



Interface preps kids for social media

Student project works to reduce cyber bullying

By Samantha Latta On November 3, 2014



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A Girl Scout and her mother test "KidGab" as part of Stephanie Valentine's research.

After growing tired of waiting for someone to make a move, computer science graduate student Stephanie Valentine said she decided to take action against cyber bullying.

Valentine started two initiatives to combat cyber bullying — a non-profit organization called "Wired Youth" and a children's social networking website called "KidGab." She credits her background in computer science, thorough research and personal experience as the catalysts to her work.

Valentine said her creations have opened a new and safer pathway into the world of social media by eliminating some of the dangerous aspects of networking that may threaten the younger generation.

"My research focuses around children's social networking — what is appropriate, how do they communicate, what role does conformity play, et cetera," Valentine said. "Through my research, I have built KidGab."

KidGab is a social media networking site designed specifically for children. Valentine said the website was created to ease children into the world of social media, and compared it to social media on training wheels.

"KidGab is a social network built for kids that are too young to join 'adult' social networks like

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Facebook, Instagram and Twitter," Valentine said. "All of the elements of an adult social network are there, but there are also monitoring and mentoring elements in place to be sure that kids are safe and are learning healthy habits."

Valentine said KidGab is intended as a closed social network for small communities of children and adults, like a scouting troop, a sports team or a classroom. She said kids can learn how to social network in a safe environment mentored by their parents, teachers, community leaders and professionals.

"Many commercial social networks for kids constrict what they can do or say to the point where they're hardly 'social' at all," Valentine said. "KidGab allows almost all social networking constructs, like friending, wall posts, comments, 'likes' and groups. KidGab focuses on education and mentoring, rather than constraints."

Valentine's other creation is the non-profit "Wired Youth" that provides children with workshops designed to teach safe and expressive social networking skills. Valentine said the workshops also initiate parental involvement for the children's future online encounters.

Emily Magnotta, program specialist at Girl Scouts of Central Texas, said her organization has already been influenced by KidGab and the Wired Youth workshops. Magnotta said there is a need for more programs like Valentine's.

"The workshop was amazing and the girls were able to absorb a lot of new information and practice it firsthand at the workshop," Magnotta said. "Girls were able to make new friends both in person and online. Once they got into the website and starting playing with all features they loved it. KidGab is a great tool for us."

Valentine said after seeing the negative effects of bullying firsthand, she chose to take advantage of her own childhood experiences in order to pull something positive out of the situation.

"I grew up in a neighborhood that is nationally known for its high level of gang activity and violence," Valentine said. "Though I admit I was rather sheltered, I still experienced a lot of bullying in school, and I understood the pain of my community. I grew up to be a computer scientist, and I want to use my skills to relieve some of that pain in other communities. Much of the violence is moving [to] digital now, and that's a domain I have the skills to protect."

Since its beginning, KidGab has hit the ground running and has received positive feedback. After assisting Valentine with a Wired Youth workshop, computer engineering graduate student Cassandra Oduola said it was exciting to see the kids' reaction to the program.

"The workshops went really well," Oduola said. "It was interesting to see the girls' knowledge on Internet safety. It was also awesome helping the girls become acclimated with KidGab and seeing them get excited about the different things they could do with a social network application tailored to them."

Magnotta said Valentine has established a new world for the adolescent online experience, and the future of KidGab may be the future for children in the social media atmosphere.

"Younger generations will be digitally literate faster and more educated about how to stay safe online," Magnotta said. "Her curriculum and effectiveness of delivering information goes right along with our digital literacy initiative."

The first program started on Oct. 11 when the girls were introduced to the programs. The girls will have access to KidGab for eight weeks, and the program will end with a closing workshop on Dec. 6.

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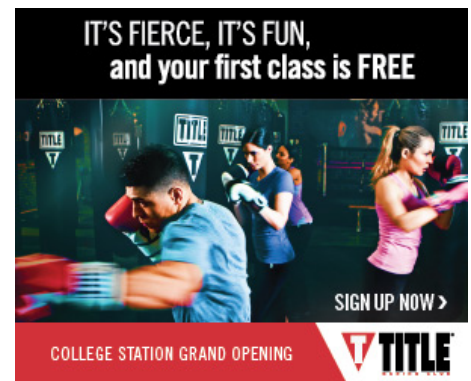
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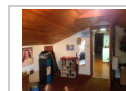
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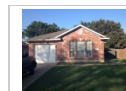
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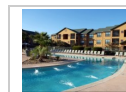
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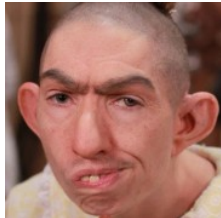
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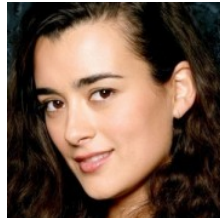
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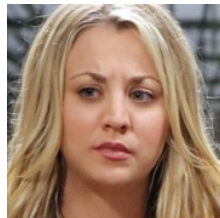
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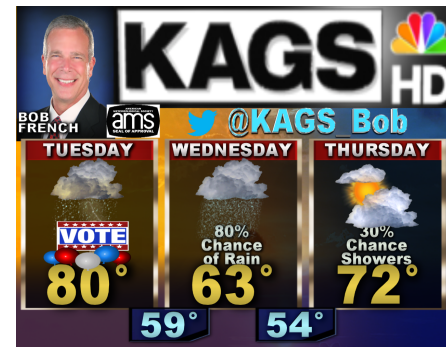
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