

UK teenagers without the internet are 'educationally disadvantaged'

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(Phys.org)—A major in-depth study examining how teenagers in the UK are using the internet and other mobile devices says the benefits of using such technologies far outweigh any perceived risks.

The findings are based on a large-scale study of more than 1,000

randomly selected households in the UK, coupled with regular face-to-face interviews with more than 200 [teenagers](#) and their families between 2008 and 2011.

While the study reflects a high level of parental anxiety about the potential of [social networking sites](#) to distract their [offspring](#), and shows that some parents despair at their children's tendency to multitask on [mobile devices](#), the research by Oxford University's Department of Education concludes that there are substantial educational advantages in teenagers being able to access the internet at home.

Teenagers who do not have access to the internet in their home have a strong sense of being 'educationally disadvantaged', warns the study. At the time of the study, the researchers estimated that around 10 per cent of the teenagers were without online connectivity at home, with most of this group living in poorer [households](#). While recent figures from the Office of National Statistics suggest this dropped to five per cent in 2012, the researchers say that still leaves around 300,000 children without [internet access](#) in their homes.

The researchers' interviews with teenagers reveal that they felt shut out of their [peer group](#) socially and also disadvantaged in their studies as so much of the college or school work set for them to do at home required online research or preparation. One teenager, whose parents had separated, explained that he would ring his father who had internet access and any requested materials were then mailed to him through the post.

Researcher Dr Rebecca Eynon commented: 'While it's difficult to state a precise figure for teenagers without access to the internet at home, the fact remains that in the UK, there is something like 300,000 [young people](#) who do not – and that's a significant number. Behind the statistics, our qualitative research shows that these disconnected young

people are clearly missing out both educationally and socially.'

In an interview with a researcher, one 14-year old boy said: 'We get coursework now in Year 9 to see what groups we're going to go in Year 10. And people with internet, they can get higher marks because they can like research on the internet...my friends are probably on it [MSN] all the day every day. And like they talk about it in school, what happened on MSN.'

Another teenager, aged 15, commented: 'It was bell gone and I have a lot of things that I could write and I was angry that I haven't got a computer because I might finish it at home when I've got lots of time to do it. But because when I'm at school I need to do it very fast.'

Strikingly, this study contradicts claims that others have made about the potential risks of such technologies adversely affecting the ability of teenagers to concentrate on serious study. The researchers, Dr Chris Davies and Dr Rebecca Eynon, found no evidence to support this claim. Furthermore, their study concludes that the internet has opened up far more opportunities for young people to do their learning at home.

Dr Davies said: 'Parental anxiety about how teenagers might use the very technologies that they have bought their own children at considerable expense is leading some to discourage their children from becoming confident users. The evidence, based on the survey and hundreds of interviews, shows that parents have tended to focus on the negative side – especially the distracting effects of social networking sites – without always seeing the positive use that their children often make of being online.'

Teenagers' experiences of the social networking site Facebook appear to be mixed, says the study. Although some regarded Facebook as an integral part of their social life, others were concerned about the number

of arguments that had escalated due to others wading in as a result of comments and photographs being posted.

The age of teenagers using Facebook for the first time was found to go down over the three year period from around 16 years old in 2008 to 12 or 13 years old by 2011. Interviews reveal that even the very youngest teenagers who were not particularly interested felt under some peer pressure to join. But the study also suggests that the popularity of Facebook is waning, with teenagers now exploring other forms of [social networking](#).

Dr Davies commented: 'There is no steady state of teenage technology use – fashions and trends are constantly shifting, and things change very rapidly when they do change.'

The research was part funded by Becta, the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency, a non-departmental public body formed under the last Labour government. The study findings are contained in a new book entitled, Teenagers and Technology, due to be published by Routledge in January 2013.

More information:

www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415684583/

Provided by Oxford University

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