

Barriers to online learning

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Veveonah climbs a tree just to get an uninterrupted connection to sit for her exams. Photo: YouTube/Veveonah M

One of the biggest issues children in Malaysia have with online learning is poor Internet access or the lack of devices in a household.

Fourteen-year-old Pravin Selvakumar comes from a family of nine. He is the third youngest of seven siblings.

While he loves being from a large family, the Form Two student from Klang says that there are some issues that he faces, especially with online studies.

“It’s not easy to do our studies online because there are nine of us but only three phones at home. We have to share handphones with our parents. My eldest brother who is in college, has his own phone,” says Pravin.

“Sometimes, the Internet (data) is also not enough, ” he says.

Pravin reveals that they have to take turns and often wait for a long time to use the mobile device because there are so many of them. And, even though he has social media, he seldom accesses it because of the lack of a device.

His mother, Premadevi Swaminathan, 45, says that they have a set timetable for the children to use her phone.

“Even though there are three phones in the family, my husband is working so his phone is only available at night, and my eldest son, who is in college, is using his phone for online studies most of the time, ” says Premadevi, who is a housewife.

Usually, my two younger daughters (aged 11 and 12) and Pravin will use my phone from the morning to the afternoon, while my three older daughters (aged 15,16 and 17) will use my phone from the afternoon to the evening. When my husband is home at night, the older children will also use his phone, ” she says.

But even if they have more devices, she highlights they also need data and it can be expensive for so many of them. They also don't have any laptops or desktop computers at home.

Students in more remote areas of the country face other barriers in accessing online learning.

Earlier this year, 18-year-old Veveonah Mosibin from Kg Sabanalang Pitas in Sabah was reported as having to climb a tree just to get better Internet reception for her studies.

Veveonah, who is the youngest of five siblings, goes to Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). During the pandemic, she posted YouTube videos of herself spending the night up a tree to get better Internet access for her exam.

“Studying off-campus due to the movement control order amid Covid-19, Internet access is not something that is readily available, ” she is quoted as saying.

Her story highlights the lack of facilities in many parts of Sabah.



Some children have to share devices with their parents or siblings so their time online is limited. Photo:

Unicef

A recent Unicef study about the online lives of children in East Asia reveals that children's phones are most often provided by parents and frequently passed down from parents, caregivers or older siblings. In certain cases where the children do not have their own devices, multiple strategies have been developed for accessing devices and content such as sharing their parents' phones to access WhatsApp.

For Jadid Akhbar Jamal, 12, a Standard Six student in Selangor, online learning means having to share his mother's phone with two other siblings. Jadid has four sisters aged 18,15,11 and 9, and a brother aged 17.

His mother Roslinda Saalan, 45, a housewife, reveals that they only have three phones to be shared by everyone at home, and a laptop, which his eldest sister in college is using.

Jadid uses the Internet to access social media (Facebook, Instagram and WhatApp), online classes, online club meetings and also games.

"Usually, my teacher would send the homework using WhatsApp and Google Classroom, and I would access it using my mother's phone," he says.

Premadevi is concerned that her children may get left behind in their studies, even though they are used to having to share mobile devices. She hopes that the subsidies in Budget 2021, including RM180 telecommunications credit for Internet access or phone purchase, will help ease the family's burdens.

"We are hoping to use the funds to buy two more handphones so that it will be easier for the kids to do their homework and attend classes online," she says.