

# META HAS A LONG HISTORY OF FAILING TO PROTECT CHILDREN ONLINE

---

According to a 2022 survey from [Pew Research](#), over a third of teenagers say they are on social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook “almost constantly.” Yet, time and time again, Meta has demonstrated its inability to keep kids safe on its platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, Messenger/Messenger Kids, and MetaQuest VR. And despite [clear evidence](#) that Meta *knows* it is harming kids, they have failed to act.

Meta whistleblower Frances Haugen stated that Facebook views “hooking kids” on its platforms as essential to the company’s ability to grow and compete with TikTok. Haugen’s revelations, as well as those by other whistleblowers, makes clear that Meta is fully aware of the ways in which children are harmed on its platforms. Internal documents also make clear that Meta employees have been consistently ignored by the company’s decision-makers when they have raised concerns about the impacts of Meta’s platforms on children and teens.

Below are just some of the well-documented and ongoing concerns about what young people experience on Meta’s platforms.

---

## META’S PLATFORMS MAKE IT EASY FOR CYBERBULLYING TO OCCUR

- An April 2022 study by Pew Research Center revealed that about half of U.S. teens ages 13-17 have experienced some form of cyberbullying, including offensive name-calling, spreading false rumors, receiving explicit messages, physical threats, and other behaviors ([Pew Research Center, 2022](#)).
- In a 2022 McAfee study of 11,687 parents and children in 10 countries, nearly 80% of respondents reported cyberbullying on Instagram, compared to 50% on TikTok and Snapchat ([Washington Times, 2022](#)). This has increased from 2017 numbers, which showed that Instagram (42%) followed by Facebook (37%) are the two platforms where people experienced cyberbullying the most ([Ditch the Label, 2017](#)).
- Instagram allows anonymous apps like NGL (“not gonna lie”) to integrate with its API on Snapchat, despite the fact that it is well known that anonymous apps lead to teen cyberbullying. In 2022, following a class action lawsuit, Snap [disallowed anonymous apps](#), stating “We will prohibit apps that facilitate anonymous messaging from integrating with our platform. During our review, we determined that even with safeguards in place, anonymous apps pose risks for abuse that are impossible to mitigate at an acceptable level... we believe that some users might be more prone to engage in

harmful behavior –such as bullying or harassment – if they have the shroud of anonymity.” Instagram has continued to allow anonymous apps and, predictably, they are a source of cyberbullying ([Forbes, 2022](#)).

---

## META’S PLATFORMS PERPETUATE CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

- After over two years of research and interviews with 70 sources, journalists “have seen evidence that suggests [Meta] is failing to report or even detect the full extent of what is happening, and many of those we interviewed said they felt powerless to get the company to act.” Children as young as nine are victims of sex trafficking via Facebook, where predators can connect directly with children as well as “sex buyers” ([The Guardian, 2023](#)).
  - In 2019, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children found that Instagram was the #1 platform for child grooming in the UK; they identified more than 5,000 crimes of sexual communication with children and a 200% increase in how Instagram was used to abuse children, all in an 18 month period ([Forbes, 2019](#)).
  - Meta was reportedly unresponsive to complaints of predatory behavior during the pandemic, despite many parents seeing a rise in this behavior. One teen said, “I’ve seen seven erect penises this week in profile pictures. People have realized there are no controls right now. There’s nobody watching” ([NBC News, 2020](#)).
  - Forbes, WIRED, and The Guardian found that Meta rejected many of their flags on accounts that engaged in child sexual exploitation and didn’t take action against them. In some cases, Meta even said the accounts did not violate their community guidelines ([Forbes, 2022](#); [WIRED, 2022](#); [The Guardian, 2022](#)).
  - In 2020, the Federal Human Trafficking Report found that 65% of child sex trafficking victims recruited on social media were recruited through Facebook and 14% on Instagram ([National Center On Sexual Exploitation, 2020](#)).
  - 22% of minors that used Instagram reported experiencing a sexually explicit interaction on the platform ([National Center On Sexual Exploitation, 2022](#)).
  - Meta broke up a team tasked with developing software for detecting indecent videos of children because it was seen as “too complex” according to an SEC whistleblower ([BBC, 2021](#)).
-

## META USES SURVEILLANCE ADVERTISING TO TARGET TEENS WHEN THEY ARE MOST VULNERABLE

- Leaked documents from Facebook revealed in 2017 that the company told advertisers it could help them target teens at moments when they are feeling specific emotions, such as “insecure” “defeated,” “overwhelmed,” “worthless,” and “a failure.” ( [The Guardian, 2017](#)).
- A 2021 report showed how Meta regularly used teens’ personal data to target ads to them on Facebook based on their interests in gambling, alcohol, and dieting. Researchers wrote, “Many of these profiles are created using highly sensitive data that potentially leaves young people vulnerable to advertisers. For example, Facebook uses data it collects about underage users to create profiles of young people with harmful or risky interests such as 13- to 17-year-olds interested in smoking, gambling, alcohol or extreme weight loss.” ( [Reset Australia, 2021](#) )
- Shortly after this research was published, Meta announced that they were restricting advertisers’ ability to target teens based on their interests. But this change was misleading, as the company’s ad targeting algorithm still used the data it collected on young people to determine who is most likely to be vulnerable to a given ad ( [Fairplay, 2021](#) ).

---

## META’S PLATFORMS REGULARLY PUSH HARMFUL CONTENT TO KIDS AND TEENS

Instagram’s design intentionally routes child and teen users toward content that is harmful to their mental and physical well-being, especially when they are already vulnerable to that content. The 2021 *Facebook Files* leaked research reveals that Meta knows this happens (Washington Post, 2021). A 2017 study showed that Instagram had the “Most Negative Overall Effect” on young people’ body image, sleep, anxiety/depression, loneliness, and bullying and FOMO (“fear of missing out”) ( [PsychAlive, May 2017](#) ).

### EATING DISORDER CONTENT

- An April 2022 report found that Meta is making millions of dollars from pushing pro-eating disorder content to minors as young as 9 on Instagram. Even worse, Instagram’s algorithmic amplification is helping to grow this content’s reach. The researchers analyzed a pro-eating disorder “bubble” on the app consisting of 153 popular accounts that celebrate “thinspiration” or “bonespiration,” and the 90,000 users that follow three or more of these accounts. The accounts post content such as positive imagery of extremely underweight people or other eating disorder memes. Most distressingly, the report revealed that 33.75% of the accounts in this bubble are underage. Following the publication of the report, Senators Ed Markey and Richard

Blumenthal and Representatives Kathy Castor and Lori Trahan sent a letter to Meta demanding answers ([Fairplay, 2022](#); [Ed Markey, 2022](#)).

- Another study found a positive correlation between higher Instagram use and orthorexia nervosa diagnoses. Personal stories from sufferers of disordered eating have highlighted the link to social media, as has Meta's own internal research; the documents Frances Haugen shared with the Wall Street Journal in 2021 revealed that Facebook has been aware at least since 2019 that "[w]e make body image issues worse for one in three teen girls" ([Turner & Carmen, 2017](#); [Slate, 2021](#); [The Guardian, 2021](#); [Wall Street Journal, 2021](#)).
- Numerous reports have shown that teen girls could easily access pro-eating disorder content on Instagram, including an internal Meta report. When an Instagram employee created a fake profile of a 13-year-old girl looking for diet tips, she was directed to graphic content and profiles pushing eating disorders. CBS ran a similar experiment and found they could easily find content promoting anorexia ([CBS News, 2022](#)).
- Tech Transparency Project (TTP) found that Instagram recommended accounts that explicitly promoted anorexia and bulimia. When TTP created a fake teen Instagram profile TTP that had only posted six pictures of thin bodies and used language associated with eating-disorders in their bios, the account was flooded with recommendations for accounts promoting eating disorders. TTP further found that fully spelled out hashtags for anorexia and bulimia were still active ([Tech Transparency Project, 2021](#)).

## SELF-HARM CONTENT

- Several concerning instances exemplify the ease at which children can both access and be fed self-harm and suicide content. "It's troubling enough that British teenager Molly Russell sought out images of suicide and self-harm online before she took her own life in 2017. But it was later discovered that these images were also being delivered to her, recommended by her favorite social media platforms" ([WIRED, 2019](#)).
- Following Molly Russell's death in 2019, Meta promised to remove pro-self harm and pro-suicide content from Instagram, but an investigation by The Mirror found that they failed to do so ([The Mirror, 2019](#)).
- Fourteen-year-old Englyn Roberts died by suicide in 2020 after being "bombarded by Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok with harmful images and videos," including "violent and disturbing content glorifying self-harm and suicide." What's more, the more the 14-year-old interacted with the content, the more Instagram started recommending the content to her ([NY Post, 2022](#)).

- Meta’s own leaked research shows that Instagram increased their anxiety and depression without being prompted, and that suicide ideation was something they encountered on Instagram ([Wall Street Journal, 2021](#)).
- 

## **META USES MESSENGER KIDS TO HOOK YOUNG CHILDREN WHILE EXPOSING THEM TO PRIVACY RISKS**

- In December 2017, Facebook rolled out Messenger Kids, giving children under 13 official access to the Facebook platform for the first time. In October 2018, Fairplay and many other children’s advocacy groups sent a complaint to the FTC, indicating how Messenger Kids violates COPPA by collecting personal information from children without obtaining verifiable parental consent or providing parents with clear and complete disclosures of Facebook’s data practices ([Fairplay, 2018](#)).
- Whistleblower Frances Haugen “told lawmakers that Facebook intentionally targets teens and ‘definitely’ targets children as young as eight for the Messenger Kids app.” Messenger Kids serves as a marketing tool, not a tool to keep younger kids safe ([The Guardian, 2021](#)).
- In fact, Meta failed to consult well-known experts in the children’s technology field about Messenger Kids, including Fairplay, Common Sense Media, and well-cited researchers Sherry Turkle and Jean Twenge, who either learned about the app a few days ahead of launch or only found out about it after it had launched ([Wired, 2018](#)).
- In July 2019, Meta’s promise to protect kids’ privacy in Messenger Kids was compromised when “thousands of children were left in chats with unauthorized users, a violation of the core promise of Messenger Kids,” according to the Verge ([The Verge, 2019](#)).

---

## **META ENABLES “FRIENDLY FRAUD,” WHERE CHILDREN SPEND MONEY WITHOUT PARENT PERMISSION**

- In 2019, an analysis of hundreds of unsealed court documents by Reveal showed that Facebook had knowingly duped children into making millions of dollars of accidental purchases for years. In many cases, children did not even know they were spending money, according to a report by Reveal, but Facebook employees knew ([Reveal, 2019](#)).
- On January 24, 2019, the Center for Investigative Reporting published internal documents which appear to demonstrate that Facebook used games to knowingly defraud children and their parents out of money, for as much as several thousand dollars

per family ([Fairplay, 2019](#)).

- As early as 2011, Facebook knew that kids were spending real money on games without their parents' permission and in some cases unintentionally, but refused to refund these purchases because doing so would hurt revenue. To get their money back, parents had no choice but to initiate chargebacks with their credit card companies or take legal action. In one 3-month period from 2010 – 2011, children spent \$3.6 million on Facebook games, and more than 9% of that money was charged back. This is well above both the .5% industry average and the 2% threshold the FTC considers a flag for deceptive business practices. The chargeback rate in 2014 was similar, suggesting that over several years, Facebook knowingly defrauded kids and families out of millions of dollars. In fact, it appears Facebook did nothing to change these obviously predatory and deceptive practices until a class-action settlement forced its hand in 2016 ([Fairplay, 2019](#)).

---

## META PUSHES HORIZON WORLDS TO TEENS, DESPITE DANGERS

- Until recently, Meta's official policy was to prohibit minors from using Horizon Worlds, its flagship virtual reality platform. Despite this prohibition, research for the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CDCH) found minors routinely use the platform, with minors present in 66 of the 100 recordings collected by CDCH.
  - Within these recordings researchers identified 19 incidents of abuse directed at minors by adults, including sexually explicit insults and racial, misogynistic and homophobic harassment. In one incident, an adult repeatedly shouted at a group of young girls "I want to c\*m on you," continuing even after the girls said they were minors.
  - Minors were also spotted in multiple 'Mature Worlds' where Meta permits sexually explicit content, legal drugs and gambling. Mature Worlds must be marked as 18+ but there are no further safety measures, and they are easily accessible from the main menu or in-world 'portals' ([Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2023](#)).
- Despite its inability or unwillingness to protect minors from abuse and accessing mature content, a leaked memo indicated that Meta planned to officially open Horizon Worlds to teens in an attempt to revive its failing platform ([Wall Street Journal, 2023](#)).
- Senators Blumenthal and Markey, as well as a coalition of privacy, public health and child development advocates and experts, urged Meta to abandon these plans. Both the letters from the senators and civil society cited Meta's long track record of failing to protect young people in the unsafe environments in Horizon Worlds ([Senate.gov, 2023](#); [Fairplay, 2023](#)).

- Just four days after receiving the civil society letter, Meta officially opened Horizon Worlds to teens, once again ignoring expert advice and showing a callous disregard for young people’s wellbeing ([Social Media Today, 2023](#)).
- 

## **META FACILITATES DRUG DEALERS CONNECTING WITH AND ADVERTISING TO CHILDREN**

- One in four kids reported being advertised drugs on social media, including Facebook and Instagram ([Vice, 2020](#)).
- A experiment ran by Tech Transparency Project (TTP) found that when a fake teen account on Instagram of theirs typed “buyxanax” in the search bar, the platform started auto filling results for buying Xanax before the user was finished typing. TTP’s director said it only took 20 seconds for a kid to connect with a dealer ([Tech Transparency Project, 2022](#)).
- Instagram recommended other drug selling accounts on the platform to TTP’s fake account. TTP said they started receiving a series of unsolicited calls from one drug dealer and were presented with a menu of products and prices by another dealer ([Tech Transparency Project, 2022](#)).
- Instagram said 72% of the posts TTP flagged during their investigation did not violate the platform’s policies against selling drugs ([Tech Transparency Project, 2022](#)).