

How living with a tech expert affects your own tech abilities

May 27 2015, by Katie Jacobs



Erika Poole completed a study that looked at how living with a tech expert affects your own tech abilities. Credit: Patrick Mansell

You're sitting on your couch, browsing your favorite websites while Netflix streams in the background. You click on an interesting link, but

it doesn't load. Looking up, you see the show you were watching has paused, a wheel spinning as it tries to refresh. Your Internet is down.

Sighing, you call for your wife, an IT consultant. She'll know what to do. She fixes the problem in five minutes, and you didn't even have to leave the couch.

It's a common scenario in households in which one person is more tech-savvy than the others—the more knowledgeable person does the majority of the technology maintenance and the other gets to kick back on the sofa. But, letting someone else do everything may not be as good as it sounds for the tech-challenged bunch.

Recently, Erika Poole, a Penn State Information Sciences and Technology assistant professor, conducted a study to examine whether having a techie around the house hinders less savvy housemates from developing technology skills of their own.

"As a society, we've reached a point where we have so many possessions that rely on technology," said Poole. "It all requires maintenance, and I was curious to explore how we handle and cope with all these things."

To see how different families deal with technology maintenance in their homes, Poole and her research team asked 10 families to complete technology-related activities on a weekly basis for several weeks while keeping a log book. They would be asked to set up and use an iPod one week, for example. The team would then interview the families the following week about their experiences and collect the families' log books before providing a new set of activities.



Credit: Ales Krivec

One family in the study consisted of Steve and Janine, a couple in their mid-30s, and their two young children. Janine described herself as unenthusiastic about computers, and therefore not eager to learn more about them. Instead, she relies on her husband or his younger brother for troubleshooting help.

Sometimes, though, Janine reported not asking for help because she felt like a burden. Instead, she would put off the task and ignore it. Ultimately, Poole says the help Janine receives from family members becomes a handicap, preventing her from learning to handle problems on her own.

This was a pattern Poole noticed throughout the study. When taking over a task, the more tech-savvy family member often hurried through the job out of habit, sometimes without teaching the other person or asking about his or her preferences.

"They might make decisions about computer settings, for example, without asking the other's opinion," Poole said. "But it's important that if you're the one asking for help, you ask to be taught how to do it next time, or that you make your opinions known."

But some participants did eventually expand their skills. Poole says she often saw progress during the weeks in which some participants didn't want to attempt the tasks asked of them—using design software to make a collage, for example—but forged on anyway.

"When they put aside their initial reluctance to do an unfamiliar task, their self-confidence ended up increasing when they finally tried it and figured it out," said Poole. "It was very heartening to see."

Steve reported that he saw this happening with Janine, saying that participating in the study was a good experience for his wife because it showed her that many technology-related activities weren't as difficult as she originally thought they would be.

Poole says the study also raises interesting questions about whether there's a baseline level of tech literacy a person should have in the 21st century.

"Tech is becoming more important everywhere, but not everyone needs to be on the level of a systems administrator," said Poole. "I wish I could say there's a set list of skills that everyone needs to know, but it's a very individual thing. It's about learning what you need to know to navigate the [technology](#) that's important to you."

So if you're lucky enough to have your very own live-in tech specialist, watch closely the next time she's rebooting your Wi-Fi connection for you. Perhaps eventually, you could be your own tech support.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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