

Cyberangels Watch Over Kids Online Volunteers check sites for compliance with federal laws to protect surfing kids.

Charles Bermant, special to PC World Monday, June 12, 2000

The [Child Online Privacy Protection Act](#) (COPPA), which regulates how commercial sites can interact with young surfers, is almost impossible for the Federal Trade Commission to enforce alone. To help out, a citizens' group called [Cyberangels](#) is taking a systematic look at sites that collect information about children, and is blowing the whistle on those that do not comply.

The new legislation, in effect since April, prohibits sites from collecting information from minors without their parents' consent. Critics argue that it is a logistical nightmare, and will be impossible to administer.

"Those who are waiting for the FTC to take action won't have to wait long," says Parry Aftab, who heads Cyberangels. A test case will not only put certain sites out of business but will motivate others to follow the proscribed guidelines, Aftab predicts. "They are going to start coming up with some enforcement actions, and it will happen all at once." If a site is found to be noncompliant, it will essentially be put out of business, as parents will take their kids somewhere else, Aftab says. Literally thousands of sites are in this category, which gives parents a choice but makes Cyberangels' task a daunting one.

The organization trains its volunteers--5000 so far--to review Web sites. The Cyberangels judge a site's compliance or lack thereof, and enter information into a database that is sent on to the FTC.

"There are certain sites that aren't going to pay attention--they will always skirt the law," Aftab says. "Then, some others will eagerly comply because it will be good for their business. But we are most interested in those who are not in compliance and don't care."

Protection Evolves

Don't confuse COPPA with the Child Online Protection Act (COPA), which was declared unconstitutional. Aftab was among those who testified about rewriting that legislation.

Aftab's group is targeting sites that get a lot of traffic, but the group will eventually work its way down to the smaller sites. Some observers feel that a high-profile test case will be the only thing that will motivate violators into compliance.

"The FTC has not come down on anyone yet," says Elizabeth Knudsen, program director of [Followup.net](#). "Many have adopted a 'wait and see' attitude. When you contact a lot of these sites about COPPA, they say, 'Don't bother me, go away.' Others may want to do the right thing but don't have the money."

Knudsen's company markets a product, Child Tracker, that helps sites become compliant. When installed on a Web site, the program asks kids to fill out a "permission slip" that it then sends by e-mail to the child's parents. Upon receipt of the return mail, the child is granted access. The \$2500 setup fee is designed to be affordable, and paying it beats the alternatives: going out of business or getting shut down.

The flaw in this system is that kids supply the e-mail addresses of their "parents," and it's pretty easy to supply incorrect information. "Unfortunately, there's no way that you can guarantee kids are telling the truth," Knudsen admits.