Medical Xpress

'Digital skills divide' along SES lines, according to new study

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A new study from Tufts University shows that while the "digital divide" may be narrowing in terms of access to the Internet, a significant "digital skills divide" is emerging.

"Parents' access to childrearing information appears to be on the rise, in large measure because of the Web," said Professor Fred Rothbaum from the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development at Tufts University. "Unfortunately, the rise in Web use has been accompanied by a pronounced 'digital divide' involving socio-economic status differences in Web use, Web skills and Web satisfaction. This gives rise to concerns about the quality of information lower SES parents are accessing."

Rothbaum and colleagues examined socio-economic status differences in parents' Web use, skills and satisfaction, and found the higher the socio-economic status, the greater the time spent on the Web and the more sophisticated the search and evaluation skills. Their findings were published in the March/April issue of the *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology.* The research was funded by the William T. Grant Foundation.

Rather than relying on self-reporting, the Tufts researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with 120 parents and observed their Web skills as the participants searched for information on the Internet. The participants -- 60 mothers and 60 fathers -- fell into three socio-economic strata -- low, middle and high. Socio-economic status was based on education and income levels.

During the first phase of the interviews, parents were asked a combination of forced-choice and open-ended questions about how often they use the Web, how satisfied they are with the information they find online, and about their Web use skills in general. During the second part of the interviews, parents were asked to search for a given topic on the Internet while researchers observed and asked the participants to talk out loud and explain why they made the choices they did.

Millions lack skills needed to identify trustworthy information

After parents completed their Web search, researchers asked them how confident they were that the information they found was trustworthy. Confidence levels did not vary between socio-economic groups, but the reasons for their confidence did differ. More than 40 percent of parents in the higher socio-economic group said that they were more likely to trust sites associated with a credible organization, such as a university or research organization, compared to 26 percent of middle SES parents and 16 percent of low SES parents.

"SES differences in parents' abilities to find and evaluate Web-based child development information may mean that low SES parents are more likely to obtain information from dubious websites that fail to provide research-based information," the researchers wrote in the study.

Researchers also asked participants about their satisfaction with the information about children that they found on the Web and with the user-friendly language of the Web sites. While the differences between the three groups were low, for both questions parents in the low socio-economics group reported they were more satisfied than parents in the middle and high socio-economic strata.

"Millions of American parents have access to both good and bad-quality information, but may not have skills to tell the difference," the study reported. "This is especially of concern given the greater satisfaction with Web information in lower than higher SES parents."

Google favored by parents in high socio-economic group

Results showed that parents in the high socio-economic group were more likely to choose their own search engine rather than use a default search engine, and 55 percent of those parents preferred Google over other search engines compared with 28 percent of middle SES parents and 8 percent of low SES parents. In contrast, 36 percent of parents in the low socio-economic status preferred AOL. There were no differences in parents' selection of Yahoo! or MSN -- the other most frequently mentioned search engines.

In terms of other Web skills, parents in the high socio-economic status group were more likely than those in the other two groups to return to the main search results and select another link, or revise the search by changing a keyword or start a new search from scratch. They also more often expressed frustration when search results included irrelevant sites.

Researchers suggest the digital skills divide should be addressed through training "to improve skills in evaluating search engines, choosing alternate keywords, and building searches from scratch" as well as training in evaluating sites for credibility and trustworthiness.

Source: Tufts University

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