April 15, 2021

Mark Zuckerberg  
Chief Executive Officer  
Facebook, Inc.  
1601 Willow Road  
Menlo Park, CA 94025

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg,

We are writing to urge you to cancel plans to launch a version of Instagram for children under 13.

According to an internal memo published by BuzzFeed, Facebook plans to build “a version of Instagram that allows people under the age of 13 to safely use Instagram for the first time.”¹ We agree that the current version of Instagram is not safe for children under 13 and that something must be done to protect the millions of children who have lied about their age to create Instagram accounts, especially since their presence on the platform could be a violation of the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) and other nations’ privacy laws.

However, launching a version of Instagram for children under 13 is not the right remedy and would put young users at great risk.

In the elementary and middle school years, children experience incredible growth in their social competencies, abstract thinking, and sense of self. Finding outlets for self-expression and connection with their peers become especially important. We are concerned that a proposed Instagram for kids would exploit these rapid developmental changes.

A growing body of research demonstrates that excessive use of digital devices and social media is harmful to adolescents. Instagram, in particular, exploits young people’s fear of missing out and desire for peer approval to encourage children and teens to constantly check their devices and share photos with their followers. The platform’s relentless focus on appearance, self-presentation, and branding presents challenges to adolescents’ privacy and wellbeing.

Younger children are even less developmentally equipped to deal with these challenges, as they are learning to navigate social interactions, friendships, and their inner sense of strengths and challenges during this crucial window of development. Moreover, young children are highly

persuadable by algorithmic prediction of what they might click on next, and we are very concerned about how automated decision making would determine what children see and experience on a kids’ Instagram platform.

Children between the ages of 10 and 12 who have existing Instagram accounts are unlikely to migrate to a “babyish” version of the platform after they have experienced the real thing. The true audience for a kids’ version of Instagram will be much younger children who do not currently have accounts on the platform. While collecting valuable family data and cultivating a new generation of Instagram users may be good for Facebook’s bottom line, it will likely increase the use of Instagram by young children who are particularly vulnerable to the platform’s manipulative and exploitative features.

Excessive screen media use and social media use is linked to a number of risks for children and adolescents, including obesity, lower psychological wellbeing, decreased happiness, decreased quality of sleep, increased risk of depression, and increases in suicide-related outcomes such as suicidal ideation, plans, and attempts. Fifty-nine percent of US teens have reported being bullied on social media, an experience which has been linked to increased risky behaviors such as smoking and increased risk of suicidal ideation. Adolescent girls report feeling pressure to post sexualized selfies as a means of generating attention and social acceptance from their peers. Additionally, social media platforms including Instagram are rife with child sexual abuse materials and online exploitation of young users – in 2020 alone, Facebook and Instagram

---


6 Sakari Lemola et al., “Adolescents’ Electronic Media Use at Night, Sleep Disturbance, and Depressive Symptoms in the Smartphone Age,” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 44 (February 1, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-014-0176-x.

7 Ibid.


reported 20 million child sexual abuse images. Instagram has faced criticism for failing to respond to reports of exploitation in a timely manner. The rise in screen time due to the pandemic has further increased the risk of these harms.

Research has found that Instagram in particular poses a number of serious challenges to young people’s wellbeing. The Royal Society for Public Health rated Instagram as the worst social media platform for youth mental health. Increased time on Instagram is linked to an increased risk for eating disorders for users. Cyberbullying is rampant on Instagram, and police reports in the UK documented more cases of sexual grooming on Instagram than any other platform.

Instagram’s focus on photo sharing and appearance makes the platform particularly unsuitable for children who are in the midst of crucial stages of developing their sense of self. The platform encourages users to upload videos and photos to receive likes and comments from other users; this can lead young people to obsessively check Instagram for reactions to their posts. In addition, editing photos and videos and using filters to present an idealized version of oneself is the norm on Instagram. Children and teens (especially young girls) have learned to associate overly sexualized, highly edited photos of themselves with more attention on the platform and popularity among their peers.

Experimental research has found that adult women rate their own appearance lower after viewing celebrity profiles on Instagram. For developing children, the constant pressure to compare themselves to others is likely to have even more concerning effects. As clinical psychologist Bethany Cook notes:

---

20 Mascheroni, Vincent, and Jimenez, “‘Girls Are Addicted to Likes so They Post Semi-Naked Selfies.’”
We all know social media — especially Instagram — allows us control over what we share with the outside world. Many of us prefer to show our “best light” and/or a “filtered” version of our life. When children see this version of life and then compare it to their own, it often creates feelings of anger, frustrations, resentment, depression, and stress they don't know how to emotionally process on their own. It doesn't matter if you explain to them “it's all fake,” because the part of their brain needed to fully comprehend and understand this concept isn't fully developed until around the age 21-25.  

Instagram also subjects its users to intense commercial pressure, which is particularly unfair to developing children. A recent analysis by digital monitoring agency Sprout Social revealed that one in every three Instagram posts is an advertisement, while other research has found that undisclosed sponsored posts are rampant on Instagram. The Instagram business model, which relies on maximizing engagement and monetizing sensitive personal information, is incongruent with children’s right to privacy and their need for a wide array of offline activities and face-to-face interactions.

Finally, Facebook’s long track record of exploiting young people and putting them at risk makes the company particularly unsuitable as the custodian of a photo sharing and social messaging site for children. Leaked documents have revealed that Facebook boasted to advertisers that it could target teens at the exact moment they were feeling bad about themselves, including when they have negative thoughts about their bodies. Another report from Reveal showed that Facebook employees referred to children who racked up thousands of dollars in credit card charges through in-game purchases as “whales,” a term casinos use to classify incredibly lucrative high rollers. In 2019, a design flaw in Facebook’s Messenger Kids allowed young children to circumvent parental controls and chat with strangers. Research published in 2020 showed that vast amounts of data from apps played by kids have been sent to the Facebook Graph database, yet no effort has been made by your company to address the problem of the children’s data that you possess or process for marketing purposes.

In short, an Instagram site for kids will subject young children to a number of serious risks and will offer few benefits for families. As Senators Markey and Blumenthal and Representatives

---

Castor and Trahan wrote to you, “[I]f Facebook’s objective is to decrease the number of users under the age of 13 on its current Instagram platform, it should invest in efforts to do that directly.” Such efforts to protect children and comply with the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act and other privacy laws shouldn’t be contingent on your ability to monopolize and monetize children’s attention on another platform.

According to your congressional testimony, Instagram for kids is in the early planning stages. We urge you to abandon those plans. Doing so would send a strong message that Facebook understands the vast concerns about the effects its business model is having on young people, and is open to solutions that truly benefit children and teens, not just Facebook’s market share.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this matter further.

Sincerely,

ORGANIZATIONS:

Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood
5Rights Foundation, UK
Accountable Tech
Africa Digital Rights' Hub, Ghana
Artist Rights Alliance
Australian Council on Children and the Media
Badass Teachers Association
Berkeley Media Studies Group
Center for Digital Democracy
Center for Humane Technology
Centre for Health Science and Law, Canada
Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP), South Africa
Child Online Africa, Ghana
Children and Screens: Institute of Digital Media and Child Development
Common Sense
Consumer Action
Consumer Federation of America
Consumer Federation of California
Defend Committee (Canada)*
Defending the Early Years
Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC)
Every Child Protected Against Trafficking UK (ECPAT UK)
Global Action Plan UK
Kidscape
Media Education Foundation

---

National Center on Sexual Exploitation*
Network for Public Education
New Economics Foundation
Norwegian Cancer Society
Obligation, Inc.
Parent Coalition for Student Privacy
Parents Television and Media Council
ParentsTogether Action
Peace Educators Allied for Children Everywhere (P.E.A.C.E.)
Public Citizen
Raffi Foundation for Child Honouring, Canada
Reach Out and Read*
Reset Australia
The creators of The Social Dilemma
The Story of Stuff

INDIVIDUALS:
(affiliations listed for identification purposes only)

Susie Alegre, Barrister, International Human Rights Lawyer, Associate Doughty Street Chambers; author of Rethinking Freedom of Thought for the 21st Century / Regulating around the Forum Internum

Alberto Alemanno, Jean Monnet Professor in EU Law at HEC Paris; author of Lobbying for Change: Find Your Voice to Create a Better Society

Sarah Baldwin, MSEd, Early Childhood Education

Veronica Barassi, Professor of Media and Communications, University of St. Gallen; author of Child Data Citizen (MIT Press)

Criscillia Benford, PhD; co-author of Sensory Metrics of Neuromechanical Trust

Barbara Biggins, OAM, CF, BSc, Grad DipLib, Honorary CEO Australian Council on Children and the Media

Faith Boninger, PhD, National Education Policy Center, School of Education, University of Colorado Boulder

Cynthia Boyd MD, MPH, Professor of Medicine, Epidemiology and Health Policy and Management, Johns Hopkins University

Emma Boyland, PhD; Associate Professor in Psychology, University of Liverpool; author of Advertising as a cue to consume: a systematic review and meta-analysis of the effects of
acute exposure to unhealthy food or non-alcoholic beverage advertising on intake in children and adults

Michael Brody, Child Psychiatrist; author of Seductive Screens

Blakely Bundy, MEd, Co-Director of Defending the Early Years

Patrick Burton, Executive Director, Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP), South Africa; co-author of South African Kids Online Study (2016) and Our Lives Online: Use of Social Media by Children and Adolescents in East Asia - Opportunities, Risks and Harms (2020)

Angela Campbell, Professor Emeritus, Communications & Technology Law Clinic, Georgetown University Law Center; Chair of the Board of Directors, Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood

Patricia Cantor, EdD, Professor of Early Childhood Education, Plymouth State University; co-author of Tech-Wise Infant and Toddler Teachers: Making Sense of Screen Media for Children Under 3

Nancy Carlssson-Paige, Professor Emerita in child development, Lesley University; author of Taking Back Childhood

Hilarie Cash, PhD, LMHC, CSAT, WSGC, Chief Clinical Officer; author of Video Games and Your Kids: How Parents Stay in Control (2009); Facing Internet, Technology and Video Game Addiction (in publication)

Kathleen Clarke-Pearson, MD, Executive Board: AAP Committee on Federal Government Affairs

Joe Clement, MEd; co-author of Screen Schooled

Mary Cornish, PHD, Professor of Early Childhood Education, Plymouth State University; co-author of Techwise Infant and Toddler Teachers: Making Sense of Screen Media for Children Under 3

Martha Daniel, LLB, BL, PGDE, Advocacy For Children's Right Initiative

Gloria DeGaetano, Founder/CEO of Parent Coaching Institute; author of Parenting Well in a Media Age: Keeping Our Kids Human

Victoria Dunckley, MD, Child Psychiatrist and screen time expert; author of Reset Your Child's Brain

Nathan Dungan, Founder and President, Share Save Spend, LLC
Charlene Elliott, PhD, Canada Research Chair, Food Marketing, Policy and Children's Health and Professor, Communication, University of Calgary

Jean Fahey, PhD, Parent Educator; author of Make Time for Reading and I'll Build You a Bookcase

Debbie Farr, PhD, Owner, Flourishing Families

Rys Farthing, PhD; co-author of The Precarious Generation

Randima Fernando, Co-Founder and Executive Director, Center for Humane Technology

Richard Freed, PhD, psychologist; author of Wired Child: Reclaiming Childhood in a Digital Age

Nicholas Freudenberg, Distinguished Professor of Public Health, City University of New York School of Public Health and Health Policy

Sheryl Gottwald, PhD, Early Childhood Emphasis, Retired Professor, University of New Hampshire, Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders

Elizabeth Handsley, Professor of Law, Western Sydney University and President, Australian Council on Children and the Media; editor of Children's Wellbeing in the Media Age: Multidisciplinary Perspectives from the Harvard-Australia Symposium

Tristan Harris, Co-Founder and President of Center for Humane Technology

Nina Hersher, MSW, CEO at Digital Wellness Institute; author of Thriving in the Remote Work Era

Petra Hesse, PhD, Clinical Associate Professor of Human Development, Boston University, Wheelock College; author of Media literacy starts young: An integrated curriculum approach

Mindy Holohan, MA, CFLE, Faculty Specialist-Family Science, Western Michigan University

John Hutton, MD, MS, Assistant Professor of General and Community Pediatrics and Director of the Reading and Literacy Discovery Center, Cincinnati Children's Hospital; author of Associations Between Screen-Based Media Use and Brain White Matter Integrity in Preschool-Aged Children and Functional Connectivity of Attention, Visual and Language Networks During Audio, Illustrated, and Animated Stories in Preschool-Age Children.

Kassim S. Kabia, teacher, Sierra Leone International Mission School, founder, The Global Pikin

Allen Kanner, PhD; Editor Psychology and Consumer Culture
Tim Kasser, PhD, Emeritus Professor of Psychology, Knox College; author of *High Price of Materialism*

Brett Kennedy, PsyD, Licensed Clinical Psychologist

Velma D La Point, PhD; Professor, Child Development, Department of Human Development and Psychoeducational Studies, School of Education, Howard University

Diane Levin, PhD, Clinical Professor of Human Development, Boston University; co-founder of Defending the Early Years, author of *So Sexy So Soon, Teaching Young Children in Violent Times, The War Play Dilemma*

Susan Linn, EdD, Lecturer in Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School; author: Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood.

Robert MacDougall, PhD, Professor of Communication and Media Studies, Curry College

Duncan McCann, Representative Claimant in McCann v Google regarding illegally processing kids’ data

Nell Minow, The Movie Mom

Katheryn Montgomery, PhD, Professor Emerita, School of Communication, American University

Dipesh Navsaria, MPH, MSLIS, MD, Associate Professor of Pediatrics, University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health; co-author of *AAP Statement on Digital Advertising to Children*

Meghan Owenz, PhD, Assistant Teaching Professor, Penn State Berks; author of *Spoiled Right: Delaying Screens and Giving Children What They Really Need*

Sue Palmer, MEd; author of *Toxic Childhood* and *21st Century Girls*

Rae Pica, author of *What If Everybody Understood Child Development*

Nikolai Pushkarev, health advocate

Jenny Radesky, MD, Assistant Professor of Pediatrics, University of Michigan Medical School

Jean Rystrom, Retired from Kaiser Permanente

Anna Anet Sambou, Founder, SHOAW Gambia

Brooke Shannon, Founder of Wait Until 8th
Joni Siani, MEd Psychology, Professor of Media and Communications Manhattanville College; Author/Filmmaker, *Celling Your Soul,* founder, The No App For Life Project

William Softky, PhD, co-author of Sensory Metrics of Neuromechanical Trust

Jim Taylor, PhD, Psychology; adjunct professor, University of San Francisco; author of 5 parenting books including *Raising Generation Tech: Preparing Your Children for a Media-fueled World*

Sherry Turkle, PhD, Abby Rockefeller Mauzé Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology, MIT

Jean M. Twenge, PhD, Professor of Psychology, San Diego State University; author of *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy – and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*

Wayne Warburton, PhD, Associate Professor of Psychology, Macquarie University Sydney; author of *Growing up fast and furious: The impacts of violent and sexualised media on children*

Kevin Welner, Professor of Education Policy at the University of Colorado Boulder School of Education (by courtesy) at the School of Law; Director of the National Education Policy Center; Senior Research Fellow at the Learning Policy Institute

Shoshana Zuboff, Charles Edward Wilson Professor of Business Administration, Emerita, Harvard Business School; author of *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* and *The Other Coup*

*Indicates experts or organizations that signed on after the initial publication of this letter on April 15*