



# 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 early children are starting to surf the Net: the average age at which children began to use the Internet dropped from age ten in 2002 to age four in 2009<sup>1</sup>; and thanks to the iPhone and iPad, that number has probably dropped even lower.

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<sup>2</sup>. A survey of the top 15 most popular American kids' sites in September of 2011<sup>3</sup> shows that all but one have at least some commercial content, with the majority either being expressly commercial or linking to commercial sites.



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 sites such as Club Penguin 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, thanks to webcams having become a standard feature in laptop computers, and the wider availability of photo and video functions in many cell phones. 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.

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1 Findahl, Olle, *Preschoolers and the Internet*, Presented at the EU-kids online conference, London, June 11, 2009. <<http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/EUKidsOnline/EU%20Kids%20I/Conference%20Papers%20and%20abstracts/Emerging%20Issues/Findahl.pdf>>

2 MediaSmarts. *Young Canadians in a Wired World*. 2005.

3 eBizMBA. "Top 15 Most Popular Kids Websites." September 2011. <<http://www.ebizmba.com/articles/kids-websites>>



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 is a popular online activity, and with camera-equipped cell phones 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 Club Penguin, Funbrain, Treehouse, TVOKids or Webkinz and look for 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 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 (Club Penguin, Treehouse) have more or fewer privacy issues than educational websites such as Funbrain? 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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