

No home internet access for children can lead to social disadvantage, report from Ofcom Consumer Panel says

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The lack of home internet access can seriously disadvantage many children living in low-income households, according to new research from the Consumer Panel, the independent voice for the consumer and citizen interest in communications markets. [Children and the internet](#) found a stark social contrast between children from low income households who have internet access at home and those who do not. The report, which looks at the attitudes and opinions of children and their parents to home internet access, is being launched today at a high-level roundtable discussion in London that brings together key representatives from government, think-tanks, the third sector and industry. The round table discussion will consider national policy solutions to help remove the barriers to take-up.

Colette Bowe, Consumer Panel Chairman, said: "The Panel's report clearly demonstrates the potentially damaging impact of not having home internet access on the children and families of low-income households. Access to the internet and the control and fun of a computer is helping many children get better at their school work, and supports better social communication and inclusion."

From about age ten most children believe that internet access is a 'must have'. Children in the survey said that having the internet at home is important for social networking and developing their own identities. "MSN is my life. I'm on it all the time", a 13-year-old girl told us. One 11-year-old boy explained that he liked it because he could "be really creative on the internet". While another girl of 11 told the research team: "You can get better knowledge in your head when you use the internet for school work."

While many parents recognise that an internet connection at home is key to their child's education and future success, others set up barriers against having it. Cost puts off some parents, but the overriding barrier is parental fear: fear of being left out and isolated within the family; fear that unsuitable content will start to enter their home; and fear that they will not be able to understand or control the computer. One father told us: "I just don't know anything about computers and the internet and I am not interested in finding out."

There is already substantial pressure on children and parents from school to use the internet for research and homework, on the assumption that they all have access at home. A nine-year-old boy commented: "I've got to get it for senior school. My cousin has it; you have to in year seven."

Children who don't have home internet access believe that they have inferior technical skills to those who do. The report also found that children who are already on the outside of their social peer group risk becoming further isolated without internet access, but once connected this can improve.

While most parents could not imagine family life without the internet, they did report some pitfalls. Some parents without any rules over internet use said that they have less interaction as a family and feel that they have lost their children to their bedrooms. Some parents expressed fears about the potential security threats to their children. When asked about this, one father replied: "You see all the bad stories on the news of what can happen to your kids if they talk to people they don't know in chat rooms."

Colette Bowe said: “We need to understand how we can address parental concerns and barriers to internet access so that families without the internet can be encouraged to start using it. By discussing the solutions and lessons learnt by those implementing programmes on the ground, the Panel wants to help shape policy recommendations to close the digital divide.”

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NOTES FOR EDITORS AND CSEs

The Consumer Panel was established to advise Ofcom on the consumer interest in the markets it regulates. The Panel is independent and sets its own agenda. Visit www.ofcomconsumerpanel.org.uk for more information.

The Panel's members appointed by Ofcom are:

- Colette Bowe, Chairman
- Ruth Evans, Deputy Chairman
- Fiona Ballantyne
- Roger Darlington
- Simon Gibson
- Graham Mather
- Kevin McLaughlin
- Jeremy Mitchell
- Kate O'Rourke
- Bob Twitchin
- Allan Williams

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