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Why Facebook Is After Your Kids

By EMILY BAZELON

In May, Consumer Reports announced that 7.5 million kids age 12 and younger are on Facebook. The magazine called this “troubling news,” in no small part because their presence is at odds with federal law, which bars Web sites from collecting personal data about kids under 13 without permission from their parents. “Clearly, using Facebook presents children and their friends and families with safety, security and privacy risks,” Consumer Reports concluded.

Within weeks of the Consumer Reports news, Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, called for challenging the 1998 Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (Coppa), which prevents Facebook from signing up young kids legally. “That will be a fight we take on at some point,” Zuckerberg said at the NewSchools Summit in California. And indeed, with the Federal Trade Commission poised to tighten Coppa’s regulations, Facebook has tripled its spending on lobbying, formed a political action committee and hired former Bush and Obama officials to push for its agenda.

We don’t really know yet how joining Facebook at a tender age affects kids socially and emotionally. There’s the fun and freedom of Facebook, and then there’s the Consumer Reports finding that the site exposed a million teenagers to bullying and harassment last year. What is clear is that Facebook thinks it needs access to kids’ lives in order to continue to dominate its industry. The younger the child, the greater the opportunity to build brand loyalty that might transcend the next social-media trend. And crucially, signing up kids early can accustom them to “sharing” with the big audiences that are at their small fingertips.

Increasingly, Facebook is staking its future relevance and profits on this idea of sharing, which it made “frictionless” in late September. With certain apps on Facebook, like Spotify, you can choose to enable a feature where everyone can see what you’re listening to or viewing, without your hitting another key. Before rolling out frictionless sharing, Facebook emphasized that it is now easier to see what your default settings are. But the company refuses to change those settings so that the default would establish more privacy, no doubt because it affects Facebook’s bottom line.

The more people you’re connected to on the site and the more “likes” you post, the more ads can be personalized — hey, buy these shoes because your three friends did! — and the more potential advertising dollars can be generated. Facebook encourages widespread sharing by making the default settings for an adult’s Facebook page public to all. The site has made a concession when it comes to teenagers: the default setting allows basic personal information (name, networks, photo) to be public, while posts are shared with Facebook friends and also the friends of those friends. My son is too young to be on Facebook, but imagine that after his bar mitzvah, he posts photos of it. Along with the 300 people he knows, he could have an

audience of 1,000 or more friends of friends he doesn't.

As Zuckerberg put it in a radio interview: "We help you share information, and when you do that, you're more engaged on the site, and then there are ads on the side of the page. The more you're sharing, the more — the model all just works out." Default settings are particularly important to this vision because most people (and especially teenagers) never change them. A recent Columbia University study of 65 college students found that 94 percent were sharing personal information on Facebook that they had not intended to make public.

It's true that Facebook has taken action against the graver dangers of sharing. For example, the site is using a new technology to find and remove child pornography, and it's a partner in the police's Amber alert system for missing children. In September, Facebook started testing a special e-mail address with a small group of principals and guidance counselors that gives schools an inside track for urgent reports on bullying and fighting. These steps on behalf of kids are all good. They also don't get in the way of all the sharing that makes Facebook prosper. Changing privacy settings for teenagers would.

For Zuckerberg and others in Silicon Valley, the assumption is that nonstop sharing, at every age, is inevitable. A week or so after Zuckerberg said he was ready to fight Coppa, Larry Magid, a co-director of the nonprofit ConnectSafely, seconded the idea in a blog post called "Facebook Ought to Allow Children Under 13." Magid argued that given the millions of young kids already on Facebook despite the law, we're better off letting them on legally and then hoping Facebook comes up with stricter privacy controls. Stephen Balkam, who runs another nonprofit, the Family Online Safety Institute (FOSI), similarly inveighed against "techno-pessimists" in his blog on The Huffington Post when Facebook's geolocation service, called Places, met with a wave of criticism over privacy last year.

Magid and Balkam's groups are both on what Facebook calls its "safety advisory board," which the company has said is "independent." Yet they also receive financing from Facebook as well as from other media companies. (FOSI receives $30,000 from each of 15 of its corporate sponsors, including Facebook; Magid did not disclose how much his group receives from Facebook and 15 other sponsors.) In September, Facebook held a reception on Capitol Hill at which the safety board members stood alongside Facebook reps promoting the company's work on privacy, and Balkam lauded Facebook's "remarkable maturity." As a commentator on a CBS radio show and a columnist for The San Jose Mercury News, Magid sometimes criticizes the company but has defended it at key moments. (Headlines: "Online Privacy Concerns Often Misplaced" and "Facebook Privacy Lawsuit a Jumbled Mess.") Magid discloses his financial link to the company because, he says, he can understand a potential conflict. On his Huffington Post blog, Balkam does not.

Facebook stresses that Google and others also finance many of the same organizations, which is true. This is a cozy corner of the online world. It is not frictionless, however. Last fall, Common Sense Media, an advocacy group for kids online that reviews movies, games and apps, left Facebook's advisory board because, the C.E.O. James Steyer says, he and his staff saw Facebook's approach to teenager privacy as worsening over time and insisted on saying so publicly. "When we disagreed with them on privacy, they

wanted us to keep it quiet," Steyer says. Facebook says it respects Common Sense Media's decision.

Meanwhile, in Washington the F.T.C. wants to require Web sites to get parents' permission before they can track the online movements of kids under 13 for marketing purposes. A bill recently introduced in Congress would go a step further. Called Do Not Track Kids, the legislation would bar Web sites outright from using kids' data to target ads to them until they are 17. In a rare show of bipartisanship, Republicans and Democrats in the House have come out in favor of Do Not Track Kids. Facebook, needless to say, has not.

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