

Engaging with Families

North West centres attract parents and kids

Nearly three in five households in the North West (57 per cent) don't have internet access, according to the National Office of Statistics, which places the region significantly behind the national average of homes online. April 2003 figures revealed that 9 per cent of those without access to the web cite a lack of time as the primary cause.

Against this backdrop, four UK online centres in Manchester recently took part in a pilot scheme designed to attract parents online while removing the constraints placed upon time by the demands of family. The pilot was co-ordinated by the Manchester Adult Education Service and focused on running specific events for children while introducing their parents to [NHS Direct](#) and [The Parent Centre](#).

Gorton South UK online centre, which is based in one of the most deprived wards in Manchester, has over 160 registered users from the Williams Sutton Estate, one third of which are single mothers. The centre has a built in crèche, designed to coax young parents into developing ICT skills while their children are occupied by separate activities. This made Gorton South an appropriate choice for a pilot scheme examining how UK online centres could promote family friendly e-learning.

While participating centres promoted the pilot through leafletting at community and health centres and brochures given to schoolchildren to take home for their parents, at Gorton South existing links with relevant community groups were exploited to good effect.

Project Co-ordinator Jim Pike commented: "We have good links with the Williams Sutton Mums & Toddlers Group, which meets regularly to discuss activities and encouraged its members to attend the pilot."

"Additionally, the government programme Sure Start arranged for people in East Manchester who weren't aware of our centre to come along, while Sutton Trust had a community worker on the ground who leafleted the estate."

The pilot itself ran on Saturday afternoons, and involved a number of special activities for children, including face painting and role playing games. Children who were leafleted were then able to apply pester power and encourage their parents to attend. Additionally, aromatherapy and massage classes were arranged to give parents a break from ICT activities.

Jim Pike said: "Our crèche facility is a great resource for these sorts of events, as we are able to provide a separate space for kids where our staff and volunteers can keep them entertained."

“It is important to be flexible though, as some parents are understandably keen to keep a beady eye on their children. In this case, our staff were happy to show the children how to use the [Children’s BBC website](#), which meant they could engage in fun e-learning while remaining close to their parents.”

Staff at the centres encouraged the parents to explore the [NHS Direct](#) and Parent Centre websites by preparing quiz questions relating to information online, which were given to parents to fill in. For example, some questions asked the parents to find their local pharmacy by searching on [NHS Direct](#) or to answer questions about children of different ages by referring to [the Parent Centre](#) website.

Manchester Adult Education Co-ordinator Jane Placker commented: “Our users found this quite enjoyable, as it enabled them to learn practical knowledge on issues of everyday concern, while understanding the basics of internet use.”

“A number of the parents mentioned that they hadn’t realised how much information was available online. The [NHS Direct](#) site, for example, helped them to find out details of prescriptions and self-treatments without needing to visit a doctor, safe in the knowledge that their children were being looked after.”

A key aim of the pilot was to make parents aware of further learning opportunities, and parents that attended the special events were provided with details of other courses. Gorton South subsequently recruited four users for a series of CLAIT sessions, while the Benchill Community Centre in Wythenshawe has attracted several new users for IT & Numeracy and ESOL (English for Speaker of Other Languages) qualifications.

Benchill Community Centre Team Leader Lin Eden said: “The pilot was an effective way to gain contact with local families that wouldn’t normally set foot in a UK online centre.”

“Many of the parents have bad memories of school, but the combination of peer power from children and practical benefits on offer has meant we have retained some users for further learning.”

The pilot events themselves were well populated, with up to 40 parents (predominantly mothers) attending each centre. Of these, approximately 80 per cent were new to UK online centres. It is currently unclear what proportion of the parents who attended the pilot will go on to further learning, but the outreach workers are sending mail shots to the parents of new courses that are planned for September.

Jane Placker said: “In September we’re setting up a ‘Log on to Numeracy’ course at the school next door to the Benchill Centre and our team is hoping to run some family e-learning and ESOL courses at the same time.

“We’ll only really know in September just how many parents have been attracted back into education.”