



## Children and the internet

A research study into the social effects of lack of internet access on socially disadvantaged children and families

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**Ofcom**  
OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS

The Consumer Panel was established under the Communications Act 2003 as the independent research and policy advisory body on consumer interests in telecommunications, broadcasting and spectrum markets (with the exception of content issues).

Working from a firm evidence base, we advise Ofcom, the communications regulator, and others on how to achieve a communications marketplace in which all consumers can confidently choose and use products and services that suit their needs.

The Consumer Panel sets its own agenda but works constructively with the Ofcom Board. This enables us to give strategic advice on policies early on in their development – before they are consulted on – so as to build consumer interests into Ofcom's decision-making from the outset.

The Consumer Panel is made up of part-time members with a balance of expertise in consumer issues in the electronic communications sector. There are members representing the interests of consumers in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England.

Consumer Panel Members are appointed by Ofcom, subject to approval by the Secretaries of State for Trade and Industry and for Culture, Media and Sport. They are appointed in accordance with Nolan principles for two or three year terms and are eligible for re-appointment. The Consumer Panel is assisted by a small support team.

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## Foreword

In today's communications world being connected is becoming central to how we relate to each other and the world at large. The Panel takes the issues that surround digital exclusion very seriously and we have been working with government and the third sector to devise policy solutions that help close the divide. Last year, we published an attitudinal research report into Older People's connectivity<sup>1</sup>. The report looked at what the barriers and enablers were to being connected for this cohort. This year we have focused our research on children from low income households.

Our interest in this group is for two reasons. First, our annual tracker, *Consumers and the Communications Market : 2007*<sup>2</sup>, continues to reveal that those households on low incomes are less connected than other sections of society. In 2007, 36% of low income households were connected to the internet compared to the UK average of 61%<sup>3</sup>. And in the UK as a whole, 63% of those who are not connected think there is no need to be<sup>4</sup>.

Consequently, we wished to understand what the attitudinal reasons were within this group for not connecting. What this research suggests is that there is a series of complex parental attitudinal barriers - and while cost plays a part there are other fears to overcome. Some of these are: parents' fear that they will not be able to understand or control the computer; a fear of being left out and isolated within the family; and a fear that unsuitable content will start to enter their home.

Our second reason for being strongly interested in this topic is that this generation of children are growing-up within this current communications revolution and it is having a profound affect on those who are connected. Many of us can remember the introduction of the home PC, the rise of the mobile phone, the start of dial-up internet. Yet these are not the collective memories of this generation. They are immersed in the digital world - using social networking sites such as MySpace as extensions of their personality and as a way to socialise and meet new people, or to stay in contact with friends; their attitudes that surround personal privacy and the information they make public differs from previous generations. And while in the past children telephoned friends after school to talk about the day's events, today these conversations are occurring on-line via MSN and not on a one to one basis but on a one to many. Further, conversations are taking place across geographic boundaries.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.ofcomconsumerpanel.org.uk/files/information/olderpeople/Older\\_people\\_and\\_communications\\_technology.pdf](http://www.ofcomconsumerpanel.org.uk/files/information/olderpeople/Older_people_and_communications_technology.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ofcomconsumerpanel.org.uk/information/documents/Consumersmarket2007.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> *Consumers and the Communications Market : 2007*, page 17

<sup>4</sup> *Consumers and the Communications Market : 2007*, page 27



Children, themselves, acknowledge in this report the central role the on-line world is playing in their lives and that those without the internet at home feel they are disadvantaged by not having it. Some children who are not connected have been able to develop coping strategies to keep up with their peers' on-line and real world social life, while those unable to develop these strategies are finding that they are being further excluded from their peer group.

All the children agree that ICT skills are required for their education and for their future careers. Many parents recognise that the provision of a PC and an internet connection at home are key to the success of their child's education. For these and the above reasons the Panel will continue to work closely with policy makers and the communications industry over the coming year to understand these issues further and formulate policy recommendations to help close the digital divide.

Colette Bowe  
Chairman, Ofcom Consumer Panel

June 2007



## Executive summary

### **Technology is an integral and important part of families' lives.**

- 1.1 Regardless of whether they have an internet connection or not, most families have a wide array of electronic items, many of which are owned by the children themselves.
- 1.2 Most of these technologies are more likely to be perceived as toys and bought as presents, whereas PCs and the internet are more likely to be owned by the family. Their primary association with work and information seeking rather than leisure, seems to lower their status as a gift.

### **All children are keen to have the internet and see real benefits which outweigh any negatives.**

- 1.3 Key benefits for children centre on social communication and inclusion. This is particularly facilitated through instant messaging (MSN), which allows them to communicate freely with groups of their friends and to widen their social group.
- 1.4 Educational achievement is perhaps of secondary importance to many of the children; however it too seems to be a real advantage. From 10 years of age onwards, there is a pressure from schools to get the internet and a sense that access to the internet allows the willing student to attain a higher quality of presentation and content.
- 1.5 Overall children believe the main impact of not having the internet at home is on social networking and developing identity. This research suggests that it also has a role re-engaging some of the educationally disengaged, as they enjoy the control and fun of working with a PC. It can also enable the academically able to find more relevant information and research more effectively. For some though, who are not particularly interested in school work, they remain uninterested whether they have internet access or not.
- 1.6 All children who do not have access to the internet at home believe that their technical skills and speed with PCs tend to be inferior to those friends who have access at home.
- 1.7 The impact of having the internet is not straightforward and depends on the personality and type of child. Some are more able to adopt coping strategies than others. Broadly speaking there are four types of children.



- 1.8 **Specialists** are usually boys and spend a lot of time on a specific hobby, which is often technology or technically based. They are extremely proficient users of the internet and often the expert within their family. They tend to be less interested in the social aspects of the web. Specialists can be affected detrimentally if they do not have access as they cannot pursue their passion and cannot develop their skills as far as they would like. They can feel that a future working with technology might be hindered by not having access to the internet at home.
- 1.9 **Leaders**, as the name suggests, are the ones who take control in their social networks and are the ones who tend to adopt things first before any of their friends. They love the internet for socialising and keeping in the know. They have the capacity to cope well without the internet and gain information and connection through using their ingenuity. They are not as disadvantaged as some other children who do not have internet access at home.
- 1.10 **Followers** are a category which many children fall into. They are keen to keep up and in with the **Leaders**, but are not trend setters or the first to try something new. These children feel disadvantaged by not having the internet at home. It is of utmost importance to these children to know the buzz words and be in touch. Although they are sufficiently motivated and able to gain access elsewhere (at the library, at friends' houses) they can still feel like they being left behind within their social networks.
- 1.11 **Outsiders** don't have many friends and are often seen as socially separate by other children. Having the internet can help integrate these outsiders a little. These individuals are often not really heard as prejudices about how they look and their low confidence and/or poor social skills mean that they communicate less freely and may be undervalued when they do speak. **Outsiders** however, can feel freer communicating by MSN, where they are more invisible. This can encourage their further acceptance within the peer group. However, without the internet, these children remain ostracised and can be further excluded as they are even less up-to-date with gossip and information that is important within the playground.

**Overall a stark contrast exists between those children who have internet access at home and those who do not. Those who don't have it feel left out and isolated and unable to access a world that others take for granted.**

- 1.12 The extent of this exclusion depends on the capabilities and personality of the children. **Specialists** can feel held back from properly pursuing their passion. **Leaders** can be skilled and motivated to get round the issue of access, especially as they get older. They can find a way to



keep in touch and they often learn other social skills from the ways they find internet access. **Followers** can find other ways to gain access but can emotionally feel that they are struggling to keep up. **Outsiders**, who are already slightly out of the loop, potentially can be further excluded.

- 1.13 Having the internet at home does not guarantee social and educational achievement. It strongly depends on how it is used and controlled and the type of child who is using it.

### **Parental attitudes to the internet are hugely significant as they are the gatekeepers.**

- 1.14 Most parents feel that having the internet at home is becoming a norm, which retains more benefits than negatives.
- 1.15 Parents acquire the internet for a variety of reasons. The main reason seems to be as an investment to help their children's education. Some parents get the internet for their children, without much understanding of the benefits, but simply because they give into pester power. Other parents seem more clued up to the potential benefits to them too and this was another factor influencing their decision. Once the internet is in the home it quickly becomes part of life and is seen as a 'must-have'.

### **How it is managed by parents can affect the impact that the internet has on children.**

- 1.16 In households where parents exhibit weak or ineffective parenting skills, getting access to the internet can exacerbate problems which already exist within families. There was evidence of increased fragmentation and lack of communication between children and their parent(s). This can leave the parents feeling even more isolated and out of touch with their children.
- 1.17 The age of the child and the number of children in the home can also affect how it is used. Younger children spend less concentrated time on it compared to tweens and teens who can become addicted. This is partly due to their interest in other things and often down to an inability to get much time on the internet. In households with more than two children the internet can cause regular squabbles over whose turn it is.
- 1.18 Most parents agree that having the internet at home is probably going to give their children some advantage in the future. By introducing it at home when they are at primary school, there is a widely held belief that it helps to build skills, knowledge and confidence. Parents believe that without these skills and regular exposure and practice at home, children will be at a disadvantage with regard to their education and future job prospects. This conviction is based on feelings, not on hard and fast facts.



## Parents with the internet at home

- 1.19 The parents who are most involved and enthusiastic about the internet are the **Techsperts**. They tend to be male and are very interested and knowledgeable about technology in general. They will tend to dominate usage of the internet in the house, with their children having to compete for access.
- 1.20 **Advocates** are made up of different types of parents. **Confident Advocates** are those who are confident users of technology and use the internet regularly. They use it in a variety of ways, ranging from supporting the running of the household, (paying bills, online shopping) to supporting their interests (downloading music, booking holidays, playing bingo).
- 1.21 Then there are the **Fearful Advocates**, who are generally not that comfortable with technology and they can be quite fearful of the internet. These parents are often under-confident in general and have much in common attitudinally with the **Fearful** typology that is identified amongst the parents who do not have access to the internet.
- 1.22 Despite having a lack of confidence, they recognise that it offers their children huge benefits and they have been motivated to get it to ensure that they are not disadvantaged. The fearful advocates' decision to get the internet may have been influenced by their children who are likely to have exerted significant pressure on them to do so.
- 1.23 The **Recently Converted** have only recently gained access to the internet and love discovering what they can do with it. They are very able to articulate the benefits for themselves and their children.

### **In most cases, once families have the internet it becomes the norm and an essential part of their lives.**

- 1.24 Whilst most parents cannot imagine family life without the internet, a host of potential pitfalls to having the internet at home were highlighted: squabbles over access amongst siblings; potential addiction to games and MSN; increased fragmentation within households; and potential security and safety issues related to chat rooms and identity theft.
- 1.25 These downsides are recognised by children and parents, but parents both with and without internet access can feel that these risks are manageable if they exercise control. A number of strategies were used, including placing the position of the PC in a public space within the household, setting rules around access and keeping an open and involved dialogue with their children.



- 1.26 These downsides can however feel more damaging when parents do not exercise control. This is evident in some **Fearful Advocate** households and could be the case in households where children seem to set the agenda more than parents.

### **Parents without the internet at home**

- 1.27 There were a few differences between the families although the extent of these differences did not seem that great. Some may have slightly less up-to-date models and arguably less technology in their households overall. They may also have a more cautious and traditional attitude to spending, and so are more reluctant to pay for a PC and the internet on credit.
- 1.28 Some were slightly more controlling of their kids and less susceptible to pester power; the rules within the house may be stricter and they are more likely to determine what is brought into the home. The children may have less control over the decision to get the internet.

**Amongst parents without internet access, the research identified three different types of parents. At the heart of all these parents' decision not to have the internet at home seems to be fear. The extent and cause of this fear differs between types.**

- 1.29 Furthest away from getting the internet at home are the **Fearful** parents. These parents often do not understand computers and the internet. They are threatened by having this technology in the house, fear they will not be able to control it and worry that it will isolate and undermine them within their household. Their fear of being isolated can be particularly powerful where the parent is already socially isolated and may have a tenuous hold over the family. Attitudinally and in terms of their style of parenting, they can be very similar to the **Fearful Advocates**.
- 1.30 Gender affects how fearfulness is presented.
- Dads can be more dogmatic and seem more certain in their choice not to get the internet. They often cite seemingly rational reasons for their choice; for example, protecting the safety of the children from predators on the internet and their concerns about identity fraud. They are confident, although their somewhat defensive front seems to mask their vulnerability and insecurity.
- 1.31 Mums are often more overtly fearful. They express their fears that they are letting their children down but equally claim that they lack the motivation, knowledge or ability to do anything about it.



- 1.32 Closest to getting the internet at home for their children are the **Planners**. They have often dealt with the emotional barriers and are in the final stages of getting the money to buy the computer.
- 1.33 Then there are the **Considerers** who are a little further away and can still be quite fearful, but imagine they will get it in the next year or so.
- 1.34 The tipping point, at which these **Planners** and **Considerers** make the step to getting the internet, is often the increased pressure as their children reach and progress through secondary school.

### Implications

- 1.35 Parents who don't have the internet at home all have real financial concerns. They are worried about how to pay for the hardware and on-going costs. Their perceptions of cost can be unrealistic and so it would be useful to help them work out how much the whole package they need will really cost and, within that, what level of equipment and broadband speed they really need.
- 1.36 Parents without the internet can often fear being emotionally left out as they have little or no basic computer skills. They also can feel powerless to control use and function. There is scope to empower these parents; this might be by helping the parents themselves to get the most out of the internet, educating them about what it can do for them and their children. There seems to be a need to encourage them gently to use the facility themselves, and to make libraries and communal areas more relaxed and fun to encourage usage. However, libraries can appear quite formal places of learning and under-confident parents can feel intimidated to use the internet in these types of environments.
- 1.37 The **Fearfuls** are the hardest parents to reach. Often they need a broader system of help to enable them to overcome the barriers to gaining access. Internet access is just one instance in which they have lost touch with wider society. Often they have not ever worked, or left the workforce years ago. They can be socially isolated, with links only to their immediate family. They need support to gain confidence in all aspects of their lives. They often have non-existent ICT skills which can exacerbate their fears.
- 1.38 To reach these **Fearfuls** there is a need to unpack their often irrational fears and reassure them via informal education. They have absorbed a disproportionate amount of negatives about the internet. These should be challenged and more emphasis given to what the internet can offer them and their children. This could perhaps be linked to school policy, by involving the parents in ICT. Schools could gently encourage parents to get the internet at home and support those without skills.



However, parents' own negative experience of school can be a further barrier to learning about the internet in a school environment and this is an issue that would need to be addressed.



## Objectives and methodology

### Research objectives

- 2.1 To identify, explore and understand the wider social impacts (both benefits and drawbacks) of home internet access for children. More specifically:
  - communication with friends, family and the outside world
  - access to information and advice, e.g. sexual health, political issues
  - peer group inclusion, instant messenger, chat rooms, internet gaming, celebrity gossip, music and fashion trends etc.
  - acquisition of “transferable” skills, i.e. perceived employability and future job aspirations.
- 2.2 To understand what children themselves perceive to be the social benefits of having internet access at home
- 2.3 To understand how important parents’ attitudes and usage of the internet may affect usage by children
- 2.4 To understand whether the lack of access further disadvantages already disadvantaged children and if so, in what way
- 2.5 To dig beneath financial limitations, ‘*we can’t afford it*’ attitudes and gain an in depth understanding of the barriers to internet take up, amongst low income/disadvantaged children, both from the children’s and the parents’ perspectives.

### Sample and methodology

- 2.6 The overall target for research was socially disadvantaged children and families (DE social economic grade). This was split into two samples:
  - ‘With’ Sample: with broadband internet access at home
  - ‘Without’ Sample: without any internet access at home
- 2.7 The sample included a diversity of people from minority ethnic communities; Bengali, Pakistani, Indian, Black Caribbean, and Irish.
- 2.8 Fieldwork was conducted in the following locations in March and April 2007: Glasgow, Newcastle, Leicester, Birmingham, and London (Southwark, Haringey and Lewisham).
- 2.9 **‘With’ Sample**  
Two in home observations lasting three to four hours



- One with a family who had primary aged children (Reception to Year 6)
  - One with a family who had secondary aged children (Year 7 to Year 12)
- 2.10 Four mini group discussions (three respondents per group) with children aged between 8 and 15 as follows:
- Boys aged 8 to 9 years (Year 4)
  - Girls aged 9 to 10 years (Year 5)
  - Boys aged 12 to 13 years (Year 8)
  - Girls aged 14 to 15 years (Year 10)
- 2.11 Two group discussions with parents as follows:
- Mums with primary aged children
  - Dads with secondary aged children
- 2.12 **‘Without’ Sample**  
Two in home observations lasting three to four hours
- One with a family who had primary aged children (Reception to Year 6)
  - One with a family who had secondary aged children (Year 7 to Year 12)
- 2.13 Six family interviews (speaking to the parents and then the children **separately**)
- Three among families who had primary aged children. This included:
    - Three parent in-depth interviews
    - Three sibling in-depth interviews
  - Three among families who had secondary aged children. This included:
    - Three parent in-depth interviews
    - Three sibling in-depth interviews
- 2.14 Three mini group discussions with parents (three respondents per group) as follows:
- Mums with primary aged children
  - Dads with secondary aged children
  - Dads with mix of primary and secondary aged children



## Children and technology

### Technology is an integral and an important part of families lives.

- 3.1 Most of the households in the sample, whether they had internet access or not, have a vast range of technology.

'When the kids go to their dad, I just sit and watch movies on Sky or get DVDs. I love the peace and quiet.' (Mum, 'Without' Sample, Newcastle)

'We have loads of fun on the Playstation, playing games as a family, it's really important.' (Mum, 'Without' Sample, London)

'I couldn't live without my mobile phone. I'm on it to my mum all the time.' (Mum, 'Without' Sample, London)

'MSN is my life. I'm on it all the time.' (Girl, 13, 'With' Sample, London)

- 3.2 Multichannel TV often occupies a central position and central role in the house. The entire household may use it, although not necessarily together.
- 3.3 Children also have a wide array of their own technologies, most have TVs, DVD players and stereos in their rooms. All of the families have some kind of games console: PS2 and PSP are most popular with boys and Nintendo DS with girls. Mobiles are a priority for many children and after they reach 11 years, most have working phones. Before this children may 'play' with a phone that no longer works. Digital radio is not important in these families; although most could access it via their TV, this does not seem relevant to them, as the TV is used ostensibly as visual stimulation. Ipods and MP3s are popular, however the need to have access to the internet to download music makes them technically and practically challenging.

### Technology plays an important role in developing the self and a social identity.

- 3.4 Different technologies help develop different skills and perform different roles:

Children (under 10 years) may integrate technology into play behaviour.



'When my friend comes round I will go on Microsoft Word; I'll write a message, and then I'll tell her and she'll send one back. And we'll pretend that we're using MSN.' (Girl, 10, 'Without' Sample, London)

- 3.5 MSN and mobiles help develop communication skills as they communicate with a wider social group and develop their own style of communication.

'I spend a few hours on MSN, just talking to friends. Tonight I've been talking to some girls at school about a trip to London Dungeons we went on yesterday.' (Boy, 13, 'With' Sample, London)

- 3.6 Web-sites like Myspace.com and personal web-pages help develop and communicate their emerging social identity. These are more significant for teenagers, especially when they become interested in attracting the opposite sex.

'I used to use myspace to flirt with girls from the school next door.' (Boy, 17, 'Without' Sample, Leicester)

- 3.7 MSN and Xbox-live help children gain confidence and independence. Some, who may be less academically minded, can gain real confidence from beating their scores and those of their opponents on games.

'I play this interactive game online with people all over the world and when we stopped the internet I couldn't play anymore, I'm really good at it and kept beating my score. It's really depressing.' (Boy, 13, 'Without' Sample, London)

- 3.8 More traditional outlets for play are sometimes less accessible to these children. Often parents expressed fears about their children's safety in public spaces and on some estates there are real restrictions on play. So the virtual world of IT can take on an important role.

'We used to be able to play football on the fields behind here, but football is banned now as they said we made too much noise. There's nothing to do round here any more.' (Boy, 17, 'Without' Sample, Leicester)

- 3.9 Many of the technologies that children own are perceived by adults as toys and this means they often enter the household via gifting.



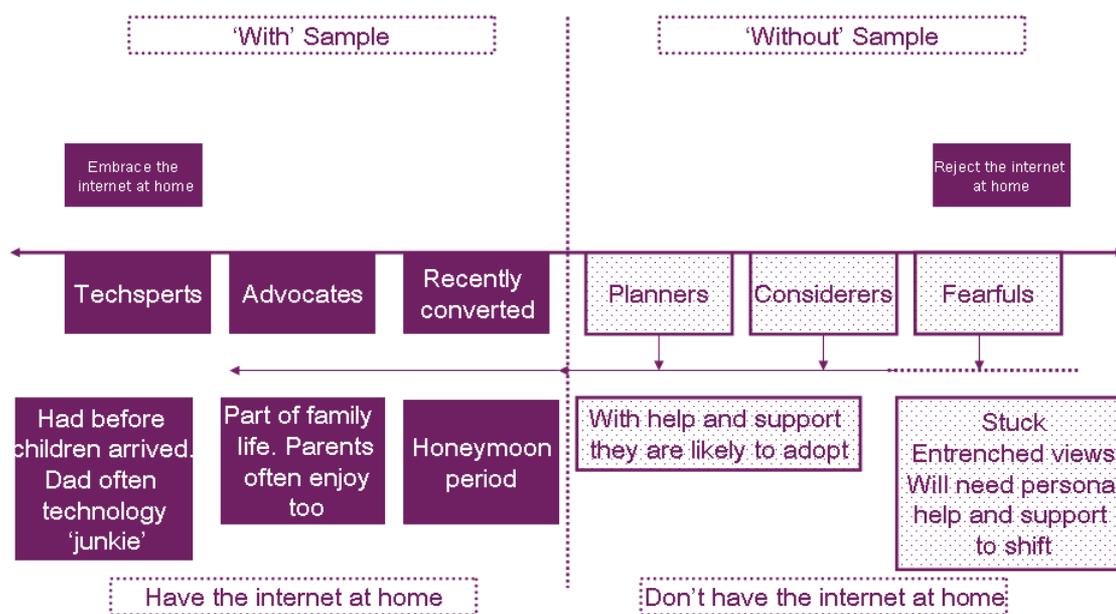
- 3.10 MP3s, Ipods and games are seen as potential presents and are often bought for children by parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles.
- 3.11 By contrast, owning a PC and having access to the internet is perceived in a different way. It is seen as owned by the family, rather than the individual. Although PCs can be used for fun and entertainment, their primary association is with work. This can make them a less obvious choice for gifting as they seem more worthy.
- 3.12 However, in some families the status of the PC is shifting closer to other technologies, as children start to get their own laptops and routers enable more than one internet user at a time.



# Parents with internet access at home

4.1 Attitudes towards the internet seem to exist on the continuum, shown below in figure 1. The vertical dotted line marks the divide between parents with and those without internet access at home.

Figure 1 Typologies - parents with internet access



- 4.2 There is movement across the continuum from right to left. The 'Fearfuls' are furthest away from getting connected to the internet and seem to be the most difficult group to shift attitudinally. Their fears are often part of a more general anxiety and related to their wider social exclusion.
- 4.3 There are a range of different types of parental attitudes to having the internet at home. This section will focus on the 'With' Sample to the left of the dotted line in Figure 1.
- 4.4 The most enthusiastic adopters are the **Techsperts**. These are invariably men who have a good working knowledge of most technologies. These parents have the most technological expertise within their family and within the broader family. Even though they are on a low disposable income, these parents prioritise technology. They love technology and enjoy having the latest products. They are likely (depending on the age of their children) to have had the internet before their children were born.



- 4.5 Unlike the other types of adopters these parents primary reason for getting access is for themselves as much as their family. Using the internet may be a priority as they use the internet for work, for example, buying and selling on e-bay. If the computer is not used for work, it often has a role as a full-time hobby.
- 4.6 These parents often dominate the use of the internet and their children will often have to fight for access, unless there is a router in the home.
- 4.7 The largest group amongst parents who have chosen to have the internet at home are the **Advocates**. This group are made up of different types of parents, notably **Confident advocates** and **Fearful advocates**.
- 4.8 **Confident advocates** are confident users of technology and use the internet regularly. They use it in a variety of ways, ranging from supporting the running of the household - paying bills, online shopping - to supporting their interests downloading music, booking holidays, playing bingo. Usage in these households tends to be more balanced, when compared to households with a **Techspert** parent, with children using it as much as their parents.
- 4.9 **Fearful advocates** are generally not that comfortable with technology and they can be quite fearful of the internet. These parents are often under-confident in general and have much in common attitudinally with the Fearful typology that is identified within the parents who do not have access to the internet.
- 4.10 The **Fearful advocates** may have been motivated to get the internet based on their desire to give their children all the latest gadgets. These parents often give into pester power; they seem to be driven by guilt and a fear of letting their children down. As a result they will give in to most of their demands. These parents take pleasure from their children's skill on computers and the internet, even though it can leave them feeling quite alienated.

'Life is horrible. Jake lives on his Xbox live. We recently got a router so that the others can use the internet as he was monopolising it. We never go out as a family anymore.' (Mum, 'With' Sample, London)

- 4.11 Both types of **Advocates** will have had the internet for a while and will have chosen to get the internet primarily for their children's needs.
- 4.12 The key trigger for them getting a PC and the internet will have been the belief that they are essential for schoolwork. These parents fear that their children will be disadvantaged if they do not have it; that their



school work will not look as good without it and that they cannot gain access to research material.

'I got the computer 6 years ago as the boys (teens) needed it for their homework'. (Mum, 'With' Sample, London)

'At parent's evening the teachers made it really clear that they would benefit. I really don't want my kids to be disadvantaged.' (Dad, 'With' Sample, Glasgow')

'Schools just expect it.' (Dad, 'With' Sample, Glasgow)

'It helps to build their confidence and self-sufficiency, and this has a positive effect in all aspects of their life.' (Mum, 'With' Sample, Birmingham)

- 4.13 The **Recently converted** are much newer to the internet in general, and are going through a honeymoon period. It is like having a new toy in the house and they are very enthusiastic.
- 4.14 They are very conscious of the potential benefits for their children and can easily articulate these. Commonly they mention improvements in spelling, greater confidence and enjoyment of school. In the long term, they believe that it will support their children getting on at school and eventually lead to a good and well paid job.

'Kids are disadvantaged if they don't have it and are probably more likely to end up in dead end jobs.' (Mum, 'With' Sample, Birmingham)

'Schools just expect it.' (Dad, 'With' Sample, Glasgow)

'We have a penny jar that we fill up and this helps us to pay for it each month.' (Mum, 'With' Sample, Glasgow)

- 4.15 The **Recently converted** parents also enjoy exploring the internet for themselves. They are discovering that a whole new virtual world exists and are starting to use it for everything from booking holidays to buying seeds for their budgies! These parents are themselves learning new skills and, in some cases, use has whetted their appetite and they are enrolling on computer courses to gain further skills and confidence. They are enjoying and benefiting from a feeling of greater inclusion. Some mums who were thinking of going back to work had used the internet to find out about courses and possible job opportunities.

'It is like my best friend. I talk to him when I walk into the room. I love to play bingo on it. I had given up bingo because you can't smoke there anymore.' (Mum, 'With' Sample, Glasgow)



**In most cases, once the internet is in the home, it becomes an important and valued part of normal family life.**

- 4.16 It is important to note though that families with the internet do acknowledge there are downsides to having the internet, which are also referenced as fears by those that do not have it.
- 4.17 Having the internet, and particularly only one PC in the house, can create squabbles over access. Some houses have got a router and acquired another PC/laptop to get round this issue.
- 4.18 In some cases, the internet is used solely for gaming, e.g. Xbox live. Parents report that this can be addictive and may actually create diminished real interaction with friends and have a negative effect on school work.

'We can't get Jake off his Xbox. I saw a programme about addiction to this on Jeremy Kyle and am worried about it.' (Mum, 'With' Sample, London)

'I think it is not great for their health if they use it too much.' (Mum, 'With' Sample, Birmingham)

- 4.19 Parents in households without any rules and regulations over use, sometimes report that there has been increased fragmentation within their family. They have diminished interaction as a family and feel that they have lost their children to their rooms.
- 4.20 Parents and children are aware of the darker side of the internet. The major fears and concerns centre on children talking to paedophiles in chat rooms, and bank details being stolen when online purchases are made.
- 4.21 Most feel these issues can be managed. They will install security systems to protect the computer from viruses and bar children from sites that are inappropriate. They will talk of the importance of maintaining an open dialogue with their children so that they know what they are up to and can pick up on anything dangerous. They will also manage space by ensuring the PC is situated in a public space within the house, so that they can more easily keep an eye on use.
- 4.22 Technical hitches are also a cause for concern. This is particularly the case where parents are new to PCs and may still lack knowledge and confidence. They worry that viruses will cause their machines to stop working or that they will do something that will cause their computer to stop working. They fear that connections will become slow and there



may become a need to upgrade the machine. This is part of a general fear about hidden extras. They also fear invasive sites and pop-ups, especially where the children are younger.

**Despite the range of negative issues surrounding having the internet at home, all parents agree unanimously that the benefits outweigh the negatives.**



## Parents without internet access at home

**These parents do not seem significantly different from the other parents in the sample.**

- 5.1 They also have a wide range of technologies within the house, and their children will have a number of technological gadgets with their own TVs and DVD players in their bedrooms.
- 5.2 On balance, as families, some do seem to have slightly less up-to-date and smaller ranges of technological gadgets, compared to those families who have internet access.
- 5.3 This often reflects their attitude to money. They can have a more cautious and traditional attitude to money. They only buy things when they actually have the 'cash in their hand', unlike others who are more comfortable and familiar with living beyond their means on credit.

'We'll have to have at least £500 saved before we start fishing around for a PC and stuff.' (Mum, 'Without' Sample, Birmingham)

- 5.4 These parents may also be more controlling parents. That is, they determine the rules in the house according to their agenda and beliefs, and are less influenced by the demands of the children. As a result, such parents can find it easier to ignore the demands of their children for the internet.

'We've given it as an incentive for our children. If they do well, we've said we'll get you a PC. If you show us you're improving and you listen to your mummy and daddy and do your homework for 30 minutes a day.' (Mum, 'Without' Sample, Birmingham)

**Fear is often at the heart of these parents decision to not get internet access at home.**

- 5.5 This fear can take many different forms and manifest itself in different ways and intensities depending on the parent(s) and their family.



- 5.6 For some these fears are quite rational and concern money worries and fears for their children’s safety from predators on the internet.

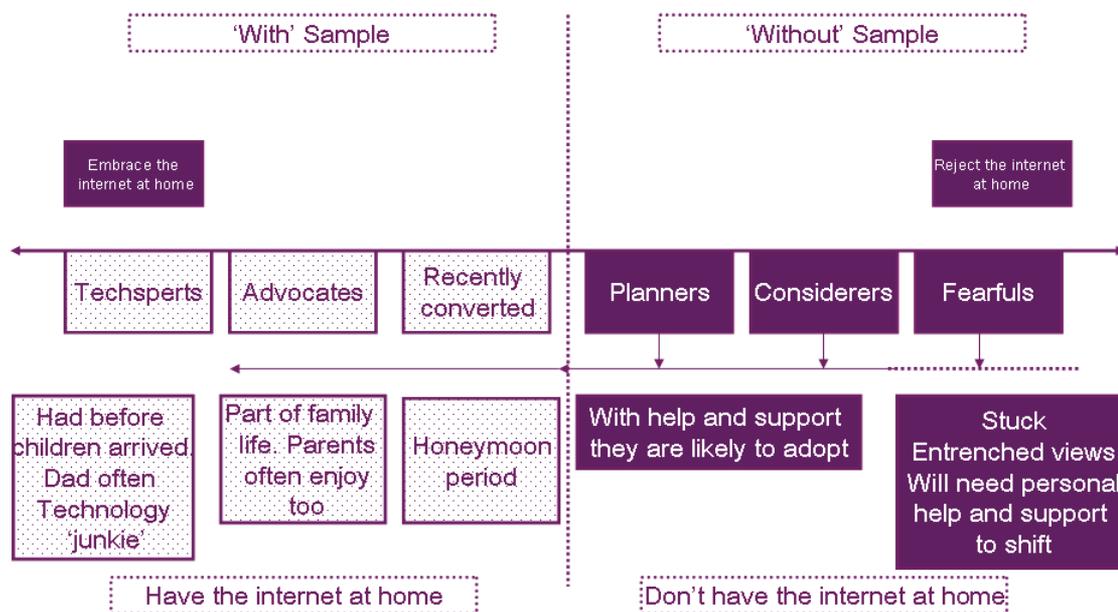
‘I would need a guarantee that me and my kids are safe before I get the internet.’ (Dad, ‘Without’ Sample, Birmingham)

‘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.’ (Dad, ‘Without’ Sample, and Glasgow)

- 5.7 Some parents however seem stifled by more emotional and deep-rooted fears about loss of control of their household and fears around exposing their perceived inadequacies as parents.

**There are a range of different parental attitudes, as represented by the ‘Without’ Sample in figure 2.**

**Figure 2 Typologies - parents without internet access**



- 5.8 The furthest away from getting internet access at home are the **Fearful** parents. Attitudinally they are very like the **Fearful Advocates**. The perceived repercussions of having the internet at home can expose parental fears and vulnerabilities. These parents can be so fearful that they cannot fully engage with the decision process in a conscious and considered way. They just block out the discussion and are adamant that it is not for them.

- 5.9 They are often extremely aware of their own ignorance regarding computers and the internet in general and tend to lack confidence.



'I just don't know anything about computers and the internet and I am not interested in finding out.' (Dad, 'Without' Sample, Birmingham)

'You would just spend hours telling them to get off it and then what would happen if I got a virus? I would just have to pay someone to mend it. It just cuts out all those problems if you don't have it.' (Mum, 'Without' Sample, London)

'I've never used one, how am I supposed to know what to do?' (Dad, 'Without' Sample, Glasgow)

- 5.10 These fears about the internet are not isolated; they are often in the context of more generalised anxiety about life and as their role as parents, they are often less confident and socially isolated. Their kids may be their lifeline and main allies and support - notably in the case of lone parent households they can fear that they will lose some of the closeness they have with their children if they get the internet. They fear that their kids will be on the internet all the time and so they will have less time for their parents. They worry that they will not be able to relate to them any more, due to lack of skills and knowledge.
- 5.11 However, these fears often seem to reflect a pattern that has already emerged within the household. In some cases the control that parent(s) have over the household is tenuous and so they are wary of introducing another source of influence that they do not understand themselves.
- 5.12 They often view the internet as something that will control them and are largely unaware of the potential positive benefits it may bring them.
- 5.13 They have a tendency to pick up on negative sensational headlines and stories in the press which feed their fears and reinforce their negative perceptions.

'I've read in the paper all those bad things that happen to kids by paedophiles.' (Dad, 'Without' Sample, Leicester)

'There's always stuff in the news that says how bad it is; I'm not convinced.' (Mum, 'Without' Sample, Newcastle)

- 5.14 **Fearful** parents can present themselves quite differently, and a key difference influencing this is gender.



- 5.15 **Fearful** dads will confidently express their views and will often present a front that makes their decision to not get the internet seem rational and consciously considered. They have a strong desire to remain in control of their household. It is important that they are seen to be doing the right thing by their children and so will state that a key reason for not wanting the internet is to protect their children from the dangers. They are defensive if they are made to feel that their children may be missing out. They can come across as dogmatic and certain.

‘All they would do is play games on it, if they need it for school work they can go to the library or use it at the local Youth Club.’ (Dad, ‘Without’ Glasgow)

‘They can get hold of disgusting pornography. I just don’t want to invite that into my home. It is filthy.’ (Dad, ‘Without’ Sample, Birmingham)

‘I don’t see why they can’t just use books for school, after all I did.’ (Dad, ‘Without’ Sample, Leicester)

‘If my kids need access to the internet, I just send them round to their uncles. They don’t seem to go that often, so I presume that they don’t really need it.’ (Dad, ‘Without’ Sample, Birmingham)

- 5.16 **Fearful** mums are often lone parents. They are much more overtly fearful, and unlike the fearful men who mask their fears with dominance, these households are often dominated by the children. Their children are more confident than them and often seek to protect their mum. They have low self esteem and may not have worked since their children were born. They are often self-deprecating of their abilities in general and in particular with regard to the computer.
- 5.17 These mums openly express the belief that they are letting their children down by not having internet access at home, but feel they do not have the energy or awareness of how to change this.

‘I’m worried about things and events you hear. Like children accessing the wrong stuff they shouldn’t. I just wouldn’t know how to stop it.’ (Mum, ‘Without’ Sample, Birmingham)

‘I’m afraid of machinery. I just think I’m going to break it.’ (Mum, ‘Without’ Sample, London)

‘I’m too scared to even go out and find out about it. I wouldn’t even know where to start.’ (Mum, ‘Without’ Sample London)

‘I feel like I am letting my kids down, in so many ways. I can’t go on a bus on my own because I am too afraid.’ (Mum, ‘Without’ Sample, London)



- 5.18 The next group are the **Considerers**, they are more able to actively engage with the issue of having the internet, but they still have emotional and rational barriers to resolve.
- 5.19 **Considerers** can be parents with primary aged children, who are working towards getting the internet when their children reach secondary age.
- 5.20 Financial outlay is often a considerable barrier to getting access, in particular the initial outlay where they do not have a computer or any other hardware.
- 5.21 A number of factors seem to encourage their greater openness to the issue of getting the internet versus the **Fearfuls**. Firstly, they may have been pushed into facing the issue by the increasing pressure from their children as they reach secondary age. Also at this point there seems to be much more of a tangible need and pressure from schools. Secondly, they may also be more receptive as they have gained a little more knowledge about computers and the internet themselves and so are not as under confident.
- 5.22 Considerers are still working through some of their fears, but there is a sense that they have started on the road to getting the internet in the future.
- 5.23 Even closer to getting the internet are the **Planners**. They are on the verge of getting the internet and the only real barrier left is the financial challenge of getting enough money together. Like the **Considerers** they have often been prompted to deal with their emotional fears, through the increasing need to get a PC and the internet, as their child reaches secondary age. Often they will have actively researched hardware issues and different broadband packages. They may have talked to friends, paid more attention to advertisements regarding prices, and have got a ball park figure of the kind of financial outlay that is needed.
- 5.24 Like the **Considerers**, the **Planners** may have become more interested in computers and the internet themselves and may be enrolling or taking part in a computer course.

'I do feel guilty that they are missing out.' (Mum, 'Without' Sample, Glasgow)

'Internet kids are probably more impressive.' (Dad, 'Without' Sample, Birmingham)



‘It’s the way forward. We are going to find a way to afford it; otherwise I fear that my kids will be at a disadvantage.’ (Dad, ‘Without’ Sample, Glasgow)

‘I am curious about the internet for me too. I would love to go back to work, but I don’t know where to start. I reckon that going on the internet could help. My friends also book holidays, arrange to go to concerts. I think I could get addicted to it quite quickly’. (Mum, ‘Without’ Sample, Glasgow)

- 5.25 Both **Planners** and **Considerers** are more able to articulate the benefits of having the internet versus the **Fearfuls**.

‘I can see that playing games can help to build their confidence.’ (Dad, ‘Without’ Sample, Birmingham)

‘It’s a priority for us, especially for secondary school. He’ll need it then for his homework.’ (Mum, ‘Without’ Sample, London)

**There seems to be a real opportunity to support parents in getting the internet. The nature of the support will need to vary according to the type of parent.**

- 5.26 All types of parent will benefit from practical advice on finances. For the **Planners** though, this seems to be the sole need. Sometimes the figures that parents hold in their minds are unrealistic. There is potential to communicate more clearly what is the true cost by helping them to calculate what equipment and broadband capacity they really need for their families’ requirements.
- 5.27 **Considerers** need more information about the benefits of having the internet, both for themselves and for their children’s education. They also need some reassurance that once they have the internet the cost will not escalate.
- 5.28 **Fearfuls**, especially mums, may need a more holistic support system, since their insecurities and hesitations around the internet are just part of their more generalised anxiety. They are often quite distant from many norms in society.
- 5.29 The **Fearfuls** would also seem to benefit from education. For example, ICT education that allows them to ask, without shame, the real basics and can challenge some of their anxieties about fraud and internet safety.



- 5.30 For the **Fearful men**, communication about the tangible benefits for themselves and their children could begin to enable some greater openness. They seem to have closed their senses to positive information around the internet and so it would be helpful to try and present them with a more balanced view of the internet's impact on their lives.



## Children and the internet

**All of the children, with and without internet at home are keen to have access to the facility at home.**

'If we stopped having the internet, I would just scream at my mum and dad until we got it back.' (Girl, 'With' Sample, Glasgow)

- 6.1 There are a host of benefits. From the child's perspective the most important benefits seem to help them to fit in with their peer group.
- 6.2 From about the age of ten years, the social benefits provided by internet access, feel like a need rather than a want. MSN is the most significant benefit for many. The children themselves will reference the need to keep up with peers. Conversations carry on after school, often in to the early hours of the next morning, and so it is really important to be in the loop.
- 6.3 Even those children who are not in the 'in crowd' can get a look in, as their personalities can shine through in the more impersonal communication over the internet. MSN is also beneficial as it teaches them to communicate and express themselves in the written form.

'You can chat to people you'd never usually chat to at school. It's just easier.' (Girl, 13, Sample A, London)

'My mum always bans me from MSN. It's a nightmare, so annoying.' (Girl, 13, Sample A, London)

'I like it and I can be really creative on the internet. I make loads of Pizco sites just because I like making them.' (Boy, 11, 'With' Sample, Glasgow)

- 6.4 Personal web-pages can be important too, as they can help to create and develop a social identity, which is particularly important for teenagers. That said this seems to be more of a short phase than a continued social forum in the way that MSN is. Web-pages on sites like Myspace.com are also a way of 'flirting' with the opposite sex and making your mark on the world.
- 6.5 Although the benefits can be less obvious for primary aged kids, having the internet at home earlier in their lives seems to enable them to consolidate basic skills and build confidence and speed.



- 6.6 From aged ten years, there is a real pressure from schools to use the internet for research and help produce school work. It is reported that many teachers set homework requiring extensive use of the internet, assuming that children have access at home. Children believe that having the internet can enable the individual to achieve a higher quality of presentation and content.

'I've got to get it for senior school. My cousin has it; you have to in Year 7.' (Boy 9, 'Without' Sample, London)

- 6.7 On the most fundamental level, not having access to the internet at home can leave children feeling that they are disadvantaged. This feeling seems to reside in their self-perceptions and does not seem to be the focus of bullying. It is perhaps for these children just another way in which they can feel left out and inferior.

'I get to use it a lot at the library and the community centre, but I can't use it all the time, just when I like. I would say that my friends are able to do better school work because they have it at home. They are more confident with using the computer too.' (Girl, 11, 'Without' Sample, Glasgow)

'I think I miss out when it comes to Geography and History as you can get info and great pictures using the internet.' (Girl, 13, 'Without' Sample, London)

'I want to be an actor so I should be putting my stuff on youtube, I could get spotted. But we don't have it so I'm stuffed.' (Boy, 14, 'Without' Sample, London)

### **The internet affects children differently, but for some there are real educational benefits.**

- 6.8 For some who are less engaged by learning, computers and having easy access to the internet can help to re-engage them. It helps make learning feel more interactive and participatory and for children that are switched off by a more traditional didactic style, this can be hugely influential in regaining their interest. Simply by spending time on the internet and using the computer, these children can also be exposed to informal learning; these children pick up skills and knowledge simply via repeated use.

'You can revise more easily as it makes it more fun than books.' (Girl, 13, 'With Sample', London)

'You can get better knowledge in your head, when you use the internet for school work.' (Girl, 11, 'Without' Sample, London)



- 6.9 Children tend to cite the same disadvantages that were listed in Section 3 on parents with the internet. Children can unquestioningly absorb their parent's attitudes and fears, especially at primary school age.

'It can make you lazy and not go to the library.' (Boy 8, 'With Sample', Birmingham)

'If you use the internet too much you can get blinded.' (Boy, 'With Sample', Birmingham)

### **The impact of not having internet access at home on children**

- 6.10 Although there are broad themes of general impact of the internet on children, in reality the effect depends on the type of child. Some children are more able to adopt coping strategies than others.
- 6.11 The effect of the internet on these types of children is particularly powerful when they reach secondary age. For primary aged children, having a computer and the enhanced opportunities that having the internet brings, has more generic benefits. It helps develop a skill base and confidence that can help progress and initiative when older.
- 6.12 For secondary aged children, the type of child is more significant in determining the impact of having the internet.
- 6.13 There are four broad types of children that this research identified<sup>5</sup>. All have different ways of interacting in the world, and have different positions to maintain and consolidate. Having access to the internet can detrimentally affect some of these more than others. These categories are usually established by the time a child leaves primary school, at the age of eleven.

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<sup>5</sup> This research was conducted by an agency which specialises in research amongst children and teenagers. The children's typologies which are referred to in this report are based on the discussions with the children and teenagers in this research, but they also concur with other research conducted with children and teenagers by the agency.



**Table 1**

<b>Specialist</b>	<b>Leaders</b>	<b>Followers</b>	<b>Outsiders</b>
Technology and the internet is a hobby	Loves the internet for socialising and keeping in the know	Likes to keep up and in with their peer set	Only have a few friends
Intense gamers	A tool to keep them in the leader position	Social aspect of the internet is crucial to their lives	Can struggle to be accepted and included by larger peer groups
Less interested in social aspect of the web			The internet allows them to feel more included and part of broader social networks

**The ability of the individual child to adopt coping strategies is of paramount importance in determining the effect of having or not having the internet at home. Some types are more affected than others.**

6.14 **Specialists** can be affected detrimentally by not having access to the internet. They are interested in computers and the web, but through not having the internet at home, they are thwarted from pursuing their passion to the extent that they would like. They will happily pursue other technology interests at home, especially games consoles. They are able to exercise some control over their ability to use the internet by using the library and school facilities as much as possible. However there is not always availability and this is not such a conducive atmosphere for long stays compared to working at home. They can feel that their skills are less developed and they are unable to keep up with their peers. They would love to work with computers but are afraid that lack of practice may hinder them.

6.15 **Leaders** are popular and confident children, who are usually teens or tweens. Where they do not have the internet they are able to retain their social position by trading on other skills for example, clothes, music and gossip. This group are fortunate in that they tend to have the ingenuity to adopt highly effective coping strategies. For example, they may use their PSP to gain access to the internet via wireless cafes, or use it around their friends' houses. As a result, they gain access to the internet easily via other means and are minimally affected. To some extent there even seems to be advantages to their not having access, as it encourages the development of other important life skills. For example, they develop ingenuity, self-motivation, as well as the enhanced ability to understand people and to use manipulation!



- 6.16 **Followers** are the most common group and this group can be disadvantaged by not having the internet at home. It is hugely important to this group to fit in. They want to know the buzz words and relevant information.
- 6.17 On an emotional level feeling excluded by not having the internet can feel isolating, especially at senior school, where the majority of their mates will have access. Having more limited access to the internet can reduce their exposure to gossip via MSN and limits access to social information via Myspace, as well as their exposure to music and other important cultural references. They have coping strategies and can find ways to gain access via close friends, libraries, and grandparents. However they are not as resilient and confident as **Leaders**.
- 6.18 **Outsiders** are often the most socially and economically disadvantaged group of all children. Whilst they may have a few close friends they often struggle to 'fit in' with the majority of children at school and this can make them a target for bullies. These children are often picked on for being outside the accepted norms of the playground; this sense of alienation from their peers is often because their parents cannot afford the 'latest.' Key items which can help support acceptance and inclusion include clothing and trainer brands, the latest mobile phone models and other electronic gadgets. Regular access to MSN and social networking sites is another way that young people can build confidence and status within peer groups.
- 6.19 Young people who fall into the **outsiders** typology and do not have internet access at home do not exercise coping strategies as effectively as some of their contemporaries and can therefore lose even further touch with their peers' agendas. Not having internet access at home compounds their isolation, whereas having access as discussed earlier can help them to feel slightly more included if they choose to use the facility in a social way.

**Overall having access to the internet at home can offer real social benefits to these children and young people. It allows them to maintain and enhance their social status and to assert their identity.**

- 6.20 The effect of the internet on school work, although of paramount importance to parents, seems less top of mind for children. They often use school work as a hook to try and persuade their parents to get the internet but it is not generally central to their agenda. However as discussed in points 6.2 to 6.5 it can be beneficial.
- 6.21 The precise way in which internet access affects performance in school work again varies. Some children who are disengaged by school work can become more engaged with the internet. Some who are already interested can use the internet to further their interest and do research



more easily and in greater depth. Some are disengaged and remain disengaged. They tend to solely use the internet for MSN and games and may often lose interest per se quite soon after getting a PC and the internet.

- 6.22 It is difficult for children to imagine the effect of their exposure to the internet on their futures. Children are much more interested in the 'here and now' than in the future. For all children the concept of a job or career is a long way off, especially younger children who are focussed on the next day or week. Conceptually it is difficult for them to think in a long term way. Teenagers are beginning to consider the next few years ahead but they would rather avoid it.
- 6.23 However, on a conceptual level all ages imagine that not having access to the internet may rule them out from working with computers and jobs which rely heavily on technology. They are not sure how exactly but there is an underlying feeling that without internet access they would remain less skilled and able.
- 6.24 Tweens and teens are more able to comprehend the impact on their futures when they are prompted to think about it. Their concerns tend to focus on their social status, their computer based skills and access to specific careers. Specifically they believe:
- They may be less confident, have fewer friends and less of a support system.
  - They may lack specific computer based skills, speed, confidence and knowledge of specific packages.
  - They would be less likely to get a computer/internet related job, compared to their friends who have access at home.
  - They may not be able to appreciate the variety of career choices available to them, as they cannot access information sites at their leisure.



# Glossary

## **MSN**

MSN (Microsoft Network) Messenger is a piece of software which allows users to have online conversations with one or more other people by typing into their computer.

## **Playstation, PSP, PS2, Nintendo DS, Xbox live**

Computer games consoles, some of which have internet access so that games can be played with others online.

## **MP3, Ipod**

A portable digital audio player which stores music and other media downloaded from a computer onto a built-in hard drive. Ipod is a brand name for the Apple MP3 player, which is fast becoming a generic term.

## **Router**

A piece of hardware that allows more than one computer in a household to connect to the internet.

## **Myspace.com, pisco, youtube**

Websites which allow users to upload pictures, text and videos. These can either be for public viewing or restricted to the owners social circle.

## **Tweens**

Children aged 11-12.

## **Multichannel TV**

Receipt of television services of more than the main five channels (BBC1, BBC2, ITV1, Channel 4/S4C, Five).