

## **Regulators say social network violated child privacy law**

*Somini Sengupta*

Skid-e-Kids describes itself as a Facebook for children ages 7 to 14. It allows them to watch “age-appropriate” movies and socialize with their friends, and it stipulates that “parents are in charge.”

Now the company, which is based in Atlanta, has fallen afoul of a federal law designed to protect the digital privacy of children. On Wednesday, the Federal Trade Commission announced that Skid-e-Kids had agreed to settle its charges that it had allowed children under the age of 13 to register on the site without their parents’ consent, which is against the law. According to the F.T.C., the site collected the first and last names of its 5,600 underage users, their dates of birth — even the cities in which they lived.

The Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act, or COPPA, requires companies to obtain parental consent before collecting any personal information about a child under 13. The law was enacted over a decade ago; the F.T.C. recently proposed changes to the statute, to reflect advances in smartphone and geolocation technology.

An emotive issue, children’s privacy can be particularly difficult to enforce. Case in point: Despite Facebook’s official policy barring children under 13 from creating accounts, independent studies have repeatedly shown that millions of children lie about their age in order to register for Facebook, and some do it with help from their parents.

A paper published in the journal *First Monday* earlier this month argued that age bans are ineffective, given that so many children lie about their age and inadvertently allow a vast trove of data to be collected about them. Over half of the 13-year-olds surveyed for the study said they had signed up for a Facebook account before they turned 13, and more than three-fourths of parents surveyed said they would allow their children to circumvent the age ban, mostly for educational purposes.

“Rather than providing parents with additional mechanisms to engage with sites honestly and negotiate the proper bounds of data collection about their children, parents are often actively helping their children deceive the sites in order to achieve access to the opportunities they desire,” wrote Danah Boyd, the lead author of the study and a researcher for Microsoft Research Labs.

Skid-e-Kids says it offers children help with homework and parents a dashboard to keep tabs on what their kids are up to. “Skid-e-Kids is the only social network that is truly committed to not only keeping our children safe, but also making sure that they are systematically learning while they are having fun,” the site promises.

The F.T.C., however, found that the site allowed children to register without collecting a parent’s email address, let alone obtaining their permission. It also charged the site’s operator, Jones O. Godwin, with misrepresenting the site’s information collection practices.

The settlement requires Mr. Godwin to destroy information he collected from children and link to online educational material about privacy. It also imposes a \$100,000 civil penalty, all but \$1,000 of which will be suspended if Mr. Godwin “provided truthful information about his financial condition” and complies with a requirement that he get proper privacy guidance for any Web site he runs.

**Fonte: The New York Times, New York, 8 Nov. 2011, Technology, online.**