

Beware These Social Networking Pitfalls For Kids

Oliver Chiang, Sept. 1, 2010

Quick: What's the legal age required for someone to create a Facebook account?

It's 13, says Facebook, which followed guidelines set by the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) of 2000. Unfortunately, it's not common knowledge, like the legal ages for drinking, driving and voting. But it should be.

In fact, you may know some kids on Facebook who aren't 13 yet. That's no surprise: A study last year, for instance, found that one in four U.K. Internet users aged 8 to 12 had profiles on Facebook, Bebo or MySpace.

In an age when Facebook and other sites are becoming a part of everyday life, it's hard to imagine keeping Web-savvy kids off social networks entirely. But a couple of startups have recently tackled the problem of how to provide a training-wheels version of social networking.

[In Pictures: Keeping Kids Safe On Facebook](#)

"Kids model their parents' behavior, and if kids see mom and dad at home on Facebook, smiling when they read their friends' updates, sharing picture albums with their friends and family, and watching funny videos and commenting on them, you'd be hard pressed to get a kid to say they don't want to do that," says Mandeep Dhillon. Dhillon is chief executive of a startup called [Togetherville](#) of Menlo Park, Calif.--a Facebook for the under-13 crowd. Just like on other social networks, kids on Togetherville can interact with online friends, write messages, play social games, watch videos and draw pictures, albeit in a much more limited way.

Togetherville is COPPA-compliant because it makes available to parents all the personal data about your child that it stores on the site. A parent's email address is required to open a new account, and activities are moderated by parents, who receive e-mail alerts about their kids' activities, as well as by the site's staff. Parents also select from their own group of Facebook friends the people that their children will be able to connect to in Togetherville, so they know who their children are interacting with.

Another new social network aimed at kids is [ScuttlePad](#) of Orem, Utah. Like Togetherville, ScuttlePad requires parental approval and moderation, and heavily limits on-site activities. For instance, children on the site can only create messages and status updates using pre-approved word lists. ScuttlePad's CEO Chad Perry also believes it's important to have a social network training ground for kids.

"Social networks have become so pervasive," says Perry. "Just like we would teach a kid how to cross the street or ride the bike, we need an environment to teach them the fundamentals of social networking."

Facebook is very likely watching such startups with interest. It needs an alternative site for the hordes of underage children joining its ranks every day so it can avoid potential legal headaches and negative press. Facebook is also certain to see the value in a site that can prepare the next generation of social network users.

Meanwhile, the recurring theme for parents is that they need to be engaged and involved in their children's social networking activity, just as they would be in teaching other important life skills. This applies when your child is legally able to join Facebook as well. Says Dhillon: "I love taking my kids to New York City, but I wouldn't take them there and walk away. It's the same on the Internet."

Here are a few guidelines on pitfalls to avoid and how to help your kids interact safely on Facebook:

- Don't have a Facebook account yet? Get on and learn. Find out what types of information you can share through social networks, the privacy settings and the norms and expectations so that you can help your kids do the same later. Also check out [Facebook's Safety Center](#) and [SurfNetKids.com](#).

- Know what to share and teach your kids. Use common sense, i.e., don't share your Social Security number on Facebook. You probably don't want to post your mailing address or phone number, either. Other things are less obvious. You and your children may not want to post on a social network that the family is going away on vacation for a few weeks--leaving your house unoccupied. The privacy rules on social networks like Facebook often change, so as a general rule, err on the side of caution when sharing.

- You wouldn't teach your children to be dishonest in real life. Don't teach them to do so online. Teach your kids not to lie about their age to join Facebook or to view an online video. In addition, encourage them not to use aliases or be anonymous on social networks. Anonymity online tends to bring out trolls and bullies. You don't want to be the parent who has to guess who your child is talking to when he messages "flowergurl25."