Social Media Sites: A Child’s New Playground

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The current approach to children using social media is pretty straight forward: they should not. Most sites have an age requirement, which makes it so people signing up with an age that is considered too young will not have access to the site. Those advocating for children to not have access to social media should consider how important the internet is today, and how vital proper knowledge and skills on the web will be for children as they grow up. It is also important to consider the fact that kids will find a way to access whatever they want, especially when given a flat out “no,” so giving kids a safe and fun alternative to our current social media platforms, we could prevent underage individuals from lying their way onto sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Children should be able to safely enjoy and explore the internet and social media because those resources are a major part of life today, and they will need the skills to understand how to navigate the web as well as what is expected of individuals socially and professionally. To alleviate this issue, I propose the creation of one or more kid-friendly social media sites. These would be family-friendly sites that would be regulated to ensure kids would not be exposed to any inappropriate images or language, but would still allow them to explore the vast opportunities that social media offers.

In today’s society, a child’s life online starts very early, many times it begins before they have even left the womb. This online identity of the child is found in many forms: Facebook announcements of pregnancy, gender, and name; Instagram posts about the baby’s progressing size and preferences; Tweets about building a registry and decorating the baby’s room; the list could go on and on. A survey by the company AVG found that 81 percent of children in the countries surveyed (including the USA, Canada, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan), had some form of digital presence by the age of two (businesswire.com). Once born, these children are continually exposed to technology. Over 50 percent of children under five have access to a computer (Clinton and Steyer, 2012). These children are able to access the internet, and while parents can monitor their child’s activity online, how long can a parent withhold a child’s access to more and more online resources?

The Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act is a federal law put in place to help protect children online, but once the child has lied about their age when signing up for a site, they will go unprotected until a parent realizes or someone reports the page (kidshealth.org). It is easy to put parental locks on many services, including television, tablets, and phones. These locks allow parents to decide what apps or services children can or cannot use (aacap.org). While this practice is good for parents, it greatly limits the child’s ability to explore and engage with the technology to the fullest extent. As they see parents, older family members, and friends who may not have these limitations accessing the full range of the internet, it will be natural for the child to wonder what else could be found online. This could lead to them sneaking around the systems in place in their home, exploring at a friend’s house, or searching at a public place such as the library. While I do agree with parental controls, and that children should be taught online safety and kept away from inappropriate sites, I do not think we should try to limit or contain their curiosity.

Most social media outlets are currently not being supervised to only include PG rated content, because they were made for use by adults. While the freedom of full internet access is very important, this puts children using the internet or social media at great risk of stumbling upon improper posts for their age. There are many ways that these freedoms and features can be negative for kids, such as the anonymity of screen names, sharing of content that would not be age-appropriate for a child, and the ability to share thoughts and photos that create a person’s online identity (aacap.org). I believe it is possible to create a social media and web-searching site that could prove to be educational, functional, and fun for children and their families. I imagine a site with strict rules regarding sharing, content, and access to information. By creating this site, we will give children a safe place to search for videos, pictures, recipes, stories, games, and even movies. I envision a site that combines the functions of many sites, such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Google. These entities could partner to form the site, or a new company could make it on their own. There are many positives to this proposal, namely the way it could be used to encourage kids. Superstars, idols, and parents could also have accounts, and they could make fun challenges, sort of like the viral challenges that go on already, but they could be based around education, healthy eating, or physical activity. Kids could explore the online world, and would in turn be able to explore all around the globe and even out into the solar system and galaxy through intellectual readings, videos, and interactive games. They could share fun activities and ideas with their friends. Of course, there would need to be strict monitoring by the site and parents would still need to observe the children and help them learn what is and is not safe online, however, if the site has very strict protocols, parents would not have to worry quite so much.

Children who are able to use the internet and social media safely reap many outstanding benefits. There is a wide range of benefits, including ones that can be considered social or academic, and even beyond those basic definitions. Through the use of social media, kids can be developing creativity through learning the process of designing games, sharing of art, and playing interactive games. Through this, they are able to mold and shape their personal identity (pediatrics.aappublications.org). They can also be exposed to individuals of other backgrounds, or stories from places around the globe, which can help the kids learn about different people and places. Through this, students are able to develop a respect and understanding of both local and global issues (pediatrics.aappublications.org). Using the internet and social media, children can learn about a plethora of various topics that will be crucial in their development into adults, so creating a safe space for this growth of understanding will be vital. Creating a children’s social media platform will help children learn and grow on the internet safely, but it will also prepare them for the pressures of “adult” social media that they can sign up for as they get older. In 2011, the UK Children’s School Commissioner called “on schools and parents to prepare children” for the toll that social media can take on their mental health, and to inform them on the societal protocols of social media (independent.co.uk). With the creation of a children’s social media site, we can help give parents and teachers resources for students to better learn about social media by participating in a version of it that is made with their skill set in mind. They could learn on the lower level of social media before being thrown into sites like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, where likes and appearances could lead young, unexperienced adolescents to be worried or unhappy about their online presence. Making this social media site will create so many opportunities for young citizens to grow in so many ways, and would help them feel more comfortable navigating the world on the web. Why would parents, educators, and general citizens, all of whom are in a position to help these children grow, not want to give these children the chance to learn in such a new and innovative manner?

Many parents, researchers, and blog-writers have identified children’s internet and social media use as an issue. I believe their response to the issue, which is in most cases a solid “no” to social media, is misguided, because kids today need to have a full understanding of those resources, as they are an integral part of life today. If these kids are not allowed to learn how to navigate social media in a controlled environment, they will not be able to conduct themselves responsibly once they are able to have access to the adult social media sites. Having a child-safe version of social media would give kids a hands-on way to learn how to best use social media and all of the resources it offers. If we are able to create a way for kids to use social media in a safe environment, why would we not encourage the development of that resource for them? I see no reason to deny this opportunity, which could help them grow exponentially, both academically and socially.

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