

## Press release

*For immediate release*

# New research into underage use of social media sites

**Age restrictions on social media sites are easily bypassed by children with parents aware or even helping kids to sign up, says new CHILDWISE report**

Two thirds of children aged 11-18 have knowingly lied about their age when signing up to social media.

Almost all children claim their parents were aware of what they were doing with some having hands-on involvement in the sign-up process, according to new research carried out by CHILDWISE.

CHILDWISE was commissioned by ITV to explore how children overcome age restrictions on social media platforms, including the methods they use to select their 'fake' age, whether they have been challenged about their age by service providers, and their exposure to online advertising.

"While it is certainly concerning, we weren't hugely surprised to learn how simple it is to sign up to social media using a false age," said lead researcher Dr Helena Dare-Edwards. "There is no real attempt by social media platforms to prevent children from doing so, no security or identity checks involved and no two-step verification process."

"There is also little to no penalty for children doing so – the worst that can happen is that their account might be deleted, but as this research seems to indicate, this is a rare occurrence, and when it does happen, they simply create a new one."

Nearly all social media services require users to be at least 13, but a study by CHILDWISE found that 90% of children age 11-12 are using one or more age restricted services, such as Instagram, YouTube and Snapchat.

"To gain access and create an account, children are having to input false dates of birth, meaning that any content they are exposed to is likely to be filtered on their older 'fake' age, rather than their actual age," says Dr Dare-Edwards. "This may well include content or other products that are inappropriate or unsuitable for children."

A minority of children in each of the groups could name gambling brands that they had seen adverts for, with all the boys aged 12-13 saying they have seen gambling adverts with mentions of Bet 365 and Paddy Power on YouTube, as well as lots of general bingo ads. A small minority of children said they recalled seeing adverts for alcohol online.

Children described how they selected their false age to gain access to social media, including using Mum or Dad's birth year or simply selecting a year at random.

One boy, age 13-14, told the discussion group 'I think on my Instagram I'm like 47...I just scrolled through it.'

On average, parents seem to be very much complicit in the sign-up process, especially in the first instance. “My Mum and Dad done it for me really, they put in the date of birth, I didn’t really do my account. I don’t really understand how to put all the details in,” one girl aged 11-12 told researchers.

YouTube is the most widely used platform of all in this age group – every child CHILDWISE spoke to used it, even if they have not all created their own account. Snapchat is the second most widely used social media app and Instagram is also popular, mainly among girls and older children.

“I wanted to have Instagram when I was in year 5 and I would beg my Mum every day – then one day when I begged her after school she just said OK why not,” one girl aged 12-13 told the researchers.

Another girl aged 13-14 described how easy it was to sign up. “Snapchat is the easiest one to get into because you just put your phone number in, your name and your date of birth, and you’re done, it literally just pops up with your account.”

Dr Dare-Edwards said completely preventing underage access will be an exceptionally tricky task. One way of at least reducing access would be to require proof of identification, such as uploading passport details.

She added that social media platforms are ‘unlikely to make any meaningful changes without government regulation.’

“There is a huge gap in the market for an ‘Instagram-lite’ that can be accessed by under 13s, but in a data-driven world, there is little financial incentive to create one. Especially when huge numbers of under-13s are already on ‘adult’ social media and freely giving away their monetizable data.”

A spokesperson for ITV says ‘this report adds to the mounting body of evidence for the need for independent statutory oversight of online platforms and the establishment of a level regulatory playing field between them and other media against whom they compete.’

### **Editor’s notes**

Research was undertaken by CHILDWISE and commissioned by ITV. The report is titled **Underage Social Platform Usage: Research with Children aged 11-14**.

Research methodology: Five discussion groups were carried out with children age 11-14, using schools selected from the CHILDWISE panel with a total of 38 children taking part in the research. Alongside this, quantitative research was also undertaken via questions asked on the CHILDWISE 2019 Monitor survey of 2000 children.

CHILDWISE is an independent market research agency specialising in children and young people. CHILDWISE has a programme of published independent research and conducts research for government agencies, charities, broadcasters, publishers and brands [www.childwise.co.uk](http://www.childwise.co.uk)

**Editorial notes:** For more information please contact Liz Hollis 07880 680302 [liz@lizhollis.co.uk](mailto:liz@lizhollis.co.uk)  
CHILDWISE website [www.childwise.co.uk](http://www.childwise.co.uk)