

The Telegraph

Children using social networks underage 'exposes them to danger'

Around 59 per cent of children have already used a social network by the time they are 10, and 43 per cent have messaged strangers online by the age of 12, a new study finds



World of their own: many children could face potential harm online because parents do not understand social media



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Facebook is the social network most likely to have underage members breaching its minimum age of 13, with 52 per cent of 8 - 16-year-olds admitting they had ignored the official age limit.

Mobile messaging app WhatsApp requires members to be at least 16 years of age, yet 40 per cent of those questioned using it. BBM's minimal age of 13 was also ignored by 24 per cent, and photo messaging service SnapChat was used by 11 per cent.

SnapChat has a minimum age policy of 13, but does not require an age on signup, so younger children would need to be reported to the app.

Around 43 per cent of the 1,004 children questioned by The Social Age study by knowthenet.org.uk said they had messaged strangers online, starting from an average age of 12.

According to the survey, a child's social media development begins aged nine and over the next four year period, their internet activity evolves from simply viewing content online to being active on social media.

At nine, children first access YouTube and will use a mobile or laptop. Aged 10, they start using Internet slang (e.g. "BRB", "YOLO") and instant messaging.

The greatest proportion of internet activity takes place when children reach 11 years of age; this is when they are likely to first post an image or video of themselves, post a nasty comment online and set up a fake social media profile.

A year later (aged 12), children will first try Twitter and Whatsapp and message someone online they haven't met in real life. When children reach 13 – their social maturity – they first try services like SnapChat and Ask FM and will try sexting for the first time.

One mother said: "You need a basic understanding of what your child is doing to guide them on what's appropriate and safe. I recently spoke to my 10 year old son after I found out he was chatting to people he didn't know while playing on Xbox Live.

"Kids might not realise the risks about giving personal information to strangers."

Child psychologist Dr Richard Woolfson believes social media has removed the barriers between a young person's public and private self, leaving them vulnerable and exposed to danger by compulsive sharing online.

"Children are gaining access to social media sites at a younger age, which could expose them to content, people or situations that are out of their depth and which they're not emotionally prepared for," he said.

"Parents need to maintain an open dialogue and encourage children to share both good and bad online experiences, and make sure they keep up with the latest social media crazes and work with their children rather than trying to control them."