

Making an imPACT with digital skills support

Throughout December 2020, we encouraged people to support others to use digital technology to get – and stay – connected in our [Connect@Xmas campaign](#).

From virtual reality to voice notes, Facebook communities to grief support on Zoom, the inspiring stories we heard showed the magic of helping others get and stay connected in simple and clever ways.



One group that got involved with our campaign was [Parents and Communities Together \(PACT\)](#). PACT is a community-led social support project in Southwark south London, Leeds and Tyneside that empowers parents and improves the health and development outcomes for young children.

We chatted with one of the team, Ellie Demetri, to find out how they support families with digital skills and how they helped them connect over Christmas and beyond.

What areas of digital support do you provide?

“We provide a range of online support depending on the needs of the parents. These can include filling in forms, accessing services (education, immigration, Universal Credit). We regularly share free online courses and support parents with enrolling and participating in this either via Zoom or other tools. Online safety is an area we've focused on as people are a little uncertain about this and it can put them off from other internet activities such as online shopping, for example.

“We encourage the use of reputable sites for news and updates (especially surrounding the pandemic) and give tips on how to spot 'fake news'. With the massive push online, including home schooling we are also encouraging more reflection on our parents' 'digital wellbeing', so that they can create healthy habits online for both themselves and their children.”

What challenges do your families face in getting online?

“The first barrier can be a lack of internet access. Many families we work with previously relied on libraries (or restaurants like McDonalds that have free WiFi), for both internet access and also with digital support. With some funding we were able to support some families with data broadband as well as devices like tablets for those without them.

“Some families we work with are in temporary housing or low-income, so affording a decent data or broadband plan is not an option for them as it is not their priority. In terms of navigating online, many parents are not sure where to start. They ‘don’t know, what they don’t know’. They are perhaps used to a few apps or programmes, but are not fully aware of the potential that is out there.

“In some cases, there is almost too much information, or resources, so we try and share tips and sites that we think are most relevant. [Like this article I wrote here](#). Language has been a barrier as well, so we have encouraged the use of translation tools online. I think also, as a parent, finding the time to learn these skills in a flexible way within our current context is an entire challenge in itself, which is why we give our support individually at times that work for our families.

Have you been able to move your support online during COVID? If so, how have you done it?

“We traditionally run face-to-face groups for PACT parents and volunteers and these moved online to Zoom because of the pandemic. This is what initiated our entire digital inclusion project, as it became so apparent how many families in our community were unable to stay connected with us during lockdown.

“We have encouraged parents to join the groups, as well as lead them for example in our ‘Mums Takeover’ session or sharing recipes during our family food clubs. I think it can still be challenging, especially if your child is fidgety and does not want to sit in front of a screen, but it allows parents to grow, stay connected and share their experiences and support.

Your [Connect@Xmas](#) tips about voice notes and screen recording were so helpful. Do you have any others?

“Yes, voice notes and video tips made by us for parents are the most accessible for our community. We also have some amazing Digital Champion volunteers who are PACT parents themselves. We regularly reflect on what is working in terms of support, and how best to support parents in our community.

“In terms of ‘you don’t know, what you don’t know’ – giving some options of the support available can be helpful as well. For example, instead of asking an open question like ‘Do you need digital support’ when they answer ‘NO’ and that’s the end of it, we can ask ‘do you need help with video calls, e-mails, forms, social media etc’.

“Most importantly, we LISTEN to our families, and we co-produce our support with them. There are plenty of ‘zoom guides’ online, in different languages, but our families might not have time for that. Instead a screen recording showing you how to do it, or a video explainer by a friendly PACT parent or member of staff in easy accessible language works better. Moreover, our conversations with families about digital skills can often lead to a better understanding of other challenges they may face, for example food insecurity, and how we can best support or signpost them following this.”

How PACT makes a difference

“Omoyosola Adenuga is one of our amazing parent leaders and digital volunteers. She supports fellow parents in our community to get online and stay connected by providing one-to-one support, including setting up the devices we have provided. Omoyosola has been a parent at our groups for over a year.

Originally based in South-East London she was moved away from her friends and social network and could no longer access the internet at her local library due to the pandemic. She really struggled in lockdown, and after receiving help from us she was able to join PACT’s Zoom groups and subsequently volunteered her time to help other parents get online.

“Omoyosola has been an inspiration to many in our community. Her support has not only facilitated the communities work to tackle digital exclusion but has also ensured that the families in need of the most support are visible and included. While navigating her own daily struggles throughout this pandemic her support has improved peoples’ wellbeing and sense of belonging and increased our families’ online skills. She has been a great role model, helping to empower parents and show that they can lead and help others. In fact, she recently won an award in recognition of this from Nationbuilder called the ‘Everyday Hero’ award.”

Digital skills resources and stories

The [Connect@Xmas website](#) is still live and you can access – and share – the resources and courses on it.

For more stories and top tips like these from Ellie, sign up to our monthly newsletter [here](#).

