



3 Reasons Why Social Media Age Restrictions Matter

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Every October, schools and organizations across the country observe [National Bullying Prevention Month](#). The goal is to put an end to bullying and cyberbullying tragedies like the one that contributed to the suicide of a Florida girl last year.

While the [story](#) of Rebecca Ann Sedwick, the 12-year-old who jumped to her death after enduring a year of cyberbullying from two girls, ages 12 and 14, has been covered widely by the press, what's been largely overlooked is that the victim and one of the two perpetrators were under the minimum age required to use the social media sites (Facebook, Ask.fm, Kik and Instagram) where some of the bullying took place.

The minimum age to open an account on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Tumblr, Kik, and Snapchat is 13. For Vine, Tinder and Yik Yak it's 17. YouTube requires account holders to be 18, but a 13-year-old can sign up with a parent's permission. Despite these clearly stated and published age restrictions, large and growing numbers of children 12 and under are using social media networks, often *with* their parent's knowledge and consent.

According to [The Social Age Study](#) by knowthenet.org.uk, approximately 59% of children have already used a social network by the time they are 10. Facebook has the most users under the age of 13-- 52 per cent of 8 to 16-year-olds admit they ignore Facebook's age restriction. You don't have to conduct a study to know that young kids under 13 are flocking to sites like Instagram, for example, to post and share photos, and to collect likes from their friends. Instagram tries to make it difficult for young kids to sign up by providing a birthday picker that doesn't let a new user select an age under 13. Regardless, kids easily make up fake birthdays and use their parents iTunes account to download Instagram to their own devices.

In short, as a society we have largely given up, giving age restrictions a collective shrug and "*so what?*" But, guess what? Age does matter, and here's why:

- 1. Children's personal information is at risk.** The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) passed in 1998 protects every child under the age of 13. The Act requires that operators of websites and online services provide notice and obtain permission from a child's parents before collecting personal information -- such as name, address, phone number and screen name -- from that child. Companies also cannot collect geolocation data that could identify the city street, and any image, video or audio files containing the child's image or voice. Anything that can identify what the child is using, like cookies, IP addresses or the unique device identifier (UDID) for mobile devices is restricted by COPPA. But COPPA doesn't work if a 9-year-old claims they are 13. When a social network account is created for a child under 13, or when a child uses a false birthdate, this Federal law cannot protect their personal information from being collected and shared with third party advertisers.

The Center for Digital Democracy offers [this parents' guide](#) explaining COPPA.

2. Children under 13 don't have the hardware upstairs to make smart decisions online. Just because kids seem tech-savvy at increasingly younger ages, doesn't necessarily mean that their brains are developing at the same rate as their digital acumen. Research shows that it takes children about 12 years to fully develop the cognitive structures that enable them to engage in ethical thinking. Before 12 it's difficult, if not impossible, for a child to fully grasp the impact of their actions upon others, online or otherwise. Yet young children are increasingly joining social networking sites, sometimes even putting themselves in harm's way by becoming victims of online harassment, solicitation, and cyber-bullying before they are ready to respond appropriately.

3. Lying is just plain wrong. Living in a civilized society means we have some implicit agreements: we take turns, play fair, stop at red lights, and hold the door open for old ladies. And we tell the truth. Sure, giving a fake birthdate to Facebook seems like a harmless white lie, but it's a lie nonetheless. I'd like to believe we can all agree that honesty and truthfulness, online and off, is important.

Finally, if your young child simply **MUST** have a social life online, then there are plenty of safe alternatives designed specifically for younger users like [Club Penguin](#), [WebKinz](#), and [Whyville](#). Each of these offer restricted and supervised networking.

So, let's support National Bullying Prevention Month by doing *whatever* we can to end cyberbullying. Even if that means telling our young ones that Instagram and Snapchat can wait.