

Media Release



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DIGITAL INCLUSION IS MORE THAN JUST HAVING A COMPUTER: AFFORDABILITY, ACCESS AND DIGITAL SKILLS ARE VITAL TO BRIDGE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Affordability is one of the biggest barriers to digital inclusion, with one in two families surveyed by The Smith Family saying their children could miss out on the digital devices needed for their schoolwork because they won't be able to afford them.

The Smith Family's annual Family Pulse Survey (which looks at parents' issues and concerns relating to their children's education) revealed 51.6% of families taking part in The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* education support program, thought their children were likely to miss out on the digital devices needed for their schoolwork.

A laptop, reliable internet access and digital skills are now a vital part of all student's education, but cost-of-living pressures mean families experiencing disadvantage cannot afford the digital devices and technical support their children need to keep up and thrive at school.

The Smith Family's findings add to growing evidence that shows those experiencing disadvantage are falling further behind their peers, despite efforts to close the digital divide.

The latest [Australian Digital Inclusion Index](#), released last month, found the digital divide between those in the highest 20% of household income and the lowest 20% increased from 26.5 points in 2021 to 28.8 points in 2023. The gap between those who did not complete secondary school and those who have achieved a bachelor's degree was 23.6 points, with scores of 56.3 and 79.9, respectively.

The Smith Family's Head of Policy and Programs, Wendy Field, said the findings highlight the need for a national strategy to ensure all children have access to digital learning essentials so they can make the most of their education.

"Digital inclusion is one of the biggest educational challenges facing children in low-income households and as families struggle to meet the skyrocketing costs of food, petrol and housing, it is becoming even harder to afford the devices and home internet children need for learning," she said.

"We are seeing gaps in digital competency between children and young people from low socio-economic backgrounds and their more advantaged peers. The risk is that as this digital divide rolls on, young people experiencing disadvantage are less ready to take on opportunities of an increasingly digitised world, and less likely to enter the jobs of the future," she added.

New research from The Smith Family also shows parents lack confidence to help their children navigate the digital world, which is contributing to the digital divide.

An in-depth consultation of 40 parents and carers who have children participating in *Learning for Life*, found that caregivers want to support their children in the online world as much as they do offline. But their confidence is undermined by a lack of visibility and understanding of the online world and what their children are doing while using digital devices.

Ms Field said helping parents build confidence is a key factor in bridging the digital divide, given the important role they play in supporting their children to navigate the online world safely.

“Providing families with devices and internet access is vital, but only one part of the challenge of bridging the digital divide. Families having relevant and timely knowledge and technical skills is vital, too,” she added.

To help address the issue, The Smith Family has launched an expansion of its *Digital Learning Essentials* program. The program aims to raise funds to provide each student with a laptop, reliable internet, digital skills and tech support to ensure young people and their families feel confident navigating the online world and that all students on The Smith Family’s *Learning for Life* program are digitally included by 2027.

Thanks to the support of generous donors, more than 2,600 students have already been equipped with a laptop and technical support. Through the expanded *Digital Learning Essentials* program, a further 3,500 students will be supported with a laptop, reliable internet and technical support over the coming twelve months.

From families that have already received *Digital Learning Essentials*, the education charity has seen improved outcomes.

- **97%** of parents reported having a laptop and internet helped their children's education.
- **81%** of parents said their children's ability to undertake schoolwork increased.
- **80%** of parents observed their children's skills in using a computer increased.

Ms Field said that while a digital device and internet access are now a fundamental part of every child’s schooling, they aren’t accessible to all families. Helping equip students with the digital essentials they need to learn is a key factor to bridging the digital divide.

Donating to The Smith Family’s *Digital Learning Essentials* program means a child experiencing disadvantage can keep up at school and be ready for the workforce of the future.

To find out more about the *Digital Learning Essential* program visit thesmithfamily.com.au/digital-learning-essentials.

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The Smith Family is a children’s education charity that helps young Australians experiencing disadvantage to create better futures for themselves through harnessing the power of education.
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