

# Some parents worry Google Buzz is 'danger zone' for children

February 23 2010, By Jessica Guynn

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Parents and privacy watchdogs are sounding the alarm that Google Inc.'s new social networking tool, called Buzz, may put children at risk.

The concern came home in a personal way for technology analyst Charlene Li. On Sunday night she discovered that her 9-year-old daughter had publicly shared a private conversation on Buzz without intending to. Li grew even more troubled when she spotted her daughter's fourth-grade classmates chatting with strangers.

She turned off Buzz and alerted other parents and her child's school, which is in turn alerted other parents. Then Li, an analyst who tracks Google as well as other Internet companies, took to the Internet to spread the word.

"These are 4th graders who have no clue," Li wrote in a blog post. "Imagine parents (and kids) checking out their Buzz accounts to find that 'iorgyinbathrooms' is following them, which is exactly what happened with my child's account."

Google had already drawn sharp criticism from privacy watchdogs for the way it rolled out Buzz in millions of Gmail accounts. Privacy expert Kathryn Montgomery, a professor at American University, urged the [Federal Trade Commission](#) to address the potential risks to kids.

"[Google Buzz](#) is a new danger zone for children," Montgomery said.

Google said it had no specific plans to tweak Buzz in response to parents' privacy concerns. In a statement, spokesman Scott Rubin said: "We designed Buzz to make it easy to have conversations with your friends about the things that interest you. Keeping kids safe online is very important to us."

It can also be tricky. Privacy watchdogs have successfully hounded social networks in the past for not taking sufficient steps to protect kids from predators and other dangers. By adding Buzz to its popular e-mail service, Google has brought new attention to how kids use Gmail and raised questions about how they may use it.

Google, like the [social networking](#) site Facebook, does not permit kids younger than 13 open Gmail accounts. That complies with the Child Online Privacy Protection Act, which requires Web sites that collect information from children under age 13 get consent from a parent.

In addition, law enforcement officials have pushed [social networking](#) sites to confirm the identities and ages of young users.

University of Maryland law professor Danielle Citron said Google, itself, is not legally required to confirm the ages of Buzz users, but should.

Citron's two kids, 9 and 11, became fascinated by Buzz during the recent snowstorms. "It was utterly amazing how they had no idea what they were sharing," Citron said.

Like many other Internet savvy parents, Citron said she is vigilant about keeping her kids off [Facebook](#) and MySpace, and having frequent conversations with them about the risks of exposing too much personal information online.

But Citron said she was unprepared a few weeks ago when Buzz popped

up in her children's Gmail accounts. "This is foisted on children and they love it," Citron said. "And it's really dangerous."

Li said she also worries that even if parents disable Buzz, kids can turn it back on. And they may not understand how to manage the [privacy](#) settings to stay safe, given that adults have been confused by the settings.

She wants Google to add parental controls to Gmail. And she is urging parents to discuss Buzz with their kids because she fears the predators are already lurking there.

"I just want the kids to be safe," she said.

[Google](#) said it has the same goal. "We think it's important to remember that there's no substitute for parental supervision to keep kids safe on the Internet," Rubin said.

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