

# Why parents help their children lie to Facebook about age

November 2 2011, By Erin White

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A major new nationwide study released today, co-authored by Eszter Hargittai, associate professor of communication studies at Northwestern University, shows that many parents know that their underage children are on Facebook in violation of the site's restrictions.

Parents are often complicit in helping their [children](#) join the site. These new data suggest that, by creating a context in which companies choose to restrict access to children, the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), which is currently under review, inadvertently undermines parents' ability to make choices and protect their children's data.

This study has significant implications for policy makers, particularly in light of the discussion in Congress and at the Federal Trade Commission about COPPA and other age-based privacy laws. Based on a national sample of 1,007 U.S. parents who have children living with them between the ages of 10-14, this survey conducted July 5-14, 2011 found:

- 12 is the mean age at which parents of current 13-and 14-year-olds reported that their child joined Facebook; Facebook's minimum age is 13.
- 36% of all parents surveyed knew that their child joined Facebook before the age of 13; 68% of these parents helped their child create their account.

- 55% of parents of 12-year-olds report their child has a Facebook account; 82% of these parents knew when their underage child signed up and 76% assisted in creating the account.
- 53% of parents think Facebook has a minimum age; 35% of these parents think that it is a recommendation and not a requirement.
- 78% of parents reported various reasons that make it acceptable for their child to violate minimum age restrictions on online services.

The authors argue that these data call into question the efficacy of COPPA. Their findings have important implications for COPPA reform and other age-based legislation, such as the “Do Not Track Kids Act” currently being discussed in Congress:

- COPPA is well intended but has major unintended consequences in terms of encouraging general-purpose websites like [Facebook](#), Skype, and Gmail to limit kids under 13 from accessing educational and social opportunities.
- Age-based restrictions imposed in response to COPPA undermine parental authority and limit parents’ freedoms to make choices about what their children do and what information is collected about them.
- As a result of COPPA, lying about one’s age has become normal and parents often help children lie. This creates safety and privacy issues.
- Online safety and privacy are of great concern to parents, but most parents do not want solutions that result in age-based restrictions for their children.
- [Parents](#) are open to recommended age ratings and other approaches that offer guidance without limiting their children’s access.

**More information:** The full survey results and policy implications may be found online at: [www.firstmonday.org/](http://www.firstmonday.org/)

Provided by Northwestern University

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