Survey: Many parents help kids lie to get on Facebook

CNET News, Larry Magid, November 1, 2011

In 1998, Congress passed the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) that requires Web sites to "obtain verifiable parental consent" before collecting personal information from children under 13.

This very well-intentioned law—enacted long before the advent of MySpace, Facebook, and other social networks—was designed to protect children from revealing information that could be used by companies to sell them products or by others to exploit them. Children under 13, according to the Federal Trade Commission, which enforces COPPA, are "particularly vulnerable to overreaching by marketers."

COPPA doesn't prevent companies like Facebook from admitting kids under 13, but it does present substantial and expensive roadblocks.

Companies with services aimed at younger kids, such as Disney's Club Penguin, have gone to considerable expense to comply with the law. But most companies, including Facebook, MySpace, and Google+, simply block pre-teens from the service. These rules are specified in the companies' terms of service, and companies generally require members to state their birth date. Any child whose date of birth indicates he or she is under 13 is blocked.

Other than requiring a birth date, very few services use any other type of age verification tools which, according to the Internet Safety Technical Task Force (which I was on), are largely impractical and can have unintended security and privacy consequences such as the risk of leaking the names and ages of children.

Millions of underage Facebook users
The FTC is currently reviewing COPPA and there is a lot debate, including from some who think it should be liberalized and others who want its protections extended to all teens under 18. But one thing is for sure: millions of children are lying about their age to get around COPPA-related rules. In 2010, I reported on a study commissioned by McAfee that found that 37 percent of 10-to-12-year olds are on Facebook. And this past May, Consumer Reports reported that "of the 20 million minors who actively used Facebook in the past year, 7.5 million were younger than 13" and more than 5 million were younger than 10.

It's not just happening in the United States. Even though COPPA is a U.S. law, most companies apply the restrictions globally. The EU Kids Online study from the London School of Economics found that, across Europe, 31 percent of 10-year-olds, 44 percent of 11-year-olds, and 55 percent of 12-year-olds said they used a social network site. Australia's Daily Telegraph quotes Facebook adviser and former FTC commissioner, Mozelle Thompson, that "Facebook removes 20,000 people a day, people who are underage."

Parents OK with kids lying to create account
As it turns out, most parents of kids who are lying about their age are aware of what their kids
are doing and many parents are actually helping their kids lie to get on Facebook. A peer-reviewed study released today—"Why Parents Help Their Children Lie to Facebook About Age: Unintended Consequences of the 'Children's Online Privacy Protection Act'"—(available from FirstMonday.org) found that "many parents knowingly allow their children to lie about their age—in fact, often help them to do so—in order to gain access to age-restricted sites in violation of those sites' terms of service."

The survey was conducted by Harris Interactive but the study was designed, supervised, and analyzed by its authors: Danah Boyd of Microsoft Research and NYU, Eszter Hargittai from Northwestern University, Jason Schultz from University of California, Berkeley, and John Palfrey from Harvard University. The study polled 1,007 U.S. parents who live with children between the ages of 10 and 14.

Nearby a fifth (19 percent) of the parents of 10-year-olds acknowledged that their child was on Facebook. About a third (32 percent) of parents of 11-year-olds knew their kid was on it. And the same was true for more than half (55 percent) of parents of 12-year-olds. Each of these kids had to lie to get an account.

For kids who were under 13 at the time they signed up, 68 percent of the parents "indicated that they helped their child create the account." Among 10-year-olds on Facebook, a whopping 95 percent of parents were aware their kids were using the service and 78 percent helped create the account.

Table 4. Mean age when child joined Facebook, and parental awareness and assistance of account creation (among parents who report child with Facebook account, N=506).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child's Current Age</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>13</th>
<th>14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean age child joined Facebook</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent was aware when child signed up</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent helped create the account</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
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Nearly 8 out of 10 parents of 10-year-olds on Facebook helped child create the account

(Credit: Boyd, Hargittai, Schultz and Palfrey)

Implications of data
In an interview (scroll down to listen), Boyd, one of the study's authors, reiterated that "very few kids are likely to be lying to their parents," and "many (parents) are helping them lie about their age." Boyd finds it "deeply problematic" that both kids and parents are lying. But, she added, "I think the solution for this is not to make it harder for them to lie. I think the solution is to say, what are they trying to achieve." Parents, said Boyd, "want their kids to have access to public life and, today, what public life means is participating even in commercial social media sites." These parents, Boyd added, "are not saying get on the sites and then walk away. These are parents who
have their computers in the living room, are having conversations with their kids, they often helping them create their accounts to talk to grandma."

Ironically, she said, COPPA may be inadvertently accomplishing what it set out to do. "It was meant to empower parents to have these conversations with their kids. It was meant to encourage exactly what happens as a result of lying." Still, Boyd considers COPPA a flawed law because it creates undue burdens on companies that allow young people to use their services to communicate with one another.

The study also found that fewer than 20 percent of the parents polled feel that the "government should enact laws to protect children by requiring a minimum age," but nearly half support the idea of government requiring services to provide a recommended age level.

**Table 13. Parents’ views about governmental involvement in setting age limits on the use of websites and online services (N=1,007).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The government should require all websites and online services to provide a recommended age rating, similar to movie ratings like PG/PG-13, to help parents determine when their child is ready to use these services, but the government should not require a minimum age for use.</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The government should not play a role in determining how websites and online services address children’s use of their services; this should be between parents and the websites and online services.</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The government should enact laws that protect children by requiring a minimum age for use of websites and online services.</td>
<td>18%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Most parents don't want the government dictating a minimum age, according to a survey.

(Credit: Boyd, Hargittai, Schultz and Palfrey)

The study's findings "call the efficacy of COPPA into serious question" and point to the "unintended consequences of COPPA." It concludes that "instead of providing more tools to help parents and their children make informed choices, industry responses to COPPA have neglected parental preferences and have altogether restricted what is available for children to access."

**Kids could be safer if...**

In May, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg told an education conference that he favored changing COPPA so that kids under 13 would be allowed on Facebook, but he backed off a few days later saying "we're not working on it right now." That tracked with what he told me a year earlier--in May 2010--during an interview when I asked him about COPPA. "It's something we've talked about a little bit," he said, "but the restrictions and regulations around it make it very difficult so it's just never been the top of the list in terms of the things we want to do."

Considering the number of kids on Facebook and parental attitudes revealed in this study, it strikes me that Facebook ought to find a way to welcome pre-teens but only if it can do so in a
way that ensures parental involvement, provides extra privacy protections, and shields kids from advertising and marketing pitches.

I would much rather see kids using Facebook in an age-appropriate way (with plenty of educational resources for kids and parents about safety and privacy) than the status quo in which millions of kid are using the service anyway without these protections. For this to happen, COPPA would have to be modified or Facebook would have to go through considerable expense to comply. I don't see either happening right now, but I do think kids under 13 would be better off if this could be accomplished.