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New push to educate on online privacy Youth can get info on important website

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On the Cutting Edge / Brian T. D. Bowman

When you visit an Internet website do you read the privacy policy? More importantly, do you know if your children read website privacy policies? It's an important question because many Canadians, including youth, disclose vast amounts of personal information online without having a clue what then happens to their data.

According to the Privacy Commissioner of Canada, "about half of Canadian youth say they never read privacy policies on websites they visit and the majority believes that if a website has a privacy policy, the information they provide will not be shared with anyone else."

Considering the extent to which Canadian youth are online these days, it should be of interest to parents, teachers and even businesses that market to youth over the Internet that such a high percentage of them do not take protecting their own privacy to heart.

Young Canadians are probably the most Internet-savvy demographic. They use social networking websites such as Facebook and wireless devices such as cellphones to be constantly connected to each other and to the business websites they like.

In fact, as I am sure you know, today's youth are not intimidated by technology. Most do not even know what the pre-Internet world looked like. For young Canadians, the Internet is simply part of their DNA.

But as recently pointed out by Canada's privacy commissioners and privacy oversight officials, "while many young people recognize the risks associated with their online activities, they lack the knowledge and the tools to mitigate those risks."

That is why the Privacy Commissioner of Canada recently launched the youthprivacy.ca website to educate and empower Canadian youth about privacy issues affecting them in today's wired world. If you have children I would strongly recommend that you and your children visit this new and innovative website.

If your business operates a website frequented by youth, the following tips should help you continue your online activities in a lawful and ethical manner.

Consider if your website collects personal information from youth. If so, you are required to manage the data you collect in accordance with Canada's privacy laws.

Canada's privacy laws require businesses operating websites to explain to online users why personal information is collected, how it will be used and whether or not it will be disclosed to third parties. Typically, websites provide this information in their privacy policies.

Privacy policies should be in plain language that young people can actually understand. That way they can meaningfully decide for themselves if they want to disclose their personal information on your website. It is all about control -- you want to empower them to make an informed choice.

And if you are intentionally directing your website to youth, it is very good practice to require the express consent of parents or guardians for the collection of their children's personal information.

We cannot expect Canada's youth to make informed online choices affecting their privacy if websites do not speak their language and offer meaningful choices. It is not just about complying with laws -- it is about taking youth privacy to heart.

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