



## CRACKING the hacker myth Computer kids learn the value of ethics in a wired world

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#### Tech Extra

A Massachusetts teen knocks out phone service to 600 homes and a small airport's control tower. An 18-year-old Israeli and two California friends break into the Pentagon's payroll computer. An international group calling itself the Masters of Downloading claims it has stolen programs used to run classified U.S. military networks.

Opening the paper can make it seem as if kids and computers are a bad combination all around. But there are two sides to the equation: Computers have become so much a part of children's lives that the lure of the dark side often is overshadowed by the opportunities offered by staying in the light.

Though they may be tempted by the hacker mentality, no small number of teens are finding the straight and narrow not only interesting, but also a conduit to jobs that pay a lot better than fast-food employment.

And while parents worry about their children's future, schools are starting to realize that, as computer use becomes a part of daily life even for kindergartners, part of their job is to teach not just technical skills but also the ethics that go along with living in a networked world.

"You get this attitude on the behalf of a lot of parents that they're just happy that little Johnny's up in his room at his computer and not getting into trouble on the streets, not realizing what trouble he can be getting into on line," says Michael Vatis, chief of the FBI's new National Information Infrastructure Protection Center. He worries that parents aren't as concerned as they should be about their children being caught up in computer mischief.

But the stereotype of the anti-social boy who spends all his free time in the glow of a monitor doesn't match reality.

Peter Jensen, a tall, blond Eagle Scout from Austin, Texas, is also an 18-year-old computer nerd. When he's not leading the drum section in the LBJ High School honors band, he's busy being an officer for the Student Technical Administrative Council and a system administrator for the school's Internet connection.

"It's administrative hassles, which would be boring to the teachers but are still interesting to the kids. And setting all that up in the system prepared us for doing real things at real companies," he says.

The long list of computer and programming skills in the rsum posted on his Web page (peter.home.texas.net) got him a job paying \$20 an hour running the Internet connection at a local company.

His friend Gabriel Jamail, a 14-year-old freshman, discovered his true calling in computers. "My wife and I are both writers," says his father, sociologist Milton Jamail. "Finally Gabo had something of his own he was passionate about."

Gabo's interest in computers led him to the Student Technical Administrative Council, where he made friends, became a top-level administrator on the school's computer system and ended up with a paid internship. "That's the great thing about the computer industry: There are no age limits," he says.

Jensen and Jamail's school is exceptionally wired. But even in average districts, opportunities abound. Matt Lennen, 15, started toying with computers at the age of 8. He couldn't afford books to learn about programming, so he taught himself. He spent some time hanging out on Internet Relay Chat, the Net's original chat space and prime hacker and cracker territory, but soon gave it up as "a waste of time."

"Probably half of them are little hacker wanna-bes," says Lennen, of Myersville, Md. "There's a lot of 'exploits' (security attacks) out there. It's really annoying to be doing something and have some little 12-year-old come and kill my computer."

A year ago he sent e-mail to his Internet service provider to ask for a job. He started with filing but eventually worked his way into designing Web pages for \$30 an hour. "I'm saving for college and car insurance," he says.

In the elementary ages as well, as PCs turn into common classroom tools, educators such as Penni Jones, the Allen

(Texas) Independent School District's technology coordinator, are determined that students will never end up on the wrong side of the law. "I think we create that hacking culture by not allowing kids to use the technology because of adults' fear," she says.

Her state is incorporating computers into the classroom with a vengeance. The Texas "essential knowledge and skills inventory" stipulates that all third-graders must know how to e-mail; all sixth-graders, how to create a database.

Jones notes that driver's education doesn't just teach students how to run a car; it also covers safety and legal issues. To do the same for 5-year-olds piloting Pentiums, she has incorporated an innovative program called Chip and Friends into the schools in her district.

Begun in 1992 as an outreach program of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, the curriculum was spun off into an hour-long videotape that uses puppets and a squishy computer named Chip to teach little kids right and wrong on line. It's available through the Computer Learning Foundation in Palo Alto, Calif.

"Technology is just as normal to them as turning on a television set. You have to teach them computer security and ethics from the beginning," says program creator Gale Warshawsky.

The idea for the program came when Warshawsky "got tired of reading one too many books about teen-agers getting arrested for breaking into computers," she says. Using catchy, Sesame Street-like songs with such titles as Protecting Information, colorful puppets teach kids how to use computers, how to recognize when something's wrong, how to avoid computer viruses and why it's wrong to copy software and give it to someone else.

"It's excellent in the ways that it addresses a group of kids that no one else seems to be addressing early learners. I think a lot of companies miss the boat by trying to educate kids like adults," Jones says.

Building ethics into the curriculum is key, says Chris Bach of Briarcliff Elementary in Raleigh, N.C. The lessons about not stealing other people's math homework, which an adult might call "an introduction to the concept of intellectual property," hit home with her first-graders. "If someone's backpack was in their locker, would you go into it? No. But if you went into someone's file, would that be the same? And they think, 'Oh!'"

Getting that kind of thinking going early, says the FBI's Vatis, is necessary to combat what he perceives as a society that "condones and in some ways romanticizes hackers. We have to do a much better job of educating people about what the laws are, what their responsibilities are."

In fact, Vatis has an offer for young computer whizzes who really want to put their minds to work. With 125 slots to fill for highly technically proficient people and a private sector competing for the same skills, he's asking them to take on "the challenge of law enforcement in the 21st century."

What greater contest could a computer kid want than to work to uncover the security flaws of the system from the inside? Come work for the FBI, he urges.

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The way it used to be

Things have changed in the world of hacking since John Gilmore started out.

"Hacking in the 1960s and 1970s was more like gentlemanly exploration than it was taking things from people," says Gilmore, 42, a noted security expert in San Francisco.

There were far fewer computers and far fewer networks, and teens had to "borrow" telephone service just to get on line which meant that merely being connected implied a certain degree of skill.

Nowadays, wizened oldsters such as Berkeley grad student David Wagner, 24, say the hacking culture has changed immeasurably. People with any skill "go into one of these start-ups and make half a million dollars."

He and partner Ian Goldberg are true "hackers" in the original sense that is, people who delight in attacking computer problems, not creating havoc. In doing so, they've ended up in security research, finding serious security flaws in several major programs.

Which is why he has little patience for the ineffective (and, even more distressing to a true hacker, inelegant) attempts against his system he regularly observes with amusement.

He estimates 99% are launched by what security experts call "script kiddies." With no technical knowledge, these would-be "crackers" (the Net term for malicious hackers) don't write their own code. They just drop in at one of the many illicit Web sites offering cracking programs, or scripts. "They don't know what (the scripts) do, but they'll just run one after another for hours until one works," Wagner says.

Even the FBI says crackers don't need as much skill as they did 10 or 15 years ago. "All you have to do is download (these scripts), compile the source code and just launch them," says the FBI's Michael Vatis. He worries that although the skill level may be falling, the number of unauthorized intrusions into computer systems is rising.

But while teen-age hackers are a threat, an FBI/Computer Security Institute survey released this year found that security practitioners see disgruntled employees (89%) as far and away the largest threat to systems.

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### **Abstract** (Document Summary)

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