The under 13 rule

Nestled at the bottom of many of websites, in tiny print and away from the interesting bits we want to look at, is a link to those tomes we call the terms and conditions. Does anybody read them? Or understand them? Well if we are involved in using these websites with children, we need to.

And in doing so we will see that the majority of websites and services that require a sign-up forbid children under 13 from having an account. Even sites that are aimed at children and which have educational value may well have this rule, and require that a legal guardian of the child signs up on their behalf or expressly grants permission.

Many people know that Facebook, for example, has this age limit (although it is frequently ignored.) Facebook, like thousands of other sites, is complying with a United States law known as COPPA, or the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act. This act states that the personal information of children under 13 must not be collected by entities under U.S jurisdiction, which many of the biggest websites and online services are.

Whilst this may not be legally enforceable in the UK, it is still a violation of the terms and conditions of the sites in question. Furthermore, in stating that a child is over 13 when they are not, incorrect information about that child is being stored online. Most of us have come across the rather disconcerting accuracy in which internet adverts reflect our interests, previous web searches etc. This is because, whether we like it or not, information can be gathered about us when we ‘surf” so that content can be targeted at us. So a child that claimed to be 13 five years ago is now, as far as the information which may be stored is concerned, an 18 year old. We hope that most sites do not share the information they collect, but we have come across cases of children who are not yet 18 being targeted with adult content, presumably because the sender assumes this person is 18 or above.

So it is important that any teacher considering using services for which the children need to sign up, takes the time to read the terms and conditions and/or privacy policy. And if the site requires parental permission for children, this should be sought.

For further information see:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COPPA
http://www.coppa.org/