Why Facebook Has It Wrong About Our Kids

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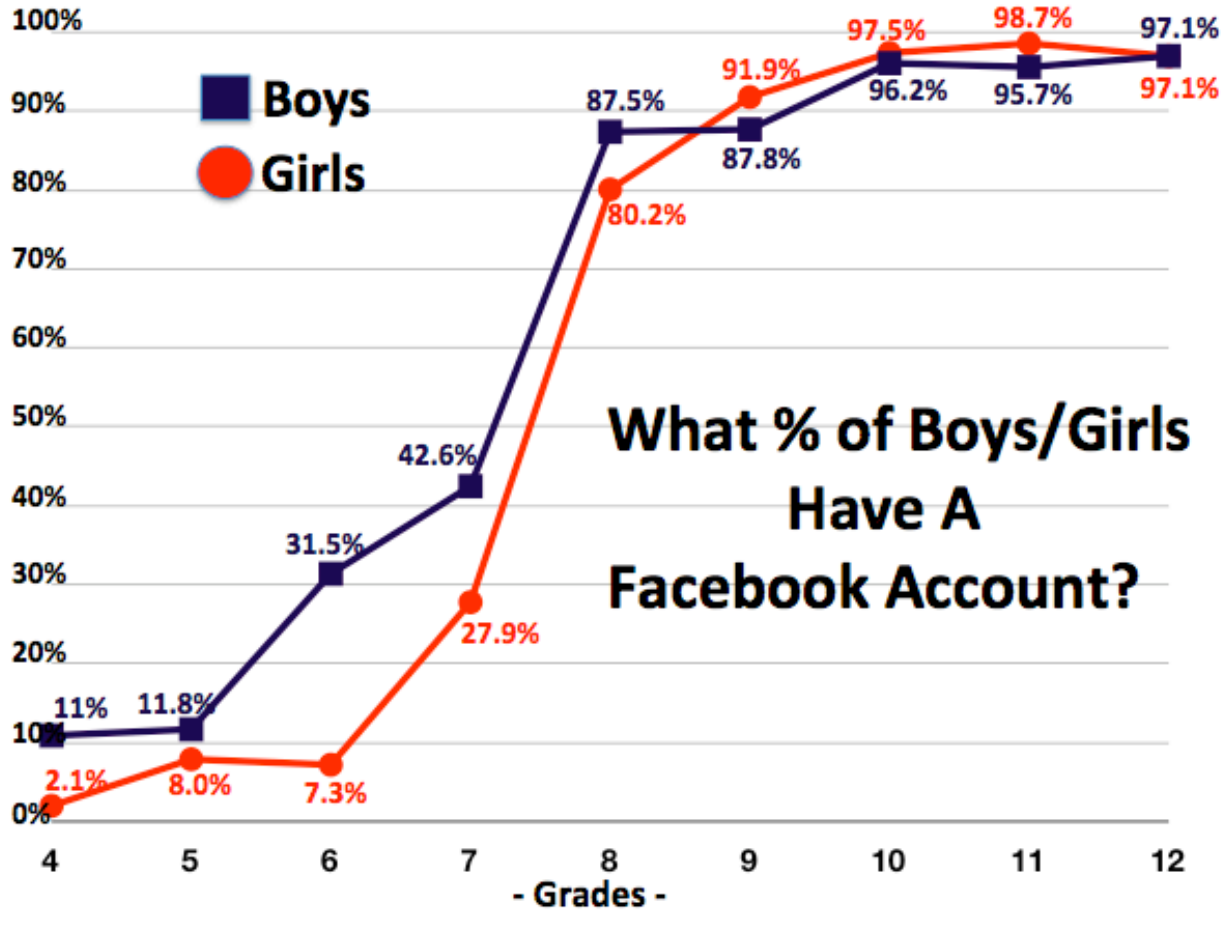
Facebook's rise in popularity is remarkable; enviable to any other company looking to increase their market share, profits and name recognition. But at what cost to our kids? When Mark Zuckerberg and his friends first created Facebook it was intended for college students eighteen years and older with a college email address. A few years later Facebook opened their community to *anyone* eighteen and older, not just college students. Then the age restriction was dropped from eighteen to sixteen. And again a couple of years later Facebook dropped the age of use from sixteen to thirteen. Not coincidently, the drop in age to thirteen was not long after Rubert Murdoch's news empire purchased MySpace, the reigning social network king, for hundreds of millions of dollars. It seemed almost kismet that Facebook was destined for great things, not only surpassing MySpace as the largest social network on the planet (Facebook now boasts more than 560 million users), but surpassing Google itself in March, 2010 as the most visited website on the planet.

Facebook has become the most popular place for our children to spend time socializing. We conducted surveys of the online behavior of 2155 students in grades 4 – 12 in the fall of 2010. We learned that students as young 8 years old have Facebook accounts, which is clearly against Facebook's own terms of service. Facebook states that children must be 13 years or older to open an account. Our estimates are that 85% of all 13 year olds have a Facebook account and the percentage continues to increase through high school. But should young teens have Facebook accounts?

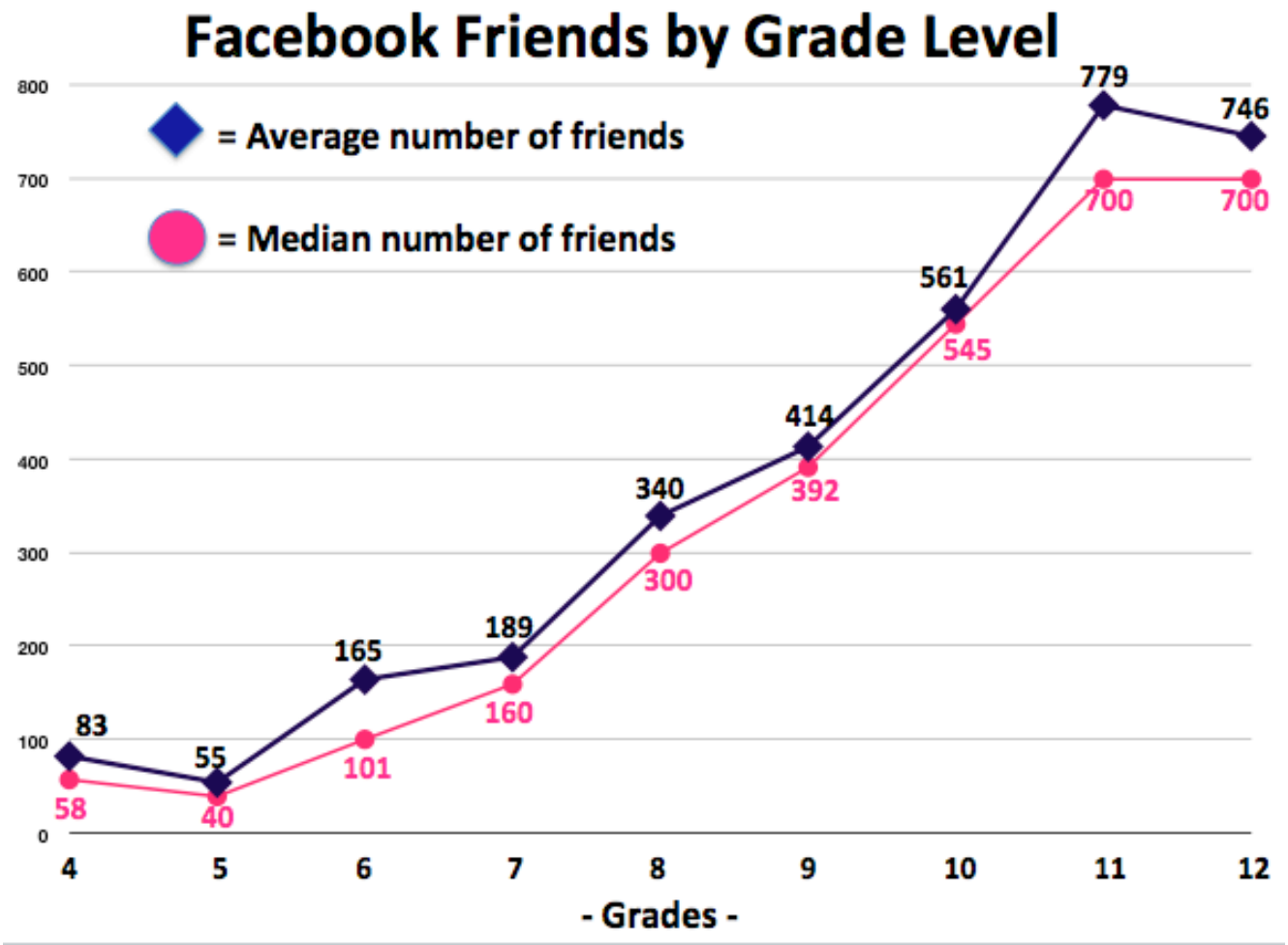


As Facebook and other social network sites have lowered the recommended age of use, no one seems to be asking the question "is it OK for children to use?" Technology seems to scream along at breakneck speed, constantly changing, adding new websites and communications tools every month. But just because children ***can*** use a technology, ***should*** they? Is the technology developmentally healthy or appropriate for them to use? Does the technology contain the proper safeguards children need? And what safeguards do they need because of their age and level of maturity?

Despite Facebook's 13-year-old age restriction, which appears to be based on the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998, the social network site is used by children as young as eight years old. During our nearly fifteen year history working in Internet safety education the single most consistent axiom we see yearly is that whatever kids are doing on the Internet this year, they will be doing the same thing next year at a younger age. It was unheard of for a sixth grader (eleven-year-old) to have a Facebook account in 2007, or an account on any adult social network site for that matter. Our Fall 2010 student surveys now show that 20% of sixth graders have a Facebook account. However, when we asked a group of about 80 sixth graders in one particular school in January, 2011 if they had a Facebook account, at least 75% raised their hands. It was in the early fall of 2009 when we learned… pause for gasp… that a fourth grader (nine-year-old) had a Facebook page. Since that time, we have found fourth graders with Facebook accounts at every elementary school we visit. Our Fall, 2010 data shows that 6.7% of fourth graders have a Facebook account. Middle school students recently told us that there are third graders (eight-year-olds) with Facebook accounts.

Facebook has more than 133 million users in the United States alone and more than 560 million worldwide (December, 2010 data). Shouldn't we expect some of them to be children? Well, yes. But that doesn't mean that Facebook, or any other adult social network site such as MySpace, Friendster, Xanga, Hi5, Gaia, or even WeeWorld (WeeWorld is a social network designed for the "tween ages" of 10-12), is a healthy place for them to hang out. In the United States there are many precedents for setting age restrictions when there is a risk to children or teens. There is an "age of consent" for sexual intercourse, legal driving age, minimum age to purchase tobacco, alcohol, and pornography. Unfortunately, there are no studies we can find in the United States which track children under age 13 who use Facebook because children under 13 must lie about their age in order to open a Facebook account. Also many young teens between thirteen and fifteen lie about their age on Facebook, often adding two or three years to their age. Thus it is hard to study their experiences on Facebook based on actual age. (Note: Ofcom, an independent regulator in the UK conducted a study that included 8-to-12 year olds using adult social network sites in 2009 and found that 25% of those using the Internet had accounts. Visit: http://media.ofcom.org.uk/2010/03/26/a-quarter-of-internet-users-aged-8-12-say-they-have-under-age-social-networking-profiles/)

Some readers may wonder, "what's the fuss?" It is, after-all, just a website for people to talk to each other. However, every middle and high school teacher and administrator across this nation knows that social network sites like Facebook are much more than a place to chat for our kids. The average Facebook user is estimated to have 130 friends according to Facebook statistics. Our Fall, 2010 research shows that the average number of Facebook friends most children and teens have is well above that figure and likely contains complete strangers.



Before we can fully understand why these adult social network sites are not healthy places for children and young teens, we first have to understand something about childhood development.

Children are still in their formative years for moral and ethical development. For example, many children are not yet able to internalize the practice of "doing good" because it is the right thing to do. They “do good” because they know that there are expectations for their behavior and they will be rewarded for good behavior and punished for bad behavior. Children need clear boundaries and clear consequences when those boundaries are tested. Every parent and teacher knows that children push boundaries. Yet boundaries are put in place to protect children and for their healthy and age-appropriate maturation. For example, most adults understand the need for a five-year-old to hold a mother’s hand while crossing a busy street, a nine-year-old being told that he cannot walk through New York’s Central Park alone, or a sixteen-year-old new driver being told that she can’t drive a car full of her friends to and from a late-night party. Children who grow up with age-appropriate boundaries are less at-risk from harm. Social risks for bullying, harassment, exclusion, name-calling and other behaviors that can cause emotional harm, or exposure to content that is developmentally inappropriate, are much harder to identify. It is therefore harder for parents to set boundaries and restrictions.

Children also have emerging decision-making skills. Brain research has demonstrated that the frontal cortex of the brain, where our decision-making skills are rooted, doesn’t fully mature until the mid-20s. The car rental companies have understood that for years! (Anyone under age 25 must have a rental car co-signed by someone over 25 years old.) For children and teens ***impulse*** is often their first "strategy" for decision-making**.** Impulse is not the most valuable skill

for solving complex, emotional and fast-paced problems online. Also, young teens are still in their formative years for social development; they are still figuring out the impact and effect of language and behavior on their relationships with others as well as the complexity of relationships. One of the consequences of this has been a remarkable erosion of civility online amongst many children and teens.

Yet young teens will say "I know what I'm doing online." They will tell us that they know how to use Internet and cell phone technologies better than adults. And they do! But though they may know ***how to use technology***, they are no better parenting themselves online than they are in real life. Their judgment is still evolving and they are still, after-all, children. They need boundaries, structure, rules and parental supervision to use these powerful telecommunications technologies in a safe, healthy, and developmentally appropriate way. If anyone has any doubt how children or teens might misuse technology when there is no parental over-site consider the explosive occurrences of sexting and cyberbullying.

Current research on human behavior and the Internet tells us that most forms of Internet communication creates the illusion that we are invisible or anonymous; that we are less human and less socially responsible for our actions. The reduction of social and contextual cues, and tangible feedback, in online communication makes it easier for mean and hurtful behavior. Also, different social expectations exist for different online environments ranging from responsible to irresponsible. Socializing across the Internet creates for many kids a disinhibition whereby they feel they can say or do things online that they would not normally say or do in person. Adults sometimes face this same disinhibition but most are able to manage it and act in a socially responsible manner, in part because of the many years of practice in their communication skills and the foundation of a strong value system and morals. For the most part, kids don't have the many years of practice as adults do, nor the strong moral foundation to "do good", and good decision-making skills (remember the immature frontal-lobe) to avoid the many difficulties they fall prey to in online social network sites. This point also highlights the important need for more extensive K-12 curricula on "digital citizenship" in all our schools.

Below is a review of the five key issues for our children and young teens using online social network sites.

1. **Avoidance of difficult face-to-face communications**
   Many children and teens turn to electronic communications to avoid having difficult face-to-face conversations because it is easier to have them online. Teens have told us, for example, that they would rather break up with a boyfriend or girlfriend via texting, chat or IM than do it in person or over the phone. With children turning to telecommunications at younger and younger ages, and spending more and more time online, we feel that they are losing out on the development of very important social skills that come from difficult face-to-face conversations.

2. **Loss of boundaries; loss of expectations**
   Ask any expert who works with children including teachers and parents… Most will tell you that children grow up healthiest in a world where there are boundaries put in place to protect them physically and emotionally, and where there are clear expectations for their behavior. Quite simply, there are no boundaries or expectations online and it is very, very difficult for parents to put these in place for their children. The Internet is a constantly moving target, as is our children's behavior. Also, it is exceptionally easy to mask what things really are online. Even websites that appear to be age-appropriate for a child may not be. For example, AddictingGames.com, owned by Nickelodeon, is one of the most popular game

sites for children ages nine to thirteen. Yet AddictingGames has posted games containing sexual, very violent, and vulgar content, or content that sexually objectifies girls/women. Such games included "Don't Whack Your Boss", "Whack Your Ex", "Perry the Perv", and "Candy the Naughty Cheerleader." [To read more about this concern, read our March, 2010 newsletter at www.childrenonline.org/newsletters/March10.pdf.]

3. **Development is accelerated**
   It is not a question of "if" our children will stumble upon something for which they are not developmentally ready; it is "when." Keep in mind that what they will likely stumble upon won't be the "tame" Playboy pictures of yesteryear. Pornography on the Internet is often extreme and upsetting for a mind not ready to process what they are seeing. One parent once told us that she discovered her nine-year-old boy crying in the shower. He had accidently come upon a man-boy love website and was trying to "wash" the images out of his head. A ten-year-old girl finding videos of hard-core sex is likely to have an altered view of her body and her relationship with males. In the summer of 2009, Symantec reported the words "sex" and "porn" amongst the top five search terms by children age seven and higher in their search application. (The study was based on more than fourteen million search terms used by children of different ages through the OnlineFamily.Norton.com interface which enables parents to track their children's online activity. "Facebook" was also on the top five list.) Kids are naturally curious, but without boundaries or protections in place, their curiosity will easily lead them to unhealthy places forcing them to face topics for which they are not developmentally prepared. Also, due to the disinhibition kids often feel when communicating online, we have learned that they will easily reveal very intimate and personal details with one another that they would not as easily reveal in person, or as quickly in a real life relationship. Is it emotionally healthy for kids to reveal things online that they don't feel comfortable revealing in real life? What is the impact of this accelerated intimacy on their relationships? This deserves more attention and research.

4. **Screens act as a shield to ethical decision-making and deception is routine online**
   The power of *anonymity* that children and teens feel in front of a computer screen often leads some of them to make very poor decisions. For example, anonymity enables harassment. It enables some to deliberately make bad choices because they feel they cannot be caught and that there are no adults watching them. Thus they often feel there are no consequences for their bad behavior. Also, deception is the norm online and with it often comes abuse and/or harassment. Deception is easy to perpetrate and kids are routinely deceived by each other, bullies, scammers, and marketers…. Even by others who are checking up on their online reputation such as a camp director, employer or admissions officer. And more often than not, kids don't get it. Though they themselves easily lie online, they often believe what others say to them. Kids, unfortunately, tell us that there is a lot of meanness online. They think that this is a normal part of their Internet experience and they are used to it. It is how "everyone acts." It saddens us, for example, to hear that some teen girls expect to hear sexually harassing and sexually objectifying comments being made about them.

5. **Children and teens are easy targets for manipulation**
   Though teens would vehemently disagree with the above statement, it is true. [For additional reading on this topic, read our article "Why Kids Can't Avoid a Good Scam" in our January, 2010 newsletter at www.childrenline.org/newsletters/Jan10.pdf.] Teens are targeted as a conduit to their parents' financial accounts by theft of information or as a conduit for installation of malware. Teens have successfully been targeted many times by scammers in Facebook and other social network sites. One of the most successful scams occurred in the fall of 2008 and was used to trick teens into visiting a website that had two consequences.

The first was to infect their computer (Windows-based computers) with malware, and the second was to capture their social network login credentials so the scammers could disseminate the infection to others. Another scam from the fall of 2009 involved spyware disguised as an add-on application to Facebook (Honesty Box Revealer**, not** Honesty Box itself). And in May of 2010 a Facebook group appeared called "10 Best Ways to Cheat on Exams" and invited Facebook users to become fans. Clicking the fan button triggered a javascript that cost the Facebook user their personal information, an invitation to friends to become a fan, and an invitation to take a scam survey. Teens and children using Facebook have also fallen prey to identity theft by revealing too much information online. Parents have also been *crammed* because their children were tricked into revealing their cell phone numbers in bogus surveys in Facebook and kids' gaming sites. [Cramming is a form of fraud in which charges are added to a cell phone bill by a third party without the subscriber's consent.]

Let's not forget that our children also deal with the same problems that all of us deal with in Facebook… a false sense of privacy. The reality though is that we shouldn't trust social network sites to guard or keep our privacy. Some add-on applications gather personal information for fraudulent marketing purposes and identity theft. Facebook walls, surveys, photo libraries, profiles, group subscriptions and friend lists reveal too much personal information about ourselves; even photos tagged by others can pose a risk. Marketers are capable of discerning a great deal of information about us from what we post in our accounts. By analyzing our posts, clicks and relationships, marketers can even tell who is "popular" amongst a group of friends.

Facebook users often feel a false sense of privacy because they log into their accounts using a password, confirm or deny friends to access those accounts, and adjust their "privacy" settings. There have been many serious consequences for teens and their parents as a result of information revealed in the children's Facebook accounts. These consequences have included denial of admission to college, rescission of acceptance to college, teenager's arrests, parent's arrests, expulsion and suspension from school, financial theft from parent's bank account (thieves stole information from teen's accounts that enabled them to figure out a parent's login information to the parent's bank account), loss of employment and removal from team sports just to name a few. A study conducted by TRUSTe in October of 2010 showed that 18% of teens had been embarrassed or disciplined as a result of something they posted or others posted about them.

Children make mistakes. That is a part of growing up. Sadly though, some of the mistakes they make online can have a serious impact on their lives and are publicly available for years. Adult social network sites such as Facebook make it far too easy for some of these mistakes to occur. Without understanding the impact, our teens are creating an online reputation for others to explore. Both children and teens don't often understand the value of privacy or how to maintain that privacy online. The "bottom line" is that there is NO privacy online, especially in Facebook. [Read the many articles that have been in the news about Facebook and privacy concerns. Enter "Facebook and privacy problems" into Google.] Yet the false sense of privacy that comes from logging into a Facebook account, and the feeling by teens that adults are excluded, contributes to more reckless and risky behavior by many. And yes, having a Facebook account does provide a direct point of contact with unknown, and undesirable, adults and other teens. This is possible even when their accounts are set to "friends only." Several different studies have shown that some Facebook users will friend complete strangers. Research puts the figure as much as 68% of teens have friended strangers. (The percentage has varied depending on the study being cited. In August 2009, for example, Sophos.com conducted a study in which approximately 43% of Facebook users accepted friend requests from complete strangers. Webroot, an Internet

software security company, concluded from their recent study published in March, 2010 that forty percent of social network users 18 - 29 say they accept friend requests from strangers while only 29 percent of total users do so.) The TRUSTe study published in October of 2010 reported even higher figures. 68% of teens surveyed accepted friend requests from people they didn't know. (8% reported accepting all, 34% accepting some, and 26% accepting rarely.)

And let's not forget that, for a small percentage of teens, there is an addictive quality to using Facebook and other social network sites. Teens are so fiercely connected to the social fabric of their lives that they cannot easily break away. For this small percent of teens, Facebook and other social network sites *consume* their time.

Adult social network sites such as Facebook are truly outstanding tools that help us feel more connected to others. Facebook and other social network sites enable people to connect across time and space like no other tool ever invented. But this very powerful tool has risks and requires a level of maturity that most children and young teens do not developmentally possess.

The driving motivation behind Facebook's marketing and development is financial. Facebook, like any corporation, is trying to make money. As such, they do not have the safety and best interests of our children as their primary consideration. Dropping the minimum age to use Facebook from eighteen to thirteen was for financial gain. We believe sixteen is the better, more appropriate minimum age for Facebook users. This minimum age requirement, however, is meaningless if a child as young as eight or nine can lie about his or her age to sign up for an account. Better safeguards need to be developed that will prevent under-age children from having access to services intended for older users. Additionally, better K-12 education is needed to help our children prepare for life in their online world. This education must include the use of various social tools at appropriate ages, media literacy, understanding manipulation, recognizing scams and fraudulent advertising, and netiquette in general.