

Facebook patent reveals plans for children to join the social network

The company has designs for a system that allows children younger than 13 to be supervised by parents, according to a new patent

Samuel Gibbs

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Facebook is working on a way to allow children under 13 years old join the social network.

The company has designs for a system that allows children younger than 13 to be supervised by parents, according to a new patent, to comply with the US Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (Coppa), which prohibits children under 13 from using online services that collect data without explicit "verifiable parental consent".

Facebook currently bans users under 13 from joining the social network.

"Child safety advocates, policymakers and companies have discussed how best to help parents keep their kids safe online," said a Facebook spokesperson in a statement sent to the Guardian. "Like any responsible company, we looked at ways to tackle this issue, but a patent application based on two-year-old research is not a predictor of future work in this area."

Parental controls and authorisation

The patent application filed in November 2012 was published last week by the US Patent Office describing a system that allows parents to authorise and supervise Facebook accounts for children.

The parent would first have to verify their own identity, followed by their relationship with the child before allowing the creation of a child's account. Parents would then have parental controls tools to restrict access to certain content, friends and third-party applications such as Facebook games Farmville and Candy Crush.

Child accounts would also have strict privacy controls privacy and permissions allowing parents to approve certain actions.

A system proving the identity of a parent and their consent for children under 13 to join any service that collects data would likely have to be approved by the US Federal Trade Commission, which enforces Coppa.

Access to children's data and their access to online services is governed under the Data Protection Act in the UK, with extra guidance from the UK data protection watchdog the Information Commissioners Office (ICO). ICO is currently promoting the education of information rights to children to help them decide what is appropriate and safe to share online.

Any new system to allow preteens to join a service like Facebook would need to meet ICO guidelines.

'Children are, in fact, now on Facebook'

While Facebook currently prohibits children under 13 from joining the service, many children already join and use Facebook as verifying a person's age is difficult online, especially for those without official government-issued identity documents or other age-related identities.

"The truth of the matter is that children are, in fact, now on Facebook, with or without parental oversight. They won't stop getting on there, regardless of whether or not Facebook is kept from straightforwardly accepting preteen members," explained Lisa Vaas from security company Sophos in a blog post.

Facebook actively attempts to remove underage children, with around 800,000 preteens removed from the service through a tiered screening process in 2012 alone, according to data from Consumer Reports, which also estimated that there were still 5.6 million underage accounts on Facebook, many created with the help of parents.

Facebook said it has nothing to announce regarding allowing those under the age of 13 to use the social network and that the patent was in response to research being conducted in the area but is not indicative of future work.

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How Instagram became the social network for tweens

Well-intentioned parents who've kept their tweens off Facebook are catching on to the workaround: kids are turning to Instagram, the photo-sharing app that may as well be a social network.

by [Michelle Meyers](#) @meymichele / September 8, 2012 4:00 AM PDT

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I just learned that my 12-year-old daughter is an app scofflaw. So, in fact, are the hordes of her fellow tween-agers -- kept off Facebook by their well-intended parents -- who have turned to Instagram as a seemingly innocuous social-network workaround.

As it turns out, just like Facebook, you technically have to be 13 to have an Instagram account. And, just like Facebook, Instagram is more or less a social network, dark sides included. Kids post photos, their followers comment... and then those not invited to said birthday party or shopping excursion get hurt feelings.

Many of us adults discovered Instagram as a nifty photo-sharing app that's lets you spruce up your photos with cool filters. But it has all the functionality of a social network, which Instagram founder Kevin Systrom says was by design.

"We are delighted that there is such a social component to using the app," he said, "but we target and intend for our user base to be 13 or older and because of legal restrictions cannot have anyone under that age using the app."

It's not easy proving the popularity of Instagram among the tween set with hard data, mostly because, as Systrom acknowledged, the service



From my daughter's Instagram page.

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Screenshot by Michelle Meyers/CNET

doesn't "currently disclose demographic data." It's unclear whether this might change now that Facebook has **officially closed its purchase of Instagram**.

Asked specifically if he's heard about the growing numbers of tweens on Instagram and Systrom could only offer that the service has grown in just about every demographic, from "the elderly side" to the 13-plus group. "The proliferation of iPod Touches and iPads has also helped growth outside of people that own iPhones," he said.

But even if Instagram did release demographic data, it likely wouldn't reflect reality. Users like my daughter and her 100 young followers have managed to get around the **strict Instagram terms** requiring users to be 13 or older to use the service. If their **iTunes** accounts are set up correctly, tweens shouldn't be allowed to download the app, Systrom said. My daughter's account, for example, must still be tied to my account -- she's had an iPod Touch for years and still goes through me before buying apps. (So yes, I'm actually just as much the app scofflaw.)

Plus, upon signup, Instagram gives you a birthday picker that doesn't let you choose an age younger than 13, Systrom explained. (My daughter claims no memory of this part of the Instagram sign-up process, so it's unclear how she bypassed it.) Systrom kindly offered to close my daughter's Instagram account, as the service does with any account it learns is in violation of terms. But would mean the end of my already shaky cool-mom status, and after all, she didn't sign on to be the daughter of a journalist.

Hard data

My daughter's experience aside, a few studies help us connect the dots in support of this meteoric rise in Instagram's popularity among tweens. According to Nielsen, for example, Instagram is the top photography site among teens ages 12 to 17, with 1 million teens visiting the site during July. Nielsen doesn't categorize Instagram as a social network. While Flickr was top photo site for the overall population in July, Instagram was the favorite among teens, Nielsen found.

Add to that an earlier Nielsen study on growing popularity of Facebook and social networks in general among teenagers, and yet another on how **teens tripled their mobile data consumption** between December 2010 and December 2011, and the picture becomes clear.

Also, a **Pew report presented over the summer** about teenage online behavior found that 45 percent of online 12-year-olds use social-network sites and that the number doubles to 82 percent for 13-year-old Internet users. The most popular activity for teens on social networks is posting photos and videos, the study found.

Parents caught off-guard

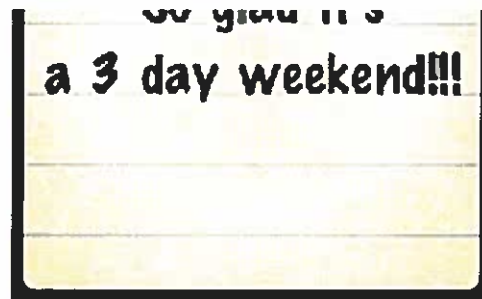
We parents have been advised over and over again by educators that our tween-age kids are just too young for Facebook. Most are just not mature enough to gauge what's appropriate for posting and to know how to respond to cyberbullying or contacts from strangers or spammers.

But with Instagram our guards were down. We never really imagined how it would be used. When my daughter asked permission to download the app, I was frankly excited that she was showing interest in photography. I love using the app and was unaware of the age restriction.

I had heard stories of kids on Instagram who had lost friends over not being included in activities posted to the site. But I only really caught onto



Instagram's ubiquity as a tweenage social network the day before school started this year, when my daughter's middle school sent out class schedules to individual families using its password protected Web site. Within an hour of viewing the class schedule, my daughter had scribbled out a chart of who was in each of her classes. When I asked how she had figured it all out, she responded, "Everybody posted their schedules on Instagram."



31 likes



A recent Facebook-like post on my daughter's Instagram. She posted a photo of a note she wrote on her iPod Touch.

Screenshot by Michelle Meyers/CNET

That started me looking through her account. In another Facebook-like status update, she posted a photo of a note she wrote on her iPod Touch that read, "So glad it's a 3 day weekend!!!" That got 31 likes.

Concerns over Instagram have spurred articles like this one in the Washington Post called "[What parents need to know about Instagram](#)" and an even more informative one it links to from Yoursphere for Parents called, "[Is it okay for kids? What parents need to know.](#)"

There, parents have chimed in about their initial ignorance about how Instagram is being used by tweens.

"My fifth-grade daughter and friends purchased the Instagram app with iTunes gift cards. Her friends thought it was an app to take and share pics and at first didn't realize they could post comments," posted a commenter named SAM. "I had no idea that it was a pseudo-Facebook app. (We are waiting until she is 13 to get a FB account.) I did not know that this app would have her following and being followed by hundreds of people she didn't know...and posting comments...it was alarming."

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Another commenter, Laura, says she'll be closing her 12-year-old daughter's Instagram account, which has turned into a "nightmare."

"She is not allowed to have a Facebook account until high school to avoid bullying issues, but due to my lack of knowledge (I thought Instagram was basically a glorified camera), I allowed her to have an account," Laura wrote. "In the last week, she has been indirectly contacted by what appears to be a predatorial pedophile posing as a radio contest to which girls send their photos. And she also experienced the middle school drama that I was trying to avoid by the lack of a Facebook account."

Tweens, of course, are merely following the leads of teenagers, and, for that matter, the general population. An [Experian Hitwise survey](#) just found that Instagram increased its market share in the U.S. by 17,319 percent between July 2011 and July 2012.

But a friend of mine just offered up a theory on Instagram's [youth popularity](#) based on the behavior of his 14-year-old daughter and her friends who are also crazy for

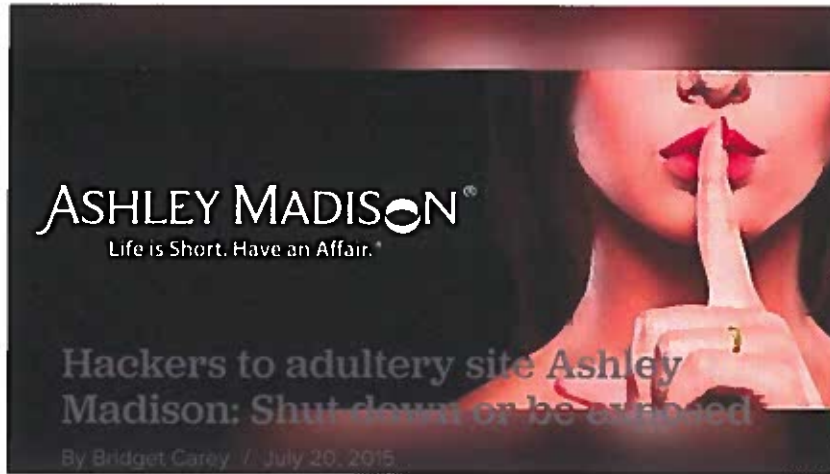
Instagram. She's been on Facebook since she was 12 and her parents have always warned her that with other parents (and grandparents) on the social network, she needed to keep her act very clean.

However, her grandparents haven't yet caught wind of Instagram, so she and her friends can be a little freer with what they post and comment on there.

Of course, it may just be a matter of time before older folks join the party. As Instagram founder Systrom noted, the service's numbers are growing on "the elderly side" as well.

Tags: Internet, iTunes, Facebook, Instagram

FEATURED VIDEO



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Michelle Meyers, associate editor, has been writing and editing CNET News stories since 2005. But she's still working to shed some of her old newspaper ways, first honed when copy was actually cut and pasted. When she's not fixing typos and tightening sentences, she's working with reporters on story ideas, tracking media happenings, or freshening up CNET News' home page. [See full bio](#)

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Letting Children Under 13 On Facebook Could Make Them Safer

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Two years ago — long before there was much public discussion about [Facebook](#) admitting children under 13 — I had the opportunity to interview [Mark Zuckerberg](#). But, before I did, I asked a group of educators, Internet safety advocates and youth risk experts to suggest questions. Two experts suggested I ask him about whether Facebook would consider creating a safe environment for kids under 13, not because they had any vested interest in helping Facebook open a new market, but because they knew that millions of young children were already on Facebook and they wanted to see if there could be a way for Facebook to create a service that could safely serve younger children.

In the interview, Zuckerberg said “It’s something we’ve talked about a little bit, but the restriction and regulation around it make it very difficult so it’s just never been one of the top-of-the-list of things we’ve wanted to do.” ([Click here](#) for that segment or the entire interview from May 27, 2010).

More than a year later, in July 2011, Zuckerberg told an audience at the NewSchools Venture Fund’s Summit that he would like to see kids under 13 on Facebook, because “my philosophy is that for education you need to start at a really, really young age.” He said it would “be a fight we take on at some point,” but neither he nor anyone else at Facebook ever revealed specific plans to change the rule that requires people be at least 13 to get a Facebook account.

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Could Facebook serve for kids under 13 sign up?

But in Monday's edition, the Wall Street Journal reported that "Facebook is developing technology that would allow children younger than 13 to use the social-networking site under parental supervision.

(Disclosure: I'm co-director of ConnectSafely.org, a non-profit Internet safety organization that receives financial support from Facebook).

The Journal called Facebook's move "a step that could help the company tap a new pool of users for revenue but also inflame privacy concerns" and shortly after the article went live on the web, Common Sense Media CEO James Steyer, who was quoted in the story, issued a statement that Facebook "appears to be doing whatever it takes to identify new revenue streams and short-term corporate profits to impress spooked shareholders." He added that "there is absolutely no proof of any meaningful social or educational value of Facebook for children under 13," and that "there are very legitimate concerns about privacy as well as the impact on the social, emotional, and cognitive development of children." He likened Facebook to "Big Tobacco in appealing to young people – try to hook kids early, build your brand, and you have a customer for life."

But the Journal also quoted Maryland Attorney General Douglas Gansler who said "We would like to see Facebook create a safe space for kids," with "the extra protections needed to ensure a safe, healthy, and age appropriate environment." General Gansler echoed my own sentiments from a year ago when I argued that Facebook "should offer special privacy settings, educational tools and parental controls to assure an appropriate environment for younger children."

What the law says

Legally, it has always been possible for Facebook to allow children under 13, but to do so it would have to comply with provisions of the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) that requires commercial sites to "obtain verifiable parental consent for the collection, use, or disclosure of personal information from children." But complying with COPPA is difficult and expensive. Although some child centered sites, operated by Disney and other companies, do go through the hoops to be COPPA compliant, most social networking sites, including Facebook, simply ban anyone who's stated date of birth indicates they're under 13. But because it's based on what people enter, it's easy to lie and there is no generally accepted way to verify the information.

Parents help kids lie about their age

Not only do millions of kids lie to get on Facebook, but most are doing so with the knowledge and help of their parents. Last May, Consumer Reports found that “of the 20 million minors who actively use Facebook,” 7.5 million were younger than 13 and more than 5 million were younger than 10. A 2010 study by McAfee that found 37 percent of 10 to 12 year olds are on Facebook and a study (PDF) released last April from the London School of Economics’ EU Kids Online project that found that 38 percent of 9- to 12-year-old European children used social-networking sites, with one in five using Facebook, “rising to over 4 in 10 in some countries.”

Last fall, a group of researchers from Harvard, University of California, Northwestern University and Microsoft Research published a paper, Why parents help their children lie to Facebook about age: Unintended consequences of the 'Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, that pointed out that, for kids who were under 13 at the time they signed up, 68 percent of the parents “indicated that they helped their child create the account.” Among 10-year-olds on Facebook, 95 percent of parents were aware their kids were using the service while 78 percent helped create the account.

In an interview, the study’s lead author, Dr. danah boyd, told me that parents “want their kids to have access to public life and, today, what public life means is participating even in commercial social media sites.” These parents, boyd added, “are not saying get on the sites and then walk away. These are parents who have their computers in the living room, are having conversations with their kids, they often helping them create their accounts to talk to grandma.”

FTC Chairman calls it a “complicated issue”

Even the head of the Federal Trade Commission acknowledges that parents should have a role in determining whether their kids should be on the service. FTC Chairman Jon Leibowitz spoke at the Wall Street Journal’s All Things Digital Conference in Palos Verdes, California last week and, during the question and answer session, I asked him about the negative unintended consequences of COPPA, including the fact that parents are helping kids lie to get on Facebook. He acknowledged that “sometimes the parents are actually permitting their children to go on Facebook.” But, calling it a “complicated issue,” he added “at least they’re having a conversation with their parents and at some level the parents have to be the gate keepers of their young children’s Internet access.” He said that he doesn’t “think the obligations of COPPA are very difficult to follow” and pointed out that COPPA is currently under review by the FTC. In response to my follow up question, he said “yes it concerns me, absolutely” when I commented that millions of children are being encouraged or condoned to lie, often by their own parents.

Memo to Zuckerberg: Do it right

I think Facebook should allow children under 13 but, as I said last year, it has to be done carefully and thoughtfully with extra precautions. There needs to be parental involvement and control and Facebook needs to provide extra privacy protections for young children that would include more secure defaults than it has for teens and adults. There are already additional privacy protections for users under 18, but the company needs to be even more careful for younger children. Ideally, I would like to see children under 13 have an ad-free experience and Facebook certainly must avoid collecting and storing personal information about children other than what is needed to provide them the service.

Do it for the children

Whether we like it or not, millions of children are using Facebook, and since there doesn't seem to be a universally effective way to get them off the service, the best and safest strategy would be to provide younger children with a safe, secure and private experience that allows them to interact with verified friends and family members without having to lie about their age.

This article is available online at <http://onforbes.com/KvH200>

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Should 11-year-olds join Facebook?

By John D. Sutter, CNN

updated 4:33 PM EDT, Mon June 4, 2012 | Filed under: Social Media

CNN.com

Should 11-year-olds join Facebook?



John
D.
Sutter
CNN

(CNN) – Should young children be able to use Facebook?

And if so, under what conditions?

Those are the questions bloggers and Twitter users are battling around the Internet on Monday following a news report saying Facebook is looking into ways it could let kids under the age of 13 use the site with parental consent.

Currently, Facebook bans children younger than 13.

Data from Microsoft Research and Consumer Reports, however, show that many kids use the site anyway, often with their parents' knowledge. A 2011 Consumer Reports survey found 7.5 million people younger than 13 use the site; nearly a third of 11-year-olds and more than half of 12-year-olds use Facebook with their parents' knowledge, according to a 1,007-person survey supported by Microsoft Research.



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Facebook's history remains unwritten



Mark Zuckerberg: The Musical

Proponents of lifting Facebook's under-13 ban say letting young kids on Facebook with the help of adults would allow them to use the social network more safely.

"Whether we like it or not, millions of children are using Facebook, and since there doesn't seem to be a universally effective way to get them off the service, the best and safest strategy would be to provide younger children with a safe, secure and private experience that allows them to interact with verified friends and family members without having to lie about their age," Larry Magid writes at Forbes.com.

Magid says Facebook for kids should not have ads and there need to be "extra privacy protections" that would involve parents helping their kids to use the social network safely.

Others say Facebook is trying to profit from the under-13 crowd.

Common Sense Media, an advocacy group, compared Facebook to "Big Tobacco."

Poll: Should kids younger than 13 be allowed to use Facebook?

"With the growing concerns and pressure around Facebook's business model, the company appears to be doing whatever it takes to identify new revenue streams and short-term corporate profits to impress spooked shareholders," the group's CEO, James Steyer, said in a statement.

"But here's the most important issue: There is absolutely no proof of any meaningful social or educational value of Facebook for children under 13. Indeed, there are very legitimate concerns about privacy as well as the impact on the social, emotional and cognitive development of children. What Facebook is proposing is similar to the strategies used by Big Tobacco in appealing to young people – try to hook kids early, build your brand, and you have a customer for life.

"What's next? Facebook for toddlers?"

The Wall Street Journal on Monday published a front-page report saying Facebook is looking into ways to give younger children access to the social-networking site, which has more than 900 million users around the world and which made its lackluster stock market debut last month.

"Mechanisms being tested include connecting children's accounts to their parents' and controls that would allow parents to decide whom their kids can 'friend' and what applications they can use," the newspaper said, citing anonymous sources who are familiar with the dealings. "The under-13 features could enable Facebook and its partners to charge parents for games and other entertainment accessed by their children, the people said."

In a statement issued to CNN and other news outlets, Facebook did not deny looking into the issue but said it does not have anything formal to announce:

"Many recent reports have highlighted just how difficult it is to enforce age restrictions on the Internet, especially when parents want their children to access online content and services.

We are in continuous dialogue with stakeholders, regulators and other policymakers about how best to help parents keep their kids safe in an evolving online environment."

What do you think? Let us know in the comments below.

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