

Lower income families less likely to use online learning tools

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Parents looking to help their children succeed academically can access free online educational programs, games and services to help them outside the classroom. A plethora of these tools have popped up in recent years in an attempt to close the achievement gap and digital divide between the rich and poor.

Instead, the gap seems to be getting larger because of these tools, according to a new study from the Georgia Institute of Technology.

Researchers found that low-income [parents](#) are less likely to use these extra resources or, when they do, they do so less effectively because of differences in motivation and parenting practices.

"A key goal for low-income parents is making sure their children stay in [school](#), so often they are more focused on monitoring whether their kids are doing homework and going to class," said Betsy DiSalvo, an assistant professor in the School of Interactive Computing, who led the study. "Their attention is directed towards school and not what could happen outside the classroom."

Higher-income parents are more likely to act as learning brokers or resource providers by searching for opportunities outside of school, whether it be a book, online game or extracurricular activity.

DiSalvo and a team of researchers interviewed 63 parents across socio-economic groups and conducted an online survey of 997 parents in

partnership with ACT, a national education testing services organization.

The results found that even when low-income parents turn to online resources they face greater challenges.

"They had lower perceived technical skills when it came to using computers and portable devices and conducting searches online. Even when they could do it, they downplayed their abilities," DiSalvo said.

"If we can capture these parents and give them access to these educational resources, we can help them help their children," DiSalvo said. "These tools are supposed to improve learning for all children, but if they are not being used by lower-income students, they are coming to school at an even greater disadvantage."

Lower-income parents also seem to experience greater face-saving concerns.

"Most parents are worried about saving face when asking for help with parenting. But this study shows it might be worst for low income parents," DiSalvo said.

There were also differences between how high-income and lower-income parents use social networks for education. Lower-income parents talk very little online about finding educational tools and instead physically go to the school resources center.

"Higher-income parents form Google groups, or search parenting blogs and message boards to learn about new tools. They will seek out that one mother who seems connected to everything and always knows what's going on," DiSalvo said.

DiSalvo presented the study this week at the Association for Computing

Machinery's Conference on Human Factors in Computing, CHI 2016. The results of this study and prior research are being used to develop an online parent portal that will specifically address the needs of lower-income parents.

"Across the board parents we talked to are passionate about their kids' education, but even those who are heavily invested are still struggling to help their children," DiSalvo said. "If we think these online resources are the answer to helping [children](#), we need to design them so that low-income parents will find them and use them."

More information: Information Seeking Practices of Parents: Exploring Skills, Face Threats and Social Networks.

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