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This blog hosts weekly news about the Texas A&M University Sketch Recognition Lab. SRL is directed by Dr. Tracy Hammond, an associate professor in the Computer Science and Engineering Department. More information about the lab can be found at <http://srl.tamu.edu>

Thursday, November 6, 2014

Stephanie Valentine - KidGab with the Girl Scouts of Central Texas

Stephanie Valentine, a Computer Science & Engineering PhD student at the TAMU Sketch Recognition Lab, conducts research pertaining to her passion for bringing awareness to and educating youth on social media safe practices. Valentine is the president and founder of [Wired Youth Inc.](#), a nonprofit started in June of 2014 aimed to "foster an understanding among children and families of the permanent, public, and context-free nature of internet communications." Valentine's co-founders include her sister Catherine Miller and Dr. Tracy Hammond who serves as the Director of the Sketch Recognition Lab at TAMU, Valentine's graduate advisor, as well as the vice-president and treasurer of Wired Youth, Inc.


The [Daily Mail](#) noted in 2014 that more than half of children use social media by the age of 10. Just over 40 percent of these children using social media had messaged a stranger by the age of 12. With these and other startling statistics, concerning [cyberbullying](#) and the 32 percent of children on social media who receive messages from online [strangers](#), research like Valentine's focused on teaching children safe social media skills is gaining increased attention.

In addition to Wired Youth Inc., Valentine is also the creator of KidGab, a social network designed with kids in mind that is appropriate for children ages 8 – 10. These children are young, but typically are already tech savvy and often circumvent age restrictions on social media like Facebook on their own or with parental consent. KidGab, as Valentine states, is a "social network with training wheels." KidGab offers a closed social media, where members are verified and approved by a proctor before being able to join and interact with other members. Valentine notes that the program "mentors kids through their first social networking experience online, and they can come to understand what is good and what might be inappropriate through the help of adult supervision." Additionally, each child user account is connected to their guardian's, who must log in once a week to monitor their user's activity and allow continued participation.

Valentine created a short teaser [video](#) to showcase some the features KidGab offers, particularly reflecting the fun and artistic expression the program allows its users.


On Saturday, Oct. 11, Valentine met with seven Girl Scouts and their guardians in the Caldwell Civic Center to begin an eight week trial of KidGab. She was joined by Hammond and fellow SRL PhD student Cassandra Oduola, along with Emily Magnotta, the Program and Travel Specialist for the Bryan/College Station branch of Girl Scouts of Central Texas. The program was supported through joint collaboration. The TAMU Department of Computer Science and Engineering donated drawstring bags, engineering inspired coloring books and other

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treats for the participants. SRL and TAMU provided tablets for use at the event. Wired Youth Inc. supplied the event space and necessary logistical and financial assistance. In addition, the Girl Scouts of Central Texas provided volunteers, additional craft supplies, and support prior to and throughout the event.

The Girl Scouts and their guardians first participated in interactive group discussions, presentations, and crafts pertaining to friendship, communication, cyberbullying, and online interactions. After these activities, the families were introduced to the KidGab software and given hands-on training on the provided tablets using the program. In regards to the educational element being included before using the program, Valentine says understanding the nature of friendships versus “digital friendships,” knowing how to detect cyberbullies and online predators, and knowing who to talk to about these issues are necessary tools for children to learn before engaging in social media.

“Most research is aimed at what to do once cyberbullies or predators are already present,” Valentine notes. “But kids shouldn’t have to be uncomfortable or even in danger. I’m concerned with education and hands-on practice to prevent these interactions from ever happening in the first place.” Valentine compared social media usage to sports, stating that practice is required to perfect the skill. KidGab can provide this needed practice in a safe yet fun environment.

“Valentine is passionate about protecting kids in an online setting,” adds Magnotta of Girl Scouts of Central Texas. “Girl Scouts of Central Texas and KidGab have developed this amazing partnership and we plan to work together for a long time.”

In the future, Valentine would like to see KidGab and projects with similar missions concerning protecting kids in online settings incorporated into schools and children’s programs akin to Girls Scouts across the country. For her current research, she plans to continue work with Girl Scout troops in the Bryan/College Station, Austin, and Houston areas. Eventually, Valentine plans to extend her research to other youth organizations such as youth groups, sports clubs, and even school curriculums.





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Posted by [Jessica Gantt](#) at 3:11 PM



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