

Hackers school next generation at DEFCON Kids

June 26 2011, by Glenn Chapman



This file illustration photo shows hackers visiting the anti-secrecy website WikiLeaks. DEFCON hackers will share their skills with the next generation at a first-ever children's version of the infamous gathering of software renegades, lock pickers and social engineers.

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DEFCON [Kids](#) will take place in Las Vegas on August 6-7 during the 19th annual DEFCON started by hackers such as "Dark Tangent" when they were young computer coding or hardware cracking rebels.

"Hackers are getting older and having kids," said Joe Grand, a DEFCON veteran known as 'Kingpin' who has wowed attendees with event badges

made of circuit boards that could be hacked to serve as radios or other gadgets.

"It is interesting to follow the process of other people's backup units; how they are coming along."

Grand, 35, recalling teen years in which his electronics skills got him benefits such as free telephone calls and trouble like an arrest for "computer-related stuff" he didn't detail.

"I was scared straight and there was nobody there to guide me straight," said Grand, who will teach hardware hacking at DEFCON Kids, which is open to children ages eight to 16.

"It feels nice to have an opportunity to be a mentor for kids who might be outcasts at school for having skills that aren't cool; that other kids don't understand."

Grand's two-and-a-half-year-old son has his own work space in dad's lab where he excitedly looks forward to being old enough to solder circuits.

A hacker conference for children is controversial even in the DEFCON community.

Prime targets for criticism include lock picking and social engineering, the art of manipulating people into revealing sensitive information.

"Everyone is up in arms that we are going to teach kids to be evil, but that is not the case," said Chris Hadnagy, who trains companies to guard against slick-talking hackers and runs the website social-engineer.org.

"Think critically, think objectively -- that is what this industry teaches people," continued Hadnagy, a DEFCON Kids mentor.

"The Internet is a [breeding ground](#) of predators, and not falling for those things is a skill I want my kids to have when someone is trying to manipulate them into something; whether it is peer pressure or a malicious adult."

Hadnagy and others behind DEFCON Kids were adamant that in a world where children are surrounded by technology it is smart to provide guidance and a place where they can safely, and legally, test hacker skills.

Hadnagy, whose book [Social Engineering: The Art of Human Hacking](#) came out this year, tailored a "Capture the Flag" game for the event.

The game will include deciphering clues, picking locks, and reading body language and subtle facial expressions.

"Kids are great at it," said Hadnagy. "This gives them a chance to grow into what we are now, the ones who keep companies secure."

Since DEFCON debuted in 1993, many once-nefarious attendees have become computer security good guys bent on defending companies and homes against cyberattacks.

Government agents once flushed out in a game called "Spot the Fed" at the world's largest hacker gathering are now welcomed on panels such as "Meet the Fed." National police agencies recruit talent at DEFCON.

DEFCON founder Jeff Moss, whose hacker handle is Dark Tangent, is on a White House homeland defense council and heads security for the agency in charge of Internet addresses.

The US National Security Agency is to bring a museum-quality cryptography exhibit this year.

"While DEFCON has a bit of edgy counter-culture to it, there is a need to harness, direct and encourage children," said Christofer Hoff, a hacker dad and a lock picking tutor at DEFCON Kids. "It is a natural complement."

Hoff has taught his daughters to pick locks and launched HacKids camps in the United States about a year ago after peers in the security industry wondered how to hook children on science and math skills.

"I got to learn about computers and do fun stuff like trebuchets and marshmallow gun fights," said his 10-year-old daughter and hackid.org camp attendee Chloe. "It was really cool to figure out how things work."

Hoff's girls will be volunteer "goons" helping at DEFCON Kids, where his session was renamed "The physics of locks."

"When we talk about teaching kids [hacking](#) it is about the creative, sometimes interesting out-of-the-box embracing of science, math, computers...to get their creative juices flowing," Hoff said.

"If you teach a kid how to light a match, does it mean he will turn into an arsonist?" he asked rhetorically. "Probably not, but he will learn how not to burn himself."

Information was online at defconkids.org.

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Citation: Hackers school next generation at DEFCON Kids (2011, June 26) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-06-hackers-school-defcon-kids.html>

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