By SIMON CHESTERN
FOR THE STRAITSTIMES

How best to protect kids online?

Law will play an important role, but so will education about the changing ways in which we share information.

Singapore’s proposed legislation does allow for regulations to be made concerning the application of the new law to minors, so it is possible that this issue will be revisited. If that happens, it will be necessary to be realistic about the extent to which any such laws will have an impact.

Among the hurdles will be the blithe attitude of some adults. There is anecdotal evidence, for example, that parents and even teachers allow or encourage primary school children to open Facebook accounts by lying about their age.

More generally, many primary school children send mixed signals to their pupils by posting photos (and sometimes names) on blogs, or requiring children to sign up for online educational programmes run by private companies.

Even assuming the good faith of adults, barriers to policing children’s online activities will remain.

Verifiable parental consent in the United States is typically sought through the submission of a credit card number or e-mail, though these may be evaded by children or even undertaken by an enterprising child.

Alternative means of verification include provision of a phone number, perhaps with some confirmation being sent via SMS, though an increasing number of children have their own phones. (As a result, some companies rely on the low-tech solution of snail mail — a letter.)

Operational questions aside, the key question is whether children should be treated as typical consumers.

New laws in the US and Europe may offer some protection on the one hand, for McDonald’s and McDonald’s.

But as Singapore develops its own regime, it offers an opportunity to think how best to protect children from the downside of information technology.

Law will play an important role, but so will education about the changing ways in which we share information and what it is that we should not let our children know need to be educated.

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