Why Age Restrictions For Social Media Are So Important

Answering the question of why age restrictions for social media are so important entails consideration of two major things: the sheer amount of content that can be seen and shared on social media, and the permanence of the decisions young people make on social media.

Social media represents a virtual space that is occupied by a truly diverse demographic of people. There are few real-world spaces that attract such a wide range of age groups, so we're not necessarily accustomed to the notion of our young children occupying the same space as teens, young adults and older adults without constant supervision.

Typically, young children want to spend time on the playground; teens want to meet their friends at the beach or mall on weekends; young adults gather at boutique bars, while older adults have brunch in crowded coffee shops. Sure, it's not uncommon to see a child accompany their parent to any one of these locations, but we'd never consider letting them go there alone… would we?

Social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat appeal to people of almost every age category. What this means is that these sites are not uniquely tailored to meet the needs of any specific demographic: they aren't necessarily 'kid friendly'. Yet, as it becomes more commonplace for young people to entirely overlook age restrictions for social media, we have to consider why these restrictions are there in the first place.

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When an app is made with a specific demographic in mind, the rules are much more clear-cut. If an app is intended for young children, it stands to reason that the app creators will view it as their responsibility to make it as safe as possible for young children: there should be no unmoderated chat functionality, no public location sharing, and no inappropriate content (e.g. gambling) being promoted within the app. If the app is a dating app intended for adults, however, it's entirely possible that users will want to share their location, or participate in unmoderated conversations, so the app creators don't necessarily need to consider these aspects as carefully.

According to the Office of the eSafety Commissioner, "both the physical age of your child and their level of maturity and resilience can impact their ability to handle social media, but as a rule, each social networking site and app has its own criteria for minimum age requirements. Some services cater for more adult audiences (i.e. dating sites)."

As it stands, there is no 'Facebook for Kids' (though, incidentally, there is a Messenger Kids) and even if there was, the Facebook that children want access to is the one all the 'big kids' are using. So, while Facebook's terms and conditions do prohibit illicit content, the site doesn't have the functionality to prevent the sharing of content that could be considered harmful or upsetting to a younger audience; which is undoubtedly part of the reason why Facebook requires its users to be at least 13 years old.

Age Restrictions For Social Media Aren't Always Arbitrary

Of course, another reason that many social media sites have a 13-year age requirement is to comply with the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998 (COPPA), which "prevents collection and storage of personal information from children under 13 years of age". (1)

This leads us to the other crucial item for parents to consider when questioning the importance of age restrictions for social media: digital footprints.

We've spoken in previous articles about the fact that digital footprints is probably the wrong terminology; that the data being shared and stored online more realistically has the permanence of a digital tattoo. This is because the decisions our children

make online, from the statuses they post and private messages they send through to the images they share, can permanently shape their online reputation.

Childhood and early adolescence are important, formative stages of a person's life, and they represent what is arguably the best time to make mistakes and learn from them. Unfortunately for modern generations, these mistakes can linger and have lasting effects. This is why it's really important for young people to have established the ability to evaluate risk and anticipate consequences before we give them access to social media.

Before letting children join social media, the eSafety Commissioner encourages parents to reflect on the following:

- Will they be able to withstand taunts from others?
- Do they know what is and isn't safe to share online?
- Have you discussed what they should do if they see something abusive or offensive on social media?
- Have you established rules regarding your child's access to social media?
- Does your child know how to protect their personal information?
- Do you understand the potential risks associated with the social networking sites they want access to?

References & More Information On Age Restrictions For Social Media

(1) Office of the eSafety Commissioner. Social media readiness.