This issue of the ThinkUKnow e-newsletter will look at the Digital Divide. We often talk about the divide between parents and their children when it comes to use and knowledge of digital technologies, but there is also a great divide between rich and poor, educated and uneducated in relation to digital technologies. This issue will look at the global issue of the Digital Divide and how it affects us here in Australia. Addressing this issue is timely as 17 May is World Telecommunications and Information Society Day with the theme of “Better Life in Rural Communities in ICT”.

The Digital Divide

Traditional means of examining the Digital Divide focussed solely on the issue of access. This highlighted the gap between those who had access to the internet and those who did not. When looking at internet usage worldwide, it is apparent that those in developing nations have less access to the internet than developed countries. According to the latest statistics, 61.3% of the population in Australia/Oceania use the internet compared to only 10.9% of the population in Africa (Source: internetworldstats.com).

Looking even more closely at our own backyard, 80.1% of Australians use the internet which means that almost 20% of our population do not. This may be for a variety of reasons: choice, age, socioeconomic status or location.

Strategies developed to reduce this divide concentrated on providing access to high-speed internet access to those of lower socio-economic status. These strategies included providing laptops and wireless networks, as well as increasing the coverage of mobile networks. Whilst these initiatives were successful in providing the technology, they did not improve digital equity.

Where to from here?

The current approach to bridging the Digital Divide aims not only to improve access to technology, but to ensure that this access is meaningful and productive. Just providing the technology is not enough; we need to also provide the education and skills for those people to use the technology in a positive and productive way.

Looking again at the Australian situation, currently 80.1% of Australians use the internet, but how many use it in a safe and responsible way? A 2010 US study by the Pew Research Centre found that households in the higher income brackets used the internet for a wider range of activities than those in the lowest income cohort. This means that some internet users do not access important health information, community services, opportunities for skills development or support services.