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## Getting into Trouble on Facebook

**N**obody under the age of 13 is allowed on Facebook. You didn't know that? You, like me, must not have read all the details in the Terms of Service that we clicked on as part of the signup process. It said we had read and agreed to the Terms of Service and one is that you are older than 12. And I thought filling in your date of birth as a requirement for registering was for those notifications of birthdays that make it harder to forget or ignore the celebrations of family and friends. It is actually there because of the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act in the U.S. which requires Web site operators obtain parental consent before collecting data from children under 13.

Restricting access by children through the Terms of Service is the low cost approach to meeting the requirements of the law. Imagine how much resource would have to go into verification of parental permission if Facebook offered its service to those 12 and under.

So does that mean that no children are on Facebook? Obviously not. A *New York Times* article in March 2011 reported that "3.6 million of Facebook's 153 million monthly visitors in [the United States] are under 12."

Facebook claims that it is trying to do something about keeping the kids off their site. When a potential user gives their date

of birth indicating they are under 13, they are told “Sorry, you are ineligible to sign up for Facebook.”

Facebook also has a form for reporting violations that says, “If you are reporting a child’s account registered under a false date of birth, and the child’s age is reasonably verifiable as under 13, we will promptly delete the account.” Facebook claims that it removes 20,000 people a day who are under age.

A Pew research study from 2010 found that 62% of 13-year-olds said they used social networking sites while 46% of 12-year-olds reported they used the sites. This would be not only Facebook, but the under 13 rule would apply to other social networking sites as well, except those that are targeted at younger children like the Canadian-created, but now Disney-owned, Club Penguin. The percent jump in social networking users between 12 and 13 does suggest that limits have some impact.

Is it a problem to have millions of children with full access to Facebook? Yes, according to the authors of a study called “Why parents help their children lie to Facebook about age: Unintended consequences of the ‘Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act.’”

The authors suggest a couple of problems with the current situation. One is that it ignores the privacy tools that would lead parents to have discussions with their children about making informed choices, and practices and attitudes when operating online. Another is that it normalizes giving false information online. From an ideal perspective, that’s right. But how many adults even check out the ever-changing privacy aspects of Facebook or any other site on the web that they are using?

### **Facebook — a dilemma for teachers**

“Most high school students think it is okay to be Facebook friends with their teachers,” the *Toronto Star* reported, based on a province-wide survey of teens in Ontario. However, parents, who were also surveyed, did not agree. Many said online connections with students are not “professional or acceptable.”

Teacher unions report an ongoing increase in the number of teachers facing discipline based on what they have posted online. In many cases, this involves Facebook, but also online forums, email and Twitter.

The stories are reported frequently and widely. A teacher in New Jersey was fired because of her comments about the stu-

dents in her class, saying she felt like a “warden” overseeing “future criminals.” She was reacting after a particularly stressful day and vented on Facebook to what she thought was her select 300 plus “friends.” However, the comment got forwarded to some parents who complained to the authorities. The case of a Calgary teacher disciplined after a parent spotted disparaging comments about drug-using mothers on her Facebook page made it into the media as well.

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A *Globe* report quoted Wanda Cassidy, director at Simon Fraser University’s Centre for Education, Law & Society, who said teacher candidates in their 20s and 30s often have trouble understanding that freedom of expression does not trump professionalism. Many “think that they’re entitled to say what they want and do what they want online and haven’t really thought about the implications.”

The *Calgary Herald* reported that future teachers in the University of Lethbridge are warned about the professional perils of their online personas. Associate Professor Marlo Steed said “We tell them... the first thing your students are going to do is look you up on Facebook. How are you represented on Facebook?”

The Canadian Teachers’ Federation has warned against e-mailing students or posting comments about them, parents or colleagues online. If teachers must e-mail, it says, they should keep a copy, include a professional signature line and use “a teacher voice.”

The Ontario College of Teachers urged its 230,000 members to rethink their professional boundaries online. The college also urged teachers to reflect on how they use Twitter, YouTube and other online channels, all with a mind to maintaining “the public trust.” [see sidebar Advisory from the College]

For another view on Facebook, check out an article called “50 reasons to invite Facebook into your classroom” at [mindshift.kqed.org/2011/08/50-reasons-to-invite-facebook-into-your-classroom](http://mindshift.kqed.org/2011/08/50-reasons-to-invite-facebook-into-your-classroom). Facebook, not surprisingly, is anxious to have it become a legitimate tool in the classroom. It targets teachers with suggestions at [facebookforeducators.org](http://facebookforeducators.org).

## OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

Teachers are probably the most vulnerable group in danger from violations of boundary crossing between one's personal and professional lives.

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## ENDNOTES

Bielski, A. "Sorry, kids: I can't be your friend; Teachers must be extra-cautious online. Friending students on Facebook is a no-no. So is venting about them in a blog or answering their e-mails from home." *The Globe and Mail*, Fri Apr 29 2011.

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McGinis, S. "Schools grapple with rules on using social media; Should teachers and students become Facebook Friends?" *Calgary Herald*, December 6 2010.

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