

Parents break rule to help young kids join Facebook

December 19 2011, By Jessica Tobacman

Nancy Gerstein is a savvy marketing executive who knows a lot about Facebook. She supervises corporate Facebook pages for her company's clients.

So Gerstein had no qualms when her 11-year-old daughter recently told her that she had created an account on the social media site while she was at a sleepover with a friend. She even helped her daughter finish establishing the [Facebook](#) page.

"Compared to some of the other things out there, it's fairly innocent. The adult stuff is supposedly blocked," she said. "I know the importance of Facebook."

Gerstein is one of many parents across the nation who are helping their preteen children get on Facebook despite the company's requirement that users must be at least 13 years old. These parents say Facebook, the world's biggest social networking site, is useful and so popular among their children that it's nearly impossible to stop them from joining.

"It's very difficult to stop something like this when all of her friends are on it," Gerstein said, noting that her daughter and her daughter's friends all have computers. "There's only so much you can do."

Kira Kurka's 9-year-old daughter joined Facebook during a sleepover with friends, and Kurka, who lives with her family in Chicago, helped her 11-year-old son become a member.

"I want him to embrace technology, and I think social media is very powerful," Kurka said.

A recent study published in an academic journal last month found that 36 percent of all parents surveyed knew that their child joined Facebook before [age](#) 13 and that 68 percent of these parents helped their child create their account.

The study, titled "Why Parents Help Their Children Lie to Facebook About Age: Unintended Consequences of the 'Children's Online [Privacy Protection](#) Act,'" also found that 55 percent of parents of 12-year-olds report that their child has a Facebook account. The overwhelming majority of those parents, about 82 percent, knew when their underage child signed up, and 76 percent helped in creating the account, according to the study, which was published in the Internet journal First Monday, [firstmonday.org](#).

Nicole Jackson Colaco, a public policy manager at Facebook, said the study "makes important points, particularly in relation to parents that actively assist their children under 13 in joining Facebook even though they know it violates our policy.

"The report also highlights the difficulty in implementing age restrictions on the Internet and underlines the need to continually work to keep kids safe online," Colaco said in a statement.Â

Facebook, like other websites, established the requirement that users must be at least 13 in response to the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, or COPPA, of 1998 and a regulation within it called the Children's Online Privacy Protection Rule, which took effect April 21, 2000.

"The primary goal of COPPA and the rule is to place parents in control

over what information is collected from their young children online," according to the Federal Trade Commission. "The rule was designed to protect children under age 13 while accounting for the dynamic nature of the Internet. As a result of COPPA, website operators must obtain affirmative consent from parents before children under 13 can create an account."

Although the law does not require websites to bar children under 13, "the industry response to the law has led to age restrictions," said Jason M. Schultz, one of the authors of the study of preteens on Facebook and an assistant clinical professor of law at the University of California Berkeley School of Law.

But parents across the country, including Gerstein and Kurka, are helping their children get around the restriction because they see the value of the wealth of information and communication on the Internet.

"It's really helped her with her computer, language and social skills. She really knows the keyboard and excels at social media now. It's useful for school and everyday life," Gerstein said.

Besides, "many parents are not aware there's a minimum age for signing up for Facebook," said Eszter Hargittai, one of the Facebook study's authors and an associate professor of communication studies at Northwestern University. The study found that 53 percent of parents think Facebook has a minimum age and that 35 percent of those parents think that it is a recommendation and not a requirement.

Gerstein said she was unaware of Facebook's 13-year-old age limit until another mother blamed her for her daughter's joining the website's community.

At that point, Gerstein's daughter was already online. The other mother

said that after Gerstein's daughter had signed up, her daughter had followed suit.

Kurka now knows the website has an age limit.

Her children don't use Facebook much, and they are on it only with other [children](#) from school, Kurka said.

"It's another means of communication for them," she said.

Kurka said she monitors her children's computer use. She has warned them about visiting suspicious websites because they might get computer viruses or come across strangers.

"I trust them wholeheartedly. They're good kids," she said. "They're smart and savvy and never get into trouble."

Gerstein's daughter, whom the Tribune is not identifying to protect her privacy, said that joining Facebook was simply a way to interact with her friend.

"I didn't get why there was an age restriction," the girl said. "It didn't bother me at all. I'm not visiting inappropriate sites."

Her privacy settings allow only Facebook visitors who on her friends' list can see any information about her.

She knows predators exist online.

"You can block them and interact with friends, and leave if you want to," she said.

Jean Retzinger, assistant director of the Media Studies Department at the

University of California in Berkeley, said [parents](#) who use Facebook may feel better able to monitor their children's online activities because they are also on the website.

Gerstein agreed.

"I believe that [social media](#) is here to stay," she said. "You should stay on top of it. You have to be online; your kids are."

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