

Gap between boys and girls persists in tech

June 18 2009, By Chris O'Brien, San Jose Mercury News

My 4-year-old daughter Kalian has become fascinated about printing on the -- "puter," as she calls it. My wife or I will open a Word file on our family PC, and she'll plop down in the chair, peck away on the keyboard and then hit the print key. She'll then run to grab her handiwork and proudly show it off to us.

I suspect her growing interest in computers comes from watching Mommy working on her own laptop. Whatever the reason, I'll admit to being more than a little happy about it. I'm not hoping she'll become a full-fledged geek, but I do want her to feel confident and excited about using computers, which will only become more central to our work and personal lives as she grows up.

But apparently I've got a lot of work ahead to keep up her enthusiasm. According to a study released last week, there remains a depressingly large gap between the way teenage girls and boys view computers and careers in [computer science](#).

The study was conducted by the Association for Computing Machinery, a respected science and education nonprofit, through a grant from the National Science Foundation. In a nationwide survey of college-bound high school students ages 13 to 17, the study found that 45 percent of boys thought majoring in computer science would be "very good," compared with 10 percent of girls.

When asked about a possible career in computer science or software design, the study found a similar gap, with 38 percent of boys rating it

"very good" compared with 9 percent of girls. There were also big disparities when asking about various technical tasks, with boys consistently saying they were more comfortable than girls doing things like learning a new software program, setting up a wireless network or even editing music or video on a computer.

The persistence of this computer gap came as a shock to me. And I'm not alone. The study was initially commissioned in conjunction with WGBH, the Boston public television station, to gauge high school students' attitudes toward tech, with the idea of identifying ways to address differences in the way minorities viewed studies and careers in computer science. Instead, the study found the real split came along gender lines, so ACM changed the focus of its program to help close that gap.

Having been in Silicon Valley for a decade, I know there remains a yawning chasm between the numbers of men and women working in tech. Just about any engineering or venture capital event is packed with men. And the executive ranks, especially the chief executive seats, are famously devoid of women.

Still, I had seen many signs that made me optimistic. There's a recognition of this gender gap. There are a number of women-oriented networking organizations popping up around the valley. And I've seen women become increasingly prominent, if not yet a majority, in the growing social media industry, particularly through organizations like BlogHer.

And I had hoped that the remarkable embrace of gadgets like cell phones and social-networking sites like MySpace among teens and preteens of both genders would narrow the differences in the way boys and girls think about computers and technical careers.

Guess not.

"Using technology doesn't necessarily enhance your idea of creating technology," explained Telle Whitney, president and CEO of the Anita Borg Institute for Women and Technology in Palo Alto. "If you think about how you think about your car, it kind of makes sense. I think many girls are like that."

Simply put, boys think computers are cool, and girls don't. When asked what words they associated with computers, the study found that boys used words such as "design," "games" and "video." Girls, on the other hand, used words like "boring," "hard" and "nerd."

"As long as teenagers believe that computer science is boring, difficult, anti-social, or doesn't have much impact on solving the world's problems, they're unlikely to choose it for their future," the study says.

As the report wisely notes, there's a big difference in making a MySpace page and building the next MySpace.

So am I now being too pessimistic? Whitney thinks so. Through the Borg Institute, she's been fighting to change those attitudes among girls and women, arguing that those skills are necessary for success in a world increasingly dominated by technology. Whitney said some of that change will come from establishing widespread mentoring programs so girls can see role models in computing fields.

And some of it comes from little things. Whitney noted that her two nieces were visiting and she took them on a tour of Google to see how cool it felt to work there.

I want to believe Whitney, that my daughter is not fated to be sneering at computers when she's a teenager. So far, despite our best efforts to raise

her in a gender-neutral manner, she's still managed to become obsessed with pink and princesses. But Whitney says that doesn't mean she can't like computers, too.

"One of our messages is that you can like pink and you can like princesses and still be good at programming a computer," Whitney said.

Are you listening, Kalian?

—

(c) 2009, San Jose Mercury News (San Jose, Calif.).

Visit Mercury Center, the World Wide Web site of the Mercury News, at www.bayarea.com/mld/mercurynews

Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

Citation: Gap between boys and girls persists in tech (2009, June 18) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-06-gap-boys-girls-persists-tech.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.