

## Underage kids flock to social networks

'They keep signing up and we keep chasing them,' says Nexopia's Chris Webster

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He calls himself "fithock2ylover" and his profile on Nexopia, a popular Edmonton-based social-networking site geared toward teens, lists his age as 62. A quick glance at his photos suggests the supposed senior is stretching the truth.

He's quite free with his personal information, too.

He uses his real name on his message board and refers to his girlfriend as the most "gorgouse gf ever shes everything and i love her shes perfect lol i love her and i always love going to see her everyday."

- **Globe reporter Matt Hartley will take readers' questions about the pitfalls of putting your identity online, and how best to behave in a world where you are on display, from 1 p.m. to 2 p.m. ET Tuesday. Join the Conversation then or leave a question in advance.**



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Nexopia's Christopher Webster speaking with co-workers at their office in Edmonton on September 12, 2008. Staff at the social networking site receive hundreds of reports daily directing them to suspected underage users. (*JIMMY JEONG/FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL*)

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Plug his name into Facebook and MySpace and more profiles appear — all of which are open and accessible to the public. He divulges his address, phone number and the name of his school along with countless minor obsessions: He loves hockey, skateboarding, and prefers the NFL to the CFL.

On Facebook, fithock2ylover lists his graduation year as 2014, which, considering the photos, appears to be when he'll be leaving high school. That puts him in Grade 6 today, and 11 or 12 years old — just shy of most social network's minimum age requirement of 13.

And he's not alone.

According to a recent study, more than 750,000 kids between the ages of 8 and 12 have set up a profile on the big social-networking sites. Most simply enter a false birth date when they register; others get a friend or sibling to help them circumvent the age-restriction policies.

Staff at Nexopia receive hundreds of reports daily directing them to suspected underage users. Angry calls from parents asking how their children were able to build profiles are frequent, said Chris Webster, the company's spokesman.

"There's no perfect way to verify age," Mr. Webster said. "Nobody out there has successfully figured out the problem. They keep signing up and we keep chasing them."

The site has two dozen employees who sniff out underage users, Mr. Webster said. Their main task is to sift through photos and profiles and to decipher whether the user is old enough to participate. He said the company busts about 30 kids a day.

"It's the only way to check," he said. "It's easier to pinpoint someone who looks 10. We'll send them a note, suspend their account, and call their parents to let them know."

The concern, of course, is more than whether minors simply have a profile on a social-networking site.

Research shows that issues of privacy and safety are not at the forefront of younger users' minds. According to a 2007 study by the Office of Communications, the independent regulator and competition authority for the communication industries in Britain, 41 per cent of children aged 8 to 17 who had a visible profile had them set so they were open and accessible to anyone.

The study also found that younger adults and children are much more likely to share sensitive information, leaving themselves open to predators, cyber-bullying or revealing that mom and dad had a big fight and might get a divorce.

In Edmonton last summer, for example, a 49-year-old man lured a 12-year-old girl into dozens of illicit chats by telling her she was "pretty."

And in June, a Toronto man was charged after he stalked a 14-year-old girl he first observed on the subway. He found her profile on Facebook, downloaded dozens of photos and attended several of her soccer games. When he tried to set up a meeting with the girl, he was arrested by police.

Children's online safety and privacy is receiving the full attention of federal governments in Canada and the United States.

"This is a huge issue," Canada's Privacy Commissioner Jennifer Stoddart says. "We know that Internet access, and particularly social-networking sites, are generation-sensitive, and the generations are a couple of years per cohort."

Ms. Stoddart said one of her biggest concerns is the amount of personal information being collected from children, and what is being done with that information.

The commissioner's office has set up a website tailored specifically for kids, aimed at informing them about privacy. The site also contains a section for parents.

"We're not kidding ourselves: maybe youth don't rush to a federal government website," Ms. Stoddart said. "But we're hoping the parents will read that."

In the United States, Attorney-General Michael Mukasey has commissioned an Internet safety task force to find better ways to verify the age of users.

The task force is looking at implementing age-verification technology from Microsoft and IBM on several sites and even opening the process of enshrining age restrictions in law, said John Palfrey, executive director of Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet and Society, who chairs the task force.

But determining the age of users is a complex problem without clear answers, Mr. Palfrey said.

"There's no way to stop people from getting on to the site at the front end, when they sign up," he said. "But I think there are ways we can improve the systems that work behind the scenes to find the underage kids and deter them from using sites where they shouldn't be."

For their part, social-networking sites continue to address the issue. Facebook and MySpace have overhauled their privacy settings to give members tighter control over who has access to their information, and MySpace has hired a security company to screen for sexual predators.

At Nexopia, staff are in daily contact with police across the country about reports they receive from users and unpaid site administrators. They've also helped police track dozens of teenage runaways by locating where they log in to their account.

But it's a hard balance to manage.

"It's a problem that isn't going away," Mr. Webster said. "The older generation has this engrained fear of the Internet. But these kids, and the generation that will follow, haven't been brought up with that ... these sites are just as real as the school hallways."

*With a report from Omar El Akkad in Ottawa*

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