



Privacy Pirates:

An Interactive Unit on Online Privacy (Ages 7-9)

Background information for parents and teachers

While the public may finally be getting the message that teenagers value their privacy – as they define it – the idea that younger children have any personal information worth protecting is still a new one. Certainly, most people would probably be surprised to learn how much time young children are spending daily online, whether it is with their own personal digital tool or that of their parent. In the United States, children under the age of 2 spend approximately one hour a day on screen media,¹ with 12.8% of Canadian parents reporting the same.²

Given the early age at which children are now going online, there are many reasons to be concerned about their privacy and personal information. Many people – parents in particular – are unaware of how commercialized young children's online experiences are. MediaSmarts' 2005 study *Young Canadians in a Wired World* found that 95 per cent of the top 20 most popular websites among Canadian youth ages 8-17 had significant commercial content.³ In 2018, a study of 135 popular apps for children under 5 years old, similarly found that 95% of them contain at least one form of advertising.⁴

The commercial nature of kids' sites is a significant privacy concern because many youth-oriented websites solicit personal information in a variety of ways: some require children to register before they can access premium content, while others encourage kids to submit their personal information – or their friends' – through contests and surveys. (As well as doing it themselves, many of these sites also host advertising material that *also* solicits personal information.) As well, many popular games such as Minecraft, Roblox and Fortnite give kids the opportunity to socialize with each other, raising the question of what information can safely be given out and what should be withheld.

Young children now have much more opportunity to post photos and videos online: recent research found that almost four in ten Canadian kids aged 6-10 used Snapchat.⁵ All of these factors mean that for even very young children, privacy education must go beyond "don't talk to strangers"; kids today need to be taught how to safely and responsibly judge and manage their and others' privacy in a wide range of contexts.



1 Hawkey, E (2019) Media use in childhood: Evidence-based recommendations for caregivers. American Psychological Association. Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/newsletter/2019/05/media-use-childhood>

2 Ferreras, J (2018) Kids under 2 should have no screen time. These ones get up to 30 minutes a day: study. Global News. Retrieved from <https://globalnews.ca/news/4028759/vancouver-toddlers-screentime/>

3 MediaSmarts. *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III*. 2014

4 (2018). Advertising in kids' apps more prevalent than parents may realize. ScienceDaily. Retrieved from <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/10/181030091452.htm>

5 Donelle, L., Facca, D., Burke, S., Hiebert, B., Bender, E., & Ling, S. (2021). Exploring Canadian Children's Social Media Use, Digital Literacy, and Quality of Life: Pilot Cross-sectional Survey Study. *JMIR Formative Research*, 5(5), e18771.



The *Privacy Pirates* tutorial explores the following topics relevant to online privacy:

1. *Personal identification* - Children need to learn to recognize the value of personally identifiable information such as their name, age and sex and to make wise choices about what information they give out online.
2. *Photos and videos* – Posting photos and videos is a popular online activity, and with video-sharing sites like TikTok becoming more and more common it's one that children are engaging in as well. This section teaches children important skills such as how to represent themselves online without using a photo, and how to handle requests to upload a photo or turn on a webcam.
3. *Data mining* – Children are bombarded with efforts to harvest their personal information through quizzes, surveys and website registration forms. This section teaches them how to decide whether or not to give information out and what the possible consequences of a bad choice might be.
4. *Digital footprints* – As soon as they start using the internet, children are leaving "digital footprints" that may follow them the rest of their lives. This section teaches children that anything they post online might be there forever.
5. *Privacy policies* – Nearly every website has a privacy policy that details what they will do with any personal information that is collected, but these are often written in language far beyond what children can understand. This section explains to children the purpose of privacy policies and stresses the importance of having a trusted adult read a privacy policy before agreeing to it.
6. *Passwords* – Having a weak password – or sharing your password with someone else – can be a big privacy risk. This section makes children aware of the importance of passwords and gives some tips on how to construct a good one.
7. *Addresses* – Home addresses, email addresses and phone numbers are examples of basic but vitally important personal information. This section teaches children the best way to manage this information online.
8. *Sharing data* – The internet is all about sharing, but sharing something without thinking first can have serious consequences. This section teaches children how to make good choices about who can see what you post, how to keep things private and how to handle other people's privacy.
9. *Parental consent* – Young children need close supervision when they're online, and they need to know they can turn to their parents and other trusted adults for help. This section explains to children that they should consult with a trusted adult before giving out any personal information.





Suggestions for Playing the Tutorial

Privacy Pirates includes audio with all of the text to accommodate different reading abilities. Younger children may still need assistance to navigate through the tutorial.

Here are some suggestions before you start:

- Have an adult or an older youth sit with the child while they go through the tutorial.
- Encourage your child to play the tutorial more than once to discover different questions.
- Team up capable readers with less able readers to play the tutorial together. Have pairs of children play the tutorial together and discuss the questions.
- In the classroom, use a projector and navigate through the tutorial with the entire class.



Extension Activities for Children

Reinforcing – Go to a website popular with young children, such as Cool Math Games, Stardoll, Treehouse, TVOKids or Prodigy and look for advertising or places where children are asked to give up personal information. Ask kids which sites are most aggressive in collecting personal information and why they think sites want to gather it.

Connecting – Ask the children what their favourite apps and websites are, and if they have encountered any of the issues raised in this tutorial on these websites (photos and videos, data mining, digital footprints, privacy policies, passwords, addresses and sharing data). Which have the most privacy issues? Do commercial websites (Candystand, Treehouse) have more or fewer privacy issues than educational websites such as Prodigy? Do websites run by non-commercial organizations such as PBSKids and TVOKids have fewer privacy issues?

Extending – Help children to develop a list of tips for protecting and managing their privacy online; when it's finished, post it where children will be using the computer.

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