

Children's Online Privacy—How to Help Preserve Your Child's Confidential Information

The VIRTUS[®] Programs

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) released a new report that examines the collection of personal data from children's Internet applications (apps) and the level of disclosure available about that collection.

After reviewing 400 of the most popular apps offered by Google[™] and Apple[®], the FTC found that only 20 percent provided details on the information they collect. According to the review, some apps may be violating a federal law that requires parental permission before certain information can be obtained from app users under age 13.

An area of concern for many parents is the collection and transmission of a mobile device's identification number. The report reveals that 60 percent of children's apps send this number to advertising groups or third parties, while only 20 percent of them disclose this practice. Once marketers have this information, they can track the online activities of the child across a variety of apps.

The report also found that many apps did not reveal the presence of interactive features, such as advertising or social network sharing. In fact, 58 percent of children's apps incorporated advertisements, but just 15 percent disclosed this fact prior to downloading.

Children's advocacy groups believe the results of the study support the current move to strengthen the existing federal Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), a law aimed at protecting children's online privacy. The law has not been re-examined in over 10 years. The application industry is working with advocacy groups to develop disclosure notices that provide parents with the information they need to make appropriate choices for their children. Natasha Singer, "Apps for Children Fall Short on Disclosure to Parents, Report Says," www.nytimes.com (Dec. 10, 2012).

According to a Common Sense Media research study, 52 percent of children, who range from five to eight years of age, have access to a mobile media device such as a smartphone, video iPod[®], or tablet device. In addition, the study found that 29 percent of parents have downloaded applications for their children on their devices.

As children grow older, they are much more likely to have their own device with numerous downloaded apps. This increasingly limitless access to the Internet has parents concerned about privacy protection. The Pew Research Center found that 81 percent of parents are concerned about the type and amount of information collected when their children are online.

COPPA addresses many parental concerns and is now being considered for strengthening through legislative amendments. This valuable step in the right direction will only provide necessary information needed to safely use the Internet. Parents and caregivers will then need to use the information to provide the best protection for children using the Internet.

Parents and caregivers must understand the risks involved in Internet use and monitor children's online activity. Commonsensemedia.org offers some basic privacy steps all parents should discuss with their children:

- Explain that nothing is truly private online and help children understand the importance of guarding their own online privacy.
- Never share passwords or personal details such as name, address, or phone number.
- Have children ask permission before downloading apps or signing up for a website.
- Teach them how to recognize advertisements and instruct them avoid clicking on them.
- Inform them to only communicate with people they know.
- Review the privacy policies of sites and apps and set restrictions if possible.
- Be involved in your child's Internet use. Particularly with teenagers, frequently asking about their online usage is a valuable way to keep an eye on them.

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