What's the Big Deal About Internet Privacy

Estimated time: 45 minutes

Essential Question: How do websites collect your personal information, and what can you do about it?

Learning Overview and Objectives

Overview: Students explore the concept of privacy in their everyday lives, and as it relates to using the Internet.

Students examine a scenario in which a research company collects information about them. They reflect on concerns they might have, and they learn about the kinds of information websites collect. They learn that sites are required to post their privacy policies and that kids should check those policies on the sites they visit.

objectives

Students will:

- Explore the concept of privacy in both a real-world setting and online
- Understand how and why companies collect information about visitors to their websites
- Learn and use online privacy terms
- Learn that websites are required to post privacy policies

Materials and Preparation

Materials

- **What's Private? Student Handout**
- Paper and pens

Preparation

- Copy the **What's Private? Student Handout**, one for every two students
- Review the **What's Private? Student Handout** and be prepared to guide students in locating and understanding their websites' privacy policies
- If students will not have access to computers with an Internet connection, print out the privacy policies from two websites that students commonly use. Make copies for each pair of students

Parent Resources

- Send parents the **Safety and Security Parent Tip Sheet**

Key Vocabulary

- **Anonymous**: Someone who can't be identified based on the information at hand
- **Cookies**: Small computer text files placed in your computer by the sites you visit that collect information about your computer system and the webpages you view
- **Third Party**: A person or company other than you and the owner of the website you visit
- **Privacy Options**: Choices a website might give you about what it does with your information

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teaching plans

Introduce

Tell your class the following story:

Our principal has hired a research company to collect information that will help us make the school better for you. Several observers will watch students and record where each of you goes, how many times you go there, and how long you stay there, including to the water fountain, your locker, the bathroom, the cafeteria, and to visit another student. You will be identified only by a number. At the end of the day, the research company will put all the data together and write a report for the principal.

ENCOURAGE students to think about what you just told them. Have them jot down any questions or concerns they have, or think other students might have. Then have them share their thoughts with the class.

GUIDE students to consider the following questions:

• Who else might see the information?

• Can people's identification numbers be linked to their name by the principal?

• Do you think any of the information should remain private?

• Do you think you will be allowed to review the data collected about you?

• Are you satisfied with the explanation that the information is needed "to make the school better," or do you want to know more about how the information will be used?

EXPLAIN that the story you told is not true; no one will be collecting information about them in the school. However, this is the kind of information that many websites collect whenever you visit them. Companies can learn all kinds of things about you, based on where you go and what you do when you're online.

REVIEW the vocabulary word anonymous. Explain to students that most people think no one knows who they are or what they do when they are online. Believing they are anonymous is why people sometimes do things online that they would not do face to face. However, it's nearly impossible to be completely anonymous online.

Teach 1: What's Private?

ARRANGE students in pairs.

DISTRIBUTE the **What's Private? Student Handout**, one for each pair of students.

REVIEW the Key Vocabulary words cookies, third party, and privacy options. These terms are discussed in more detail on the student handout.

ASSIGN each pair of students one of the following websites, or choose other sites that your class uses. If your class has access to a limited number of computers, you may assign two or more pairs to work at the same computer and look at the same sites; each pair should complete its own handout.

PBS Kids: http://pbskids.org/go/
How Stuff Works: http://www.howstuffworks.com/

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About.com: http://www.about.com/

Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page

Nick.com: http://www.nick.com/

Teennick: http://www.teennick.com/

Disney Games: http://disney.go.com/disneyxd/#/disneyxd/games/

ASPCA Kids: http://www.aspca.org/aspcakids/

Harry Potter at Scholastic.com: http://harrypotter.scholastic.com/

EXPLAIN to students that every website has a privacy policy. They can usually find this by looking at the small print at the bottom of the home page and finding the words "Privacy" or "Privacy Policy."

ASK students to go to their assigned websites and find the privacy policy. On their handouts, have them check off the words that they find on the site, and answer the questions about personal information and privacy options.

INVITE pairs of students to share what they found out about the kinds of information their sites collect, and how they use it. Does their site collect personal information? Does it use cookies, or give out data to third parties? Does it give them a choice of privacy options? This information is generally included in the privacy policy, though not always.

Then ask students what they think about their site's privacy policy. Remind them to think back to the real-world privacy scenario about their school.

ASK *Do you mind that the site collects information about you? Why or why not?* (Students may say that they don't mind, but they want to know the site is doing it, or that they don't like strangers having personal information about them.)

ASK *Does it make a difference what kind of information your site collects about you?* (Make sure students understand the difference between sites that collect personal information such as names, addresses, and email, and sites that collect other information about things they do on the Web but keep the identities of their visitors anonymous.)

ASK *What do you get in return for the information? Is the exchange worth it to you?* (Students should understand that what they receive is free access to the website. In some cases, sites sell the data to make money, which supports the site. However, not every site does this, and some sites find other ways to support themselves.)

Teach 2: Design a Privacy Policy

HAVE students write their own privacy policies, using use all of the terms on the **What's Private? Student Handout**. In designing their privacy policies, students will need to consider the following questions:

• *What kinds of information do you want to collect about visitors to your site? How will you use the information?*

• *Will you use cookies?*

• *Will you share the information you collect with third parties?*

• *Do you want to give your visitors privacy options, so that they have choices about how the information will*

be used?

For students who need extra support, suggest that they structure their privacy policies by including the following headings:

• Name of Site

• What Information Is Collected

• How this Information Is Used

ENCOURAGE volunteers to read their privacy policies aloud, and invite other students to respond to them.

DISCUSS strategies for dealing with a site that asks for more information than students feel comfortable sharing, or that does not post a clear policy. Remind students that they can leave the site if they don't like the policy. Adults may have access to privacy settings, so students can ask an adult family member or teacher to check out the site
or contact the site for more information. (Adults should also know that the Federal Trade Commission provides an online Consumer Complaint Form at www.ftc.gov.)

Wrap Up and Assess

You can use these questions to assess your students' understanding of the lesson objectives.

ASK

• *What kinds of information do you want to keep private in the real world? On the Internet?*

• *Why do website owners want information about their visitors?* (They use the information to decide how to change the site, to decide how much to charge advertisers, and to customize a site for each visitor to encourage them to use the site more or, for commercial sites, to buy more. Without your knowledge, some sites may also share your information with others in exchange for more information about you or in exchange for money.)

• *Why is anonymity an important feature of the Internet?* (If websites know students' personal information, like their name and address, they can use it or sell it to third parties.)

• *What is a cookie? A third party? A privacy policy? Privacy options?* (See Key Vocabulary.)

REMIND students that they can always check a website's privacy policy to find out what that site might do with their personal information. If they don't feel comfortable with the policy, they can leave the site.

Extension Activity

Have students research and define the term "aggregate data." Ask them to explain how aggregate data can be collected even when a website's visitors remain anonymous. Encourage them to explain how aggregate data might be useful to companies that buy information from websites. How would it help them place ads or sell products on the Internet? (Students should understand that the data helps companies figure out what visitors' interests are, so they can place ads or sell products that they might like.)

Homework

Have students work with a parent or adult family member to go to a favorite site that they use at home, and find and read the site's privacy policy. Ask them to summarize the privacy policy and list any concerns or questions it raises.

Alignment with Standards – National Educational Technology Standards for Students© 2007

(Source: International Society for Technology in Education, 2007)

5. Digital Citizenship

    a. advocate and practice safe, legal, and responsible use of information and technology

6. Technology Operations and Concepts

    a. understand and use technology systems