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What Other Facebook-Like Sites Have Done When Targeting Youth

BY [JORDAN ROBERTSON](#) | [JUNE 15, 2012 3:03 PM EDT](#) | POSTED IN [FACEBOOK](#), [POSTS](#), [PRIVACY](#) |
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Photograph by Erica Shires/Corbis

Implementing age restrictions on Websites is easier said than done.

As Facebook [mulls](#) whether to open its site to children, there's a roadblock the social-networking company will have to overcome before it's ever allowed to openly cater to kids.

It's not parents. It's the federal government.

As I [report](#) in this week's Businessweek, a 1998 federal law called the [Children's Online Privacy Protection Act](#) (COPPA) sets strict rules on how sites that target kids under 13 years old must behave. The key requirement is that the sites must get parental consent before allowing children to create accounts.

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What Other Facebook-Like Sites Have Done When Targeting Youth

As I found out through interviewing the founders of social-networking sites that already focus on kids — and have gotten [high marks](#) from child advocates — that’s easier said than done.

One entrepreneur, Mary Kay Hoal, a mother of five who created [Yoursphere.com](#), said she spent hundreds of thousands of dollars just so her site could comply with COPPA. The money mainly went to hiring consultants and trying out various identity-verification services, such as phone banks and credit-card authorization firms. She eventually settled on an e-mail notice that parents receive to approve their children’s registration with the site.

Another founder, Vincent Cannistraro, who created a site called [WhatsWhat.me](#), said he even bought facial-recognition technology to scan the Web cam pictures that kids are required to take every time they log in. Employees also review the photos to make sure they match, he said. Cannistraro said the system has helped catch adults trying to log in to the site.

Facebook isn’t commenting on its plans for kids under 13. Millions of them are already on the site, according to a [survey](#) by Consumer Reports. Facebook said it’s hard to enforce age restrictions because parents help kids access online services. Many kids lie about their age when signing up.

For Facebook, which raised \$16 billion in its recent initial public offering, cost isn’t an issue. It has the resources to implement all of the latest age-verification systems at once. A key question for the company will be how it plans to appease the government — and anxious parents — at the same time.

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