Should Kids Under 13 Be on Facebook?

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</div><div align="justify">By Bonnie Rochman Tuesday, May 24, 2011

In a perfect, law-abiding world, no child under 13 has a Facebook account. But this world is pretty far from ideal, if the 7.5 million tweens � and younger kids � trolling the social-media behemoth are any gauge. Now, if Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg gets his way, that already impressive number will explode.

Last week, Zuckerberg told the NewSchools Venture Fund's Summit in Burlingame, Calif., that he'd like younger children to be permitted to patronize his site. Technically, the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) prohibits websites that gather data about users from allowing access to anyone younger than 13. In reality, though, COPPA is pretty ineffectual.

</div> �<div align="justify">(More on Time.com: Facebook and Breast-Feeders Face Off Again Over Nursing Photos)

Consumer Reports (CR) recently announced results of an annual survey that found that "more than one-third of the 20 million minors who actively used Facebook in the past year" were under 13.

According to TIME.com's Techland blog, "that number could be low, since it's only based on parents who knew their underage kids were Facebook members:"

��� In fact CR found that over 5 million of Facebook's 7.5 million-plus underage were as young as "10 and under." ... That's not the worst of it. CR also found that underage kids using Facebook were unsupervised by parents. The site claims � not wrongly � that this exposes them to "malware or serious threats such as predators or bullies."

��� Consider other points raised in the report like: 15% of all Facebook users post "their current location or travel plans," 34% post their birth date in full, and 21% with children post their children's names and pictures.

��� What about Facebook's privacy controls, your bastion against all things nefarious? CR found "roughly one in five" weren't using them.

Still Zuckerberg insists that connecting on Facebook � for educational purposes, natch � is a must for young kids. "That will be a fight we take on at some point," CNNMoney quoted him as saying. "My philosophy is that for education you need to start at a really, really young age."

(More on Time.com: Pediatricians Should Discuss 'Facebook Depression' with Kids)

Zuckerberg, not so far removed from the gawky age of 13 himself, says that Facebook has not begun researching how to open up the site to young kids and protect them at the same time. "Because of the restrictions we haven't even begun this learning process," he said. "If they're lifted, then we'd start to learn what works. We'd take a lot of precautions to make sure that they [younger kids] are safe."

Whew. That's reassuring.

Still, it's undeniable that kids simply don't have the same powers of judgment as adults. Consider, for example, the New Hampshire teen who mourned on Facebook that Osama bin Laden hadn't first offed her math teacher before he was killed. "In hindsight, she's mortified that she said that, but she's a 13-year-old kid," the girl's mother, Kimberly Dell'isola, told a local television station.

(More on Time.com: Alaina Giordano, Mom with Stage 4 Cancer, Speaks Out About Losing Her Kids)

That's exactly why the publisher of Consumer Reports isn't quite as cavalier as Zuckerberg about little ones friending and tagging to their hearts' content. On Friday, the nonprofit Consumers Union worried that kids and teens don't really get why it's so important to self-censor what they share with the online world. "We urge Facebook to strengthen its efforts to identify and terminate the accounts of users under 13 years of age, and also to implement more effective age-verification methods for users signing up for new accounts," Ioana Rusu, the regulatory counsel for Consumers Union, wrote in a letter to Zuckerberg.

According to the Los Angeles Times, Rusu's letter came on the heels of a congressional

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hearing questioning the security of underage Facebook users:

��� Senate Commerce Committee Chairman John D. Rockefeller (D-W.Va.) said it was "indefensible" that Facebook had only 100 employees monitoring the activities of its 600 million users.

��� At the hearing, Facebook Chief Technology Officer Bret Taylor said Facebook shuts down the accounts of people found to be lying about their age. But he acknowledged that Facebook depended on other users to report underage users.

The Consumers Union urged Facebook to be more "diligent and effective" at safeguarding the millions of minors who frequent the site. It suggested a few ways to do that: make minors' default privacy setting one that facilitates sharing with "friends only" instead of "friends of friends;" for the average user, that amounts to nearly 17,000 people. And institute an "eraser button" that users can click to delete embarrassing information posted on the site when they were underage.

An eraser button? Should it actually be created, many adults will likely lobby to use it too.

Read more: http://healthland.time.com/2011/05/24/should-facebook-welcome-users-under-13/#ixzz1NLd3YY9v
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