

Ethnographic Social Research

Just Coping Families: Uses of technology



Executive Summary

Families in the UK living on low incomes can face a struggle particularly when combined with other factors such as unemployment, disability or ill health. If a family is 'Just Coping' and struggling to maintain this status quo, then they fall beyond the radar of organised support. Families are complex structures and aiding their self-sufficiency through indirect channels can be vital to ensure that the situation improves. Deterioration has implications not only for the family but also the subsequent cost to the state, one form of which is Child Poverty seen as prevalent in this group.

The families within this grouping are looking for assistance to sustain themselves, as well

as employment and education opportunities. It is widely acknowledged that ICT can assist this and provide more access to information and support. The issues arise around how these Just Coping Families can benefit from this if they find themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide.

The Research Report

Aim

The purpose of the Report, first published in July 2009, is to provide an insight into the lives of the families who are beyond the immediate reach of the state due to their status of 'Just Coping' as opposed to failing. It aims to introduce some of the realities faced by this group and focuses particularly on their attitude to and usage of technology.

Methodology

The research methodology for this Report was based around ethnographic and focus group research in two projects that were undertaken directly with Just Coping Families. The research looked to highlight common themes amongst these cases and also explore specific details on the technological issues that they encountered.

The Report defines Just Coping Families not as those defined as 'At Risk' in other policy initiatives but as those who are one misfortune away from becoming so. The Research uses the definition of a household income at 60% less than the UK median where one or both parents are out of work, but it is recognised that these families are likely to be facing numerous other interrelated problems.

Highlights of Findings

Social Barriers

- Scarce resources, particularly financial, create and maintain numerous problems causing a time-consuming focus on basic activities and necessities
- The Research shows how the Just Coping Families have great aspirations for improvement and fight to ensure that they were not seen as 'charity cases' to the extent of hiding their status from wider society
- Social networks are limited often leaving parents in Just Coping Families feeling isolated

ICT

- A range of technologies was being used by this Group and the Research finds four thematic categories to classify the attitude of different members
- The potential advantages of ICT were widely acknowledged but the cost of access was a major restriction and internet access clearly divided the respondents
- Mobile Phones were the most widely used tool driven by the ability to manage costs and flexibility
- Time consuming use of public-access ICT and a fear of embarrassment while already feeling left behind in terms of knowledge hinder further take up

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The full Report provides detailed findings from the direct family studies on the everyday problems faced and attitudes to technology. The Research manages to identify some significant similarities across Just Coping Families and their approach to ICT while clearly showing where improvements in this area need to be made. The Report uses a number of Case Studies to highlight projects that are successfully using technology to overcome some of the barriers faced by this group of people.

The full document is available on
www.esd-toolkit.org.uk



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