

Kids and Tech: What's the Problem? What's the Solution?

THE PROBLEM

The internet looks completely different than it did just 10 years ago. Firms collect billions of data points on users, like our location and browser history, to maximize engagement and profit, and kids and teens are uniquely vulnerable to the online harms that stem from these practices. As kids and teens grow up, they can be more impressionable and easily influenced by tactics like targeted advertising, addictive platform design, and social pressure. This is because their brains are still developing, and the [structural differences](#) between adults' and adolescents' brains make kids and teens respond to events differently from adults.¹ For example, most kids cannot distinguish an ad from content until they are at least 8 years old, and most children do not realize that ads can be customized to them. These vulnerabilities make them particularly defenseless against advanced and personalized techniques used by companies.²

What harms do kids and teens face online?

- **Privacy harms:** By the time a child is 13 years old, adtech firms have gathered at least [72 million data points](#) on them, which they can use to manipulate them, such as through targeted ads, or sell to third parties.
- **Amplification of algorithmically recommended content:** Algorithms often take users down dark rabbit holes that recommend content promoting eating disorders, suicidal ideation and self-harm, and dangerous physical challenges like the [blackout challenge](#) that are detrimental to mental and physical health.
- **Sexual exploitation:** An alarming number of minors have reported sexual encounters with adults online, and many have been coerced into producing child sexual abuse material.
- **Promotion of unhealthy habits:** Online advertising of unhealthy food and drinks increases kids and teens' consumption of these products. Advertising also exposes them to smoking, vaping, drinking, and gambling.
- **Compulsive usage and addiction:** Companies use manipulative design features like endless scroll, autoplay, and push notifications to keep young users glued to the screen.

Common Sense Media has done extensive [research](#) and [advocacy](#) to help protect kids and teens online and is available as a resource on [privacy and platform accountability policy](#).

¹ Brief for Common Sense Media and Frances Haugen as Amici Curiae Supporting Petitioner, *Gonzales v. Google*, __ U.S. __ (2022) (No. 21-1333).

² Common Sense Media, [AdTech and Kids: Behavioral Ads Need a Time-Out](#) (May 13, 2021).

THE SOLUTION

Congress should adopt strong privacy and platform accountability policies to protect kids and teens online. There is growing bipartisan support from the [public](#) and in Congress for increasing privacy protections and holding tech companies accountable, and in the 117th Congress, Common Sense Media supported many of these efforts. We were the lead supporter of the **Children and Media Research Advancement (CAMRA) Act**, which authorizes an NIH research program about the impact of technology on infants', children's, and teens' physical, cognitive, and mental health over time. There is still more work to be done, and it is urgent that Congress act this year.

Because online platforms have become so powerful through their data practices, Congress should pass strong privacy legislation to address the harms that kids and teens face online. The less online data on minors that is collected, stored, and shared, the less opportunity there is for technology companies and online advertisers to reach minors with inappropriate content that can undermine young people's mental and physical well-being. The only federal privacy law that protects kids online, the **Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA)**, is 25 years old and does not adequately protect kids on the internet today.

PRIVACY: Congress should build on the significant work it did last year to provide baseline online privacy protections to kids and teens, including but not limited to these provisions:

- Establish an opt-in regime for minors.
- Expand COPPA's online protections to teens age 13 to 17.
- Ban targeted advertising to kids and teens.
- Close the COPPA loophole that companies use to turn a blind eye to minors on their platforms.
- Guarantee minors the right to erase their internet history.
- Establish a Youth Privacy and Marketing division at the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), and provide the FTC with sufficient funding for staff and enforcement.

PLATFORM ACCOUNTABILITY: Companies—not parents—should take responsibility and be accountable for the products they design. **Congress must establish new requirements on platforms to protect youth, such as:**

- Require companies to design platforms in a way that prioritizes kids' and teens' health and well-being.
- Require that the strongest privacy-protective settings be the default for minors.
- Prohibit design features (e.g., autoplay and endless scroll) that manipulate minors to spend more time online.

Each year that passes without new privacy and platform protections is another year of harm to young people and their families. They cannot afford to keep waiting.

Interested in learning more? Explore our other Common Sense Media reports and resources:

- [AdTech and Kids: Behavioral Ads Need a Time-Out](#) (May 2021)
- [Behavioral Advertising Harms: Kids and Teens](#) (February 2022)
- [Global Policy Comparative Report](#) (December 2021)
- [Kids and the Metaverse: What Parents, Policymakers, and Companies Need to Know](#) (March 2022)
- [List of Social Media Harms](#) (December 2021)

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Common Sense is the nation's leading nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of all kids and families by providing the trustworthy information, education, and independent voice they need to thrive in the 21st century.