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## Consumer Reports magazine: June 2011

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## That Facebook friend might be 10 years old, and other troubling news

Last reviewed: June 2011

This article appeared in [June 2011 Consumer Reports Magazine](#).

Our survey unearthed several disturbing findings about children and Facebook:

Of the 20 million minors who actively used Facebook in the past year, 7.5 million—or more than one-third—were younger than 13 and not supposed to be able to use the site.

Among young users, more than 5 million were 10 and under, and their accounts were largely unsupervised by their parents.

One million children were harassed, threatened, or subjected to other forms of cyberbullying on the site in the past year.

Clearly, using Facebook presents children and their friends and families with safety, security, and privacy risks.

### Underage 'friends'

Facebook screens applicants by asking for their birth date and rejecting those too young. Because joining doesn't require a credit card, though, a preteenager can slip through by falsifying his or her birth date.

Children under 13 who post personal information on Facebook that can be publicly viewed defeat protections afforded by the Federal Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998 (COPPA). That act prohibits sites from knowingly disclosing children's personally identifiable information. "We are very concerned about kids eliding around COPPA's restrictions," Federal Trade Commission chair Jon Leibowitz told us.

### Where are Mom and Dad?

Parents of kids 10 and younger on Facebook seem to be largely unconcerned. Only 18 percent made their child a Facebook friend, which is the best way to monitor the child. By comparison, 62 percent of parents of 13- to 14-year-olds did so. Only 10 percent of parents of kids 10 and under had frank talks about appropriate online behavior and threats.

Parents of young children might think they are less likely to take risks, some observers say. "It's like an alarm clock goes off for parents when their kids turn 13," says Vanessa Van Petten, creator of Radical Parenting, a blog featuring writing by teenagers that aims to improve family

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relationships. "Parents think their younger kids aren't interested in porn. With a 10-year-old mentality, they're only interested in 10-year-old things."

But those parents would be mistaken. Ten-year-olds need protection from other hazards that might lurk on the Internet, such as links that infect their computer with malware and invitations from strangers, not to mention bullies.

## Privacy watch

There's concern that Facebook and other social networks manipulate privacy policies and settings to confuse users, extract more personal information from them, and transfer the information to application developers and websites, Marc Rotenberg, Executive Director of the Electronic Privacy Information Center, told Congress last year.

He urged that such data-collection practices be regulated for 13- to 18-year-olds "who have no protection under COPPA and who cannot easily follow all the changes taking place in this self-regulatory environment."

Parents who object to their teenager using Facebook can't count on any help from the site. Citing federal electronic privacy laws, Facebook won't close a teenager's account just because a parent requests it.

## Recommendations

### For parents

If your preteenager uses Facebook, delete the account or ask Facebook to by using its "report an underage child" form. For children 13 and older, monitor activities by joining their circle of Facebook friends. If that's not feasible with an older teenager, keep tabs on them through their friends or siblings, as did 18 percent of parents we surveyed who had 13- to 17-year-olds on Facebook.

Get to know the technology. "Use Facebook yourself, so you're savvy about the privacy issues," says Denise Terry, chief "safety mom" at SafetyWeb, an Internet-monitoring service for parents.

### For Facebook

Facebook should beef up its screening to drastically reduce the number of underage members and make its privacy controls even more accessible. Among active adult Facebook users who hadn't used such controls, 66 percent told us they didn't know either that the controls existed or how to access them.

### For government

Rotenberg urges Congress to raise the age requirement in COPPA to 18 and to focus more on personal data that is location-based—information that wasn't foreseen when the act was written. Leibowitz says the FTC might soon try to tighten age verification for websites. Consumers Union is seeking teen privacy protections in the proposed Commercial Privacy Bill of Rights Act.

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