

The Washington Post



This new children's book is a bedtime story for the AI age

With “Privacy, Please!” a longtime cybersecurity expert wants preschoolers to start learning about digital privacy.

Shira Ovide | December 5, 2025

Illustration by Elena Lacey/The Washington Post; iStock

Lorrie Cranor influenced what you know about digital privacy. Now she's aiming for preschoolers.

The Carnegie Mellon University professor helped pioneer an internet misery benchmark that tallied the 244 hours a year each American would need to read online privacy policies. (It's probably far higher now.) Cranor's research into passwords shaped workplace security policies and showed up in her homemade dress adorned with our terrible passwords.

Now Cranor has written a children's book, “Privacy, Please!” to help parents and children as young as four start talking about privacy in a digital world with few boundaries.

Cranor's book mostly delves into privacy through concepts that little kids grasp, such as privacy in the bathroom, sharing secrets with friends and quiet time alone

under a cozy blanket. Overt technology only appears occasionally, including when the child narrator doesn't want to have their photo taken.

Cranor said that she wants her book to spark kid-friendly family conversations about the value of personal space, respect for others and digital well-being.

“By teaching young children about privacy, we can help them understand that their boundaries matter and give them the vocabulary to talk about their privacy needs,” Cranor said.

No one wants a version of “The Very Hungry Caterpillar” with a data-gobbling Mark Zuckerberg. (Wait. Do I?) But Cranor's book is among the signs that our technology anxieties are sprouting children's fiction dealing with digital overuse, the data surveillance economy and privacy erosions.

Potty time and turtles

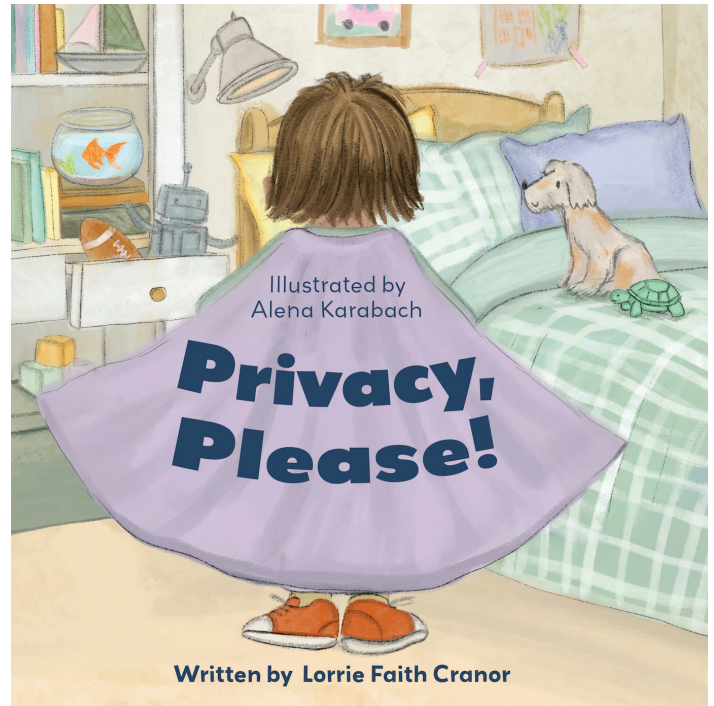
Starting about a decade ago, Cranor and her collaborators asked hundreds of adults and children to draw pictures of what privacy meant to them. Many children (and some grown-ups) drew images of cherished time alone in bedrooms or bathrooms, sometimes with impatient siblings on the other side of the door.

Cranor said that the privacy illustration project and experiences raising her three children showed her that little kids instinctively understand the benefits of personal privacy and healthy secrecy.

Then last year, Cranor and her graduate students led an adult data privacy clinic at a local library. They wanted to include a companion story time for young children, but the librarians said there were no age-appropriate books introducing privacy concepts.



Lorrie Cranor wears her homemade password dress.



Book cover of "Privacy, Please!" (*Privacy Please Book*)

So Cranor decided to write her own. She relied on her privacy illustration research and solicited input from preschool teachers and parents of young children.

"The feedback that I heard is, actually, this is really needed and useful," said Cranor, director of the CyLab Security and Privacy Institute at Carnegie Mellon.

Cranor's self-published storybook doesn't hammer kids over the head with technology. Instead, privacy concepts come up gently.

The illustrations by Alena Karabach in "Privacy, Please!" repeatedly show a turtle, including one pulling into its shell "to feel safe." It's contrasted with a grumpy-looking goldfish in a bowl that can't so easily retreat from prying eyes.

There are pages intended to bring up when a child might want to show an artwork to others and when they prefer to work on it without anyone watching. In one panel explicitly about technology, the narrator says, "It's nice to put my technology away and play outside where there's lots of privacy."

I described Cranor's book to Mitch Prinstein, chief of psychology at the American Psychological Association.

"I like the idea very much," he said. "It's interesting to start to think about how to educate and shape some of those attitudes toward privacy."

Is this a budding genre for young children?

Cranor's book isn't the only one introducing children to the downsides of technology and related life lessons.

A 2021 picture book, "Old MacDonald Had a Phone," encourages time away from devices. A sample line: "The hens wouldn't lay/ On their phones all day."

Daniel J. Solove, director of the privacy and technology law program at George Washington University, also self-published a novel for slightly older children, "The Eymonger." A creature with 103 eyes promises to "put an end to all crime/ because I'll be watching each of you all of the time."

Solove told me that he wrote "The Eymonger" after he couldn't find a book to discuss privacy with his son. In what Solove said is largely a metaphor for government surveillance, the Eymonger by the end regrets his extreme zeal for security. "We all need some time when nobody sees," the creature says.

Cranor's book arrives as Prinstein said that adults' and children's attitudes toward technology and privacy may be starting to shift.

Children at middle school age or younger are upset when they learn their data is collected in ways they don't expect and used for profit, Prinstein said.

And while even young children use a lot of technology and often interact with other people through devices, he said they increasingly want real-life connections. "There's a craving for that right now," he said.