making infrastructure available and affordable, according to a new report from Parent Zone.

'Digital poverty: what still needs to happen' found that almost all families have been online at least once a day since the start of the first lockdown in March 2020. However, their experiences differed significantly, with lower income families having fewer, older devices - and a quarter of households with five or more people (including one or more children) having no or only one computer.

The research, carried out by Ipsos MORI for Parent Zone, also showed that this disparity of access impacted children's access to education. A quarter (27%) of lower-income families said that since March 2020, a child in their household had missed out on some of their education because they did not have an appropriate device to work on, compared to 8% of higher-income families.

Parents in all income brackets recognised the importance of investing in digital in order to support their children's schooling, with 66% of higher-income families and 48% of lower-income families purchasing a new device since March 2020.

But this investment had an uneven impact on family finances, with 10% of lower-income households going into debt (or overdraft) to pay for a device to connect to the internet and 8% going into debt (or overdraft) to pay for internet access - compared to 3% and 2% respectively for higher-income families.

Digital disadvantage

These findings demonstrate that almost all parents recognise the importance of the digital world - but that some families find it harder and more expensive to be online. This digital disadvantage results in unequal access to the opportunities offered by an increasingly online world.

Where going online comes with a financial penalty, it is difficult to look beyond what 'must' be done online - education and school work - towards what 'can' be done online. It is likely that children in lower income households have less opportunity to play and explore online, with implications for their digital skills, confidence and resilience.

Social, cultural and personal disadvantages - rooted in economics, gender and ethnicity - all have an impact on people's ability to be part of a world where being online is a necessity, not a nice to have.

What needs to happen

Solutions to digital poverty need to look beyond laptops, data and digital skills to take a more holistic view, considering the context and circumstances behind how families engage with technology.

All children should have the opportunity to master the technologies of the future - which means not just ensuring they have hardware and connectivity to support their education, but also that they have the space and time to explore everything the digital world has to offer.

This will require a coordinated approach across government as part of the levelling-up agenda. The crucial role of parents in supporting their children's digital development and potential must be considered by policymakers and technology companies alike.

Vicki Shotbolt, founder and CEO of Parent Zone, says: "This report clearly demonstrates that parents have embraced the importance of technology for their children's future - with many going into debt to ensure their children could access education during lockdown.

"While access to devices and data remains important, it is also vital that parents are given the means and support to help their children explore the online world confidently and safely. Failure to engage parents - and particularly those who are digitally disadvantaged - in developing solutions to digital poverty will only reinforce existing disadvantages between families.

"The upcoming government Media Literacy Strategy presents an ideal opportunity to ensure all parents are given the chance to develop their skills and knowledge to ensure the next generation - whatever their background - can thrive online."

Read the full report [here](#).

Editor's note:

Research was carried out by Ipsos MORI on behalf of Parent Zone. It surveyed a nationally

representative quota sample of 468 parents or guardians in Great Britain aged 18+ using its CATI Omnibus (telephone) between the 8th and 28th of January 2021. Data has been weighted to the known offline population proportions for age within gender, government office region, working status and social grade and ethnicity.

Parent Zone founder and CEO Vicki Shotbolt is available for interview. Please email press@parentzone.org.uk or call 020 686 7225.

About Parent Zone

Parent Zone sits at the heart of modern family life, providing advice, knowledge and support to shape the best possible future for children as they embrace the online world. We support parents to help their children discover the possibilities and opportunities available to them online, and provide teachers and family professionals with resources and training to help them guide and advise families in the digital world. We use our insights and knowledge to bridge the gap between parents and platforms, and work with policy-makers to help ensure the interests of families are at the heart of everything they do.