

New study finds gender divide in children's use of cell phone features (w/ Video)

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It's a given that many children will ask their parents for cell phones this Christmas. Now, a recent study by University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) sociologist Shelia Cotten, Ph.D., finds that the way the kids will use their new phones depends on their gender.

In a study of nearly 1,000 middle-school students, students were asked to rate the different ways they use their [cell phone](#) on a five-point scale, from zero meaning "Never" to 5 meaning "Several Times a Day." The study found that boys scored higher than [girls](#) for using their cell phones to play games, share pictures and videos, listen to [music](#) and/or send e-mails, even after accounting for how much the students liked using their phones and how skilled they were at using them, says Cotten, whose study appears in the current issue of the journal *New Media & Society*.

"It has a lot to do with gender socialization," says Cotten. "Boys are often taught to explore and be more creative with technology and not to be afraid to take things apart. So it leads to more advanced cell phone uses among boys. Boys tend to see and use the cell phone as a gadget."

Girls, on the other hand, used the phone as a phone book or contact list more often than boys did, says Cotten, who teaches in the UAB Department of Sociology and Social Work. But when UAB researchers looked at more traditional types of cell-phone use — how frequently children made calls and used text messaging — no gender differences were detected, with girls averaging 2 hours on the cell phone each day and [boys](#) averaging about 1.8 hours per day.

"By these study results, we aren't saying that parents should buy phones with fewer features for girls," says Cotten, "but it does point out how more needs to be done to teach girls about the technical and more advanced multimedia features of their cell phones. Females traditionally have perceived themselves as less skilled in terms of technology, especially with regard to computers.

"If you plan to get your child a cell phone, features and style are still going to be a personal choice," says Cotten. "The bigger issues that parents should think about are the age of the child and how mature they are. Is the child responsible enough to stay within time-use allotments, to charge the phone, not to lose it and to use the phone appropriately? Obviously more advanced features like Internet access and multimedia capabilities carry greater opportunity and consequences for misuse.

"Talk with the child about what the responsibilities are for owning a cell phone, the limits for making calls, and texting and behaviors that are appropriate and inappropriate," she said. "Parents need to have a good conversation with their child about the cell phone because it's much harder to control children's cell-phone activities unless they set rules or place parental controls on the phones."

Provided by University of Alabama at Birmingham

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