

Sex abuse concerns over popularity of TikTok among children

KUALA LUMPUR: While TikTok videos are entertaining, and sometimes even educational and meaningful, its growing popularity among children aged between four and 13 can be a cause for concern.

As experts pointed out, unrestrained use of the social media app can have negative outcomes such as privacy violations and exposure to sexual predators.

TikTok is a Chinese social networking service used to share a variety of short videos, each with a duration of 15 seconds to

one minute.

Universiti Putra Malaysia Teaching Hospital psychiatrist Dr Ruziana Masiran, who is also a lecturer at the Faculty of Medicine and Health Science, said although TikTok users below 13 are supposed to watch the censored version of content posted on the platform, many lie about their age to gain access to uncensored material.

“TikTok is increasingly becoming the app of choice for children in Malaysia. In fact, children as young as four already know about it and watch

whatever is uploaded,” she told Bernama.

According to United Kingdom-based market research company Global Web Index, as of February last year, TikTok had an estimated 800 million active users worldwide. In the United States (US), the amount of time TikTok users spent on it doubled from 38 minutes a day in May 2019 to 82 minutes daily in February 2020.

Ruziana said the Global Web Index showed that 90% of TikTok users visited the site more than once a day. “Although 41% of users

worldwide are aged between 16 and 21, one-third of US users are aged below 14.”

Data released by parental control software company Qustodio showed that in the US, children aged four to 14 spent an average of 82 minutes a day watching Tik Tok content and 86 minutes daily on YouTube between February 2019 and April last year, she added.

While TikTok’s simplified framework provides an avenue for children and teenagers to express their creativity and give them free

access to professional video, audio and photo editing software, the site’s negative aspects cannot be ignored.

TikTok content can expose young users to sexual predators and sexual grooming. The app’s usage can also lead to privacy leakage, which is even more dangerous as it puts the safety of children and their families at risk, Ruziana said.

Parents can use its Family Pairing feature that allows parents to link their child’s TikTok account with their own, giving them direct control over the child’s privacy settings.