The Internet and Kids: Study Suggests It's Time for Stronger Safeguards

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The Internet offers kids a wealth of information, but the medium is also a risky one when children encounter online predators or share too much personal information. These problems, among others, may be why the public supports updating federal laws that require Internet safety standards to protect kids, according to a new University of Michigan poll.

That law is the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, a.k.a. COPPA. COPPA was enacted to protect young children from some of these Internet dangers by prohibiting collection of personal information through websites if the user is under age 13. But COPPA was written in 1998, before the advent of smartphones, applications and social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter.

For the survey, researchers from GfK Custom Research, LLC conducted a nationally representative household survey for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital. Scientists contacted a randomly selected, stratified group of 2,137 adults from the company's web-enabled KnowledgePanel who closely resembled the U.S. population and reflected population figures from the Census Bureau.

The poll found that 60 percent of adults think children should be at least 13 years old to use the Internet on their own. But 29 percent of parents with children age 9 to 12 said their kids have their own handheld Wi-Fi enabled devices, which means these children may be online while they're unsupervised.

This is why Matthew M. Davis, MD, the director of the C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health, and an associate professor of pediatrics and internal medicine at the University of Michigan Medical School, feels it's not surprising adults think COPPA needs to be updated.

"So much has changed in the 14 years since COPPA was enacted," Davis said. "This report underscores concerns among the general public to make sure proper safeguards are enacted to protect kids."

Davis also suggested that parents can play a key role in protecting their children online. He recommended parents talk to their kids about Internet safety and teach them how to identify and avoid dangerous situations.

Did you know that Internet usage patterns may reveal signs of depression? Click here to read more.

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