



# Parents and Communities Together (PACT) Digital Inclusion Project



*“So interesting that a crisis where we are all shut away, has managed to expose so much”* - Layla Merloo, PACT Community Organiser

PACT has and continues to engage in a ‘Listening Campaign’ with our community. This campaign collects insights into families’ situations through one-to-one telephone calls carried out by our team of ‘Action Researchers’. Action Researchers are trained members of our community that have used a prepared questionnaire to guide their conversations. The case studies shared here are from follow-up conversations and to respect the privacy of the families that have participated in interviews, we have changed their names.

**This report was created in conversation with our community**

## Section 1: Case Studies

### OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO INDEPENDENCE

Bunmi, mother of two children, 8 years old and 5 years old. She received mobile wi-fi and a chromebook through PACT.

*“My aim is to learn, so I can improve my rights and support my children. If I gain my independence I will be as happy as a new-born baby” - Bunmi*

Bunmi heard about PACT through word of mouth and became a regular attending Mum’s groups such as the weekly Family Food Club, where parents lead cooking sessions sharing healthy recipes and eating together with other families in the community. With the introduction of lockdown, these face-to-face group activities were moved online, and Bunmi was no longer able to access this support during this isolated period.

### Improving language skills and engaging in adult education

Education is a priority for Bunmi. She knows that in order to help her children she also needs to help herself by improving her education. At times she feels insecure about her English skills, scared to make mistakes when she talks or writes something in case it is incorrect. There are online English courses available, but Bunmi did not have a computer or wi-fi to get involved.

*“I know I don’t have the privilege that others do which is why I want to improve my language skills, then I can work and earn money” - Bunmi*

Her phone was borrowed from a friend, who topped it up with credit. This allowed her to keep in touch with friends and the PACT network through calls and text messages, but the credit was low and data was very limited. The media has focused on the impact that covid-19 has had on education but mostly for school children and universities. However, there is a whole spectrum of adult educational needs that have been overlooked, and have not been compensated or supported in the same ways that some school students have. Not to mention, the level of literacy that is required of parents when homeschooling their children or using the online resources provided by schools.

*“I want to study child care so I can support my child who has special needs”. - Bunmi*

### Ensuring children can participate in education online

Before lockdown, Bunmi could only get online in her local library and needed help from the support staff to fill in forms, while she had an email address she was not sure how to use it properly. Her two children, one who has special needs, suddenly needed to get online to do their homework. Without the right technology or experience she inevitably felt very distressed with this change.

*“For a couple of months I was unhappy, I was crying, I just did not know how to help my children”. - Bunmi*

This feeling of guilt was something experienced by many of the mothers in our community, being expected to take on teaching responsibilities online with little external support. No one wants their kids to fall behind.

### **Build confidence through training and leadership**

Bunmi’s kids are her priority, and now she has a chromebook and mobile wi-fi provided by PACT, she is feeling significantly better. Her daughter is good with computers and Bunmi is also receiving support from PACT’s recruited Digital Champion Volunteer, Tim.

*“Tim is great, we speak on the phone and through texts, I am interested and I want to learn seriously”. -Bunmi*

Tim is an IT specialist, already had a relationship with PACT and has volunteered some of his time to offer one-to-one support to Bunmi. PACT is recruiting a number of digital volunteers, referred to as “Digital Champions”, both from within and outside of the community, and hopes that the future of Digital Champions will be parent-led. Being parent-led brings various advantages: it allows members of the community to actively participate in the change that affects them most, it gives them the opportunity to show leadership, feel empowered for building up their community as well as use their language capabilities. For now, the need is quite urgent, and volunteers can provide much needed support to get parents set up with their devices and familiarise them with the basics and essentials for their current situation. Bunmi will need a significant amount of support, and she is keen to get going with it.

*“I’m so grateful for PACT for making such a great impact on my life”. - Bunmi*

### **EMPOWERING PARENTS THROUGH PARTICIPATION, LEADERSHIP AND CONNECTION**

Sade is a mother of one 10 month old child. She received wi-fi from PACT and will be a future Digital Champion volunteer.

### **Being in the know and the ability to make well-informed decisions**

Originally based in South-East London, Sade was moved North of the river, further away from her friends and support network. During the pandemic she did not have access to the internet.

*“This makes you feel depressed in total lockdown, no internet, no TV and no radio.” - Sade*

Previously, Sade, like Bunmi and many others, would go to the library or McDonalds to get online, without that option during lockdown she was not able to access government support.

Being in the know about Coronavirus was very important to Sade. Now she has received her mobile broadband from PACT, she can get online and check the news and the progress of the pandemic. Feeling well-informed about the current situation, means you can feel confident about the sort of activities you engage in, based on government guidelines and accurate statistics. Moreover, parents can be more informed about their rights, such as the ability to get free school meals, or support for shielding parents. We found some inaccurate or misleading news and advice circulating the community about coronavirus. When misinformation is shared within communities it can result in external effects such as inability to access services because you are not leaving the house, as well as internal affects, such as impacting mental health and causing anxiety and stress. Much of this information has been circulated through text messages and forwarded whatsapp messages or images.

While having access to the news is important, it is equally important that we know how to find reliable sources. When we set up the devices, we downloaded a selection of apps including the NHS app and BBC News. PACT has also arranged a health visitor to give advice to parents during the Covid-19 pandemic over Zoom. In response to a significant number of parents not leaving their homes because they were worried about their children’s safety, PACT creates this blog: [Going out with your baby or young child during the corona crisis](#). Responses from families were collected by our team of Action Researchers, trained members of our community that made phone calls to families using a prepared questionnaire.

*“I spoke with a parent that was too scared to take her child outside because she thought the virus was just everywhere, floating in the air. This is what led to creating the video. There is a lot of misinformation, and it’s especially hard for those with language barriers to recognise what is true and what is not” - Antonia, PACT Action Researcher*

The next step will be supporting families in discerning fake from reliable news, and giving them the tools they need to do this, this would be more of a long term project.

Sade previously felt like she was unable to give her child what she needed, and that it was beyond her control. Now, she is able to use the abundance of resources available online.

*“Before, I felt like I was denying my daughter basic things, now I can play nursery rhymes and dance with my daughter. It’s her first birthday this week and I’ve been on youtube finding activities and making things for the celebration.” - Sade*

Moreover, she has voluntarily offered her time to support other parents by giving digital support in the future. Creating ‘parent-leaders’ is central to PACT’s ethos, being a project that is run *by* parents *for* parents. Most community centres or projects will provide support or a service *to* parents, whereas PACT aims to work *with* them. This is why training parents and working with them to support other parents online is essential to making positive and participatory change within the PACT community and beyond.

*“We want to empower our communities, and while this way takes longer and is harder work, it is more authentic. Our idea of success is that you walk into a group and you can’t tell who runs it!” - Kate, PACT Parent Organiser and Programme Lead*

### **GIVING FAMILIES THE OPPORTUNITY TO THRIVE**

Sarah is a mother of four, including two children in primary school and one child in secondary school. She received a tablet and a chromebook from PACT.

#### **Getting On Top of School Work**

*“My son is 10 years old and he was doing his schoolwork on my phone. He could not get much done on it, in fact, there were 25 pieces of work he didn’t do, and he was falling behind.” - Sarah*

While some schools shared that they were providing their students with computers, this was not *all* schools. This became clear to Sarah early on in lockdown.

It was hard, as a mother, to see her son unable to access his education. Since she received devices from PACT the teacher says her son is doing well, it is also easier for Sarah to check in on his schoolwork. Sarah emphasises that a lot of parents she knows still cannot get their kids online to do schoolwork, and mobile phones are not sufficient.

*“Phones are not enough for schoolwork, as well as other activities. We should encourage businesses to donate devices and understand the reality of the situation.” - Sarah*

Sarah also highlighted that many parents are not great with computers or are not able to provide home education especially when there are language barriers involved. It is important to acknowledge that while Sarah has English as her first language, the majority of our community have English as their second language.

*“Even when schools are open, why should some children have to stay late in the library and not have access at home. Being limited to school, reduces their opportunities to learn” - Helen, PACT Action Researcher*

While PACT supports all parenting, our focus is traditionally with early years development. With the lockdown the organisation became more involved with older children within families. Depending on the age and school requirements of the child, PACT allocated either a tablet or chromebook. For example, a primary school child would only require a tablet, as most activities would be reading focused. Whereas, a secondary school teenager is more likely to be writing essays, as Yusuf, 17 years old, is going into sixth form to start his A-levels in September.

*“Not having a laptop has disadvantaged me as most of the work involved me having to type up essays on Microsoft Word, which is extremely difficult and near impossible to do on an iPhone and even an iPad!” - Yusuf*

### **Creating safe spaces and listening**

Sarah has suffered anxiety over lockdown, one of many mental health conditions that have become more challenging during the Pandemic. When PACT first embarked on our Digital Inclusion project we imagined our phone calls with parents as a type of informal ‘audit’, a way to understand and prioritise needs. This soon evolved into a listening campaign, giving parents the opportunity to share. Without pressure or judgement they are invited to share any challenges that they have faced during lockdown, whether related to digital capabilities or not. When moderating the responses we are then able to make appropriate referrals. Mental health concerns were not uncommon, and although we included an explicit question asking about mental health, as our Action Researchers quickly noticed, it is not a simple yes or no question.

*“From the tone of the conversation it becomes clear if something is affecting their mental health. Parents will often say they are fine, they are coping, because they do not want to sound ungrateful for what they have.”  
- Helen, PACT Action Researcher*

When listening to parents, it's important to look at what they have *not* said, if this was flagged, after moderation we would recommend a follow-up call to check-in. Danna, a spanish-speaking Action Researcher, contacted Latin-American parents from PACT. When translating the questions into Spanish she changed 'mental health' to 'emotional health', she says,

*"It's a nicer way of framing it. It focuses on how you are feeling and your emotions. It is less direct, and more relatable to a lot of the parents."* -

Danna, PACT Action Researcher