

Let the nippers network

With appropriate safeguards, children should be allowed to use social networks



In its early days, Facebook was a hangout for college students searching for hot dates and cold beer. Now the social network is open to all ages—except, in theory, the under-13s. Children need protecting from online bullies, cyberstalkers and inappropriate pictures, runs the logic. The problem is that the under-13s can enroll on Facebook simply by lying about their age. Some of them, parents will be shocked to hear, have actually done so: 5.6m in America alone, by one estimate. The current safeguards are as effective as a “Do not pilfer” sign on an unguarded cookie jar. It is time for a rethink.

There are two options. Facebook can either try harder to prevent children from joining, or it can let them in, but with safeguards. The company is toying with the second idea (see article). Its bosses are debating whether to allow children to set up their own profiles under parental supervision. That could mean making it easy for parents to vet their children's friends and to police the apps they use. Facebook is said to be looking at ways of charging parents for games and other apps that their offspring play with.

Many people are aghast. One activist has compared Facebook to a tobacco firm seeking to get kids hooked early. Children must be protected from Facebook, argue the firm's critics.

This is unfair. Social networking does not cause cancer. There is no compelling reason why children should not socialise with each other online. What is worrying is that those on Facebook today are treated as if they were adults. Many have created profiles—complete with photos and personal information—that virtually anyone can see. Many access Facebook through mobile phones; some reveal where they are to prying eyes. A more subtle problem is that children's first experience of social networking today often involves deceit, which is hardly the best way to encourage good online citizenship.

Facebook has a powerful incentive to clean up its system. It risks falling foul of an American law that requires companies to obtain parental consent before collecting information from youngsters. If it does nothing, it could also face a flood of lawsuits and negative publicity, as children inevitably get into trouble. The only question is: what should it change?

I am shocked, shocked, to find that socialising is going on

Software filters to block under-age users are unlikely to work, because young geeks will find ways around them and share them with all their friends. Far better to let children openly join Facebook and create a safer environment for them to socialise in. The following safeguards would be a good start.

First, Facebook should ensure that privacy settings for pre-teens are automatically set at maximum strength. Their pictures and social plans should be visible only to their friends, not to their friends' friends or the online world. The company should also create simple controls that allow parents to monitor whom their kids are befriending, which apps they have access to and what information is being collected about them. And it should seek approval from both children and their parents before making any changes to these settings. This approach would shield children from predators. It would make it easier to ensure that they see only content that is suitable for their age. And it would allow Facebook to provide them with advice about how to stay safe online.

To some, this will still seem like a whopping risk. After all, Facebook's record on privacy matters is as chequered as the flag that marks the end of a Formula One race. But the alternative is almost certainly worse. Facebook and other social networks already have millions of vulnerable, clandestine underage users. It is time to bring them into the light.

Fonte: The Economist, London, v. 403, n. 8788, p. 18, 9-15 Jun. 2012.

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