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Kids Online: Surfing in Shark-Infested Waters

by Lynie Arden

The World Wide Web is a great playground for kids and, all over the world, kids are busily taking advantage of all the Web has to offer. Just like adults, they play, shop, study and surf. And just like adults, their moves are being tracked and their identities are being collected, targeted for sale on the open market.

Parents have long been concerned about their children's privacy online, but usually over the issue of strangers being in contact with their children. The primary fear has been exposing young minds to images and information that are just inappropriate for them. But what many parents haven't considered is the danger that kids could innocently disclose information that could actually lead directly to their front door.

Privacy is the number one concern for 92 percent of online users, and most take at least some steps to protect themselves. Yet only 65 percent worry that their children's personal information is being collected. Children's sites on the Web routinely ask very personal questions, without any explanation as to what will be done with the information. Recently, the Center for Media Education checked out the most popular children's Web sites and found that 88 percent of them collect personal information and 75 percent do so without asking for parental consent. The numbers were even more dismal when CME analyzed randomly selected sites from the AltaVista-Looksmart Kids Directory. The number collecting personal information from kids was an overwhelming 95 percent, with a mere 6 percent asking for parents' permission.

The Real Threat: Kids as a Target Market

It's easy to lure curious kids to a Web site. They are naturally drawn into sites with cool graphics, cartoon characters, games, contests, and information about their favorite pop stars. But what's behind these glitzy online playgrounds is no game. Marketers are deadly serious about the \$150 billion that kids influence in spending, not to mention the \$50 billion per year they spend themselves. Whether it's toys, TV shows and movies, CDs, breakfast cereals, or after-school snacks, all marketers need to get a piece of this huge pie is a little information. Companies big and small are staking their claim to the booming kids' market by going online.

The information online marketers need to target children more effectively is relatively easy to come by. Promises of freebies and prizes are a favorite way of

prying information out of kids. For example, Dr. Pepper and NBC teamed up to create a "teen tip" Web page and simply asked teens to contribute their own tips along with their name, age, gender, address, and e-mail address. This was done without any attempt to get parental consent. Getting teens to submit was simple; it was posed as an online contest, with a trip to Los Angeles and the chance to be in a TV studio audience topping the list of prizes. What teen could resist?

Younger kids are especially curious and trusting and make easy targets for aggressive marketers. The unique nature of Web-based technology allows advertisers to get to kids by using well-known TV characters to interact with kids on a first-name basis. To innocent kids, talking to Mickey Mouse just seems like fun, but companies use characters like this to solicit data and dollars from them. Through traditional broadcast media, such as TV, there is a natural separation between the character hawking goods and the viewer. But on the Internet, it's a one-on-one relationship. If the Mouse were to ask the child to fill out an online profile with name, age, gender or other valuable, potentially dangerous information, would your child hesitate?

Most sites collecting information just want to promote the company's products more effectively, and there's nothing fundamentally wrong with that. Even the strongest consumer advocates would concede that companies can gather information about consumers -- as long as the consumers are adults and there is informed consent. The problems start when the perpetrators are your kids' favorite cartoon characters and those characters are asking for data that could fall into dangerous hands.

Are Your Children Giving Away the Family Secrets?

The information being collected from kids often goes beyond their own identification. They are routinely asked for information about parents, including their home address, employers, favorite hobbies or music or sports. And too often, kids give out dangerously personal information, without even realizing it.

The risk that children could do something that has negative legal or financial consequences for their parents is very real. Children don't understand the concept of doing something that violates another person's rights. Even being asked to give out a parent's credit card -- something that happens all too frequently -- may not seem like a big deal after watching the parent do it with routine nonchalance.

Protection Under the law

Some business groups, such as the Children's Advertising Review Unit of the Council of Better Business Bureaus, have issued their own self-regulatory guidelines for online advertisers. But after privacy groups repeatedly raised the issue before Congress, the FTC was convinced that some real protection was needed. The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) went into effect April 21, 2000. Basically, COPPA prevents the collection of personally identifiable information from children under the age of 13 for commercial marketing purposes without full disclosure and parental consent.

Web sites collecting data from children now have hard and fast rules to follow:

PRIVACY OPTIONS

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[Stop Junk Privacy Kit](#)
[Privacy Features](#)
[Privacy Fact Sheets](#)
[Privacy FAQs](#)
[Privacy Sources](#)
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More Ways To

- Parents must be able to review any information about their children, correct it if necessary, and they must be able to delete any information that has been collected from their children and prevent its further use.
- Parents must be contacted if information collection practices change and have the opportunity to give new consent or decline.
- Sites must disclose what kind of information is being collected, how it is used, and identify any third parties with whom the information is being shared.
- Sites must get parental consent before asking children for personal information.
- Sites must post privacy policies on home pages as well as any area where information is being collected.

The FTC is monitoring sites for compliance with COPPA, and those not following the rules will be slapped with penalties of \$11,000 per violation. A few months after COPPA went into effect, the FTC checked a number of children's sites and found roughly 25 percent provided a wide variety of children's content without collecting any personal information. That's an improvement overall. Of the sites that did collect kids' personally identifiable information, however, fully half seemed to have substantial compliance problems.

Privacy advocates point out that one of the problems with this law is that parents can still give consent to businesses to market to their children, and when that consent is given, the information can be shared with third parties. Further, this law only covers kids under 13, but who says teens are savvy enough to protect themselves or the family secrets?

What Parents Can Do

Parents are the ultimate line of defense when it comes to protecting kids online. To protect your children and your family, take the time to educate both yourself and your kids about the dangers of giving out too much information.

Tell your children:

- Don't name anyone in your family, mention your address, or what school they go to in a chat room, on a bulletin board, or to online penpals.
- Don't tell any friends -- even other kids -- their screen name or their user ID or password.
- Never answer any questions, enter contests, or provide information without checking with you first.
- Never give out their Internet or AOL password to anyone.
- Never give out their real name, address or phone number to anyone without your permission.

As parents, you should:

- Don't give away details about your kids or your family while chatting online. You never know who might be listening.
- Explain why it's important to protect personal information.
- If you think your child's privacy has been violated, fill out the online

Protect Your Privacy!

[Privacy Main](#)

SEARCH

Entered Since:

Type of Content:

Topic Area:

Keyword Search:



complaint form at the [FTC Web site](#).

- Keep the computer where it can be easily monitored, such as the family room.
- Make sure every site your kids visit has a privacy policy that complies with COPPA.
- Make sure the family Web page doesn't include any identifiable information about your kids.
- Surf together with your kids.

Parents should also be aware of other places children have access to the Internet. If your child has access to the Internet through a school, library, or daycare facility, they could be giving consent for the collection of your child's personal information.

Conclusion

Like all citizens, children have a fundamental right to privacy. No one, including a reputable company, has the right to extract information from children without first asking for parental permission. The Internet has provided awesome opportunities for kids, but it has brought with it unique challenges. Most children are far more comfortable navigating the information highway than their parents, but unlike adults, they cannot be expected to fully understand the consequences of giving out personal information online. It's up to all of us to protect the privacy of our children.

Related Information

[Privacy Fears Online](#)

Since the beginning of the Internet, users have been concerned about privacy issues, and those concerns are growing more severe. It seems the general public shares Web surfers' concerns. Recently, The National Consumers League (NCL) discovered through a survey that what worries American consumers most is not health care, crime, or taxes. It's loss of privacy.

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