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News Release

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Global privacy guardians call for better privacy practices for children's websites

VICTORIA—Results of the third annual Global Privacy Enforcement Network (GPEN) privacy sweep show that companies making websites and mobile apps for children need to think more carefully about privacy, B.C. Privacy Commissioner Elizabeth Denham said today.

“Our children are growing up in a digital world, with technology increasingly integrated into their lives. It is now normal for children to be exposed to tablets, cellphones and websites from a very young age,” said Commissioner Denham.

“In this GPEN sweep, privacy regulators from around the world took a close look at nearly 1,500 websites and apps popular with children to assess how much personal information was being collected by companies behind these websites, and what privacy policies and controls were in place to protect that information.”

Twenty-nine privacy regulators took part in the third annual GPEN privacy sweep May 11-15, 2015. The British Columbia Office looked at 100 websites that provide social media, gaming and educational content to children in North America. These websites were primarily from the private sector, which is covered by B.C.'s *Personal Information Protection Act*.

The GPEN privacy sweep results found that two-thirds of websites children visit collect personal information, but that many of those websites fail to explain in child-friendly terms what personal information is being collected or how it might be shared.

“Privacy law requires that organizations have a privacy policy that explains to their customers what personal information is being collected, for what purpose, and whether that information will be shared with outside parties. This requirement extends to information collected online. Children and their parents should have the opportunity to read and understand what a company is doing with their personal information before deciding whether to download an app or continue using a website.”

Some websites such as Pottermore.com – a children's website associated with Harry Potter – had a privacy policy specific to children, while companies like Mattel.com included protective communications tailored to kids reminding them not to share information about their family on the Internet.

The GPEN sweep also identified websites that allowed children to share personal information with strangers or upload sensitive details to the Internet without protections or controls.

“We came across one website that invited children to upload drawings to their website. Though seemingly harmless, one of the pictures had a child’s full name and address. If websites give kids the opportunity to post information online, there should be monitoring tools in place to prevent the publication of personal information,” said Denham.

Website developers can better protect children’s privacy by limiting the amount of personal information collected, using child-friendly language to communicate privacy policies and content, and providing tools to encourage parental involvement.

“The GPEN privacy sweep results highlight the need to educate our children about online privacy at a young age. This is a great opportunity to start a conversation with our children about what is appropriate to share online, and also to engage companies in a conversation about privacy and personal information protection,” said Denham.

The B.C. Office will be following up with websites where the GPEN sweep revealed privacy concerns.

Founded in 2010, GPEN is an informal network of privacy enforcement authorities from around the world. The members aim to work together to strengthen personal privacy protections in a global context. The network is comprised of 57 privacy enforcement authorities in 43 jurisdictions.

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