

OTHER VIEWS COMMENTARY

Protect children from dangers of the internet with Kids Online Safety Act

Social media can bring us closer together and help us communicate. But for kids, unchecked use can have a negative impact.

By Jeffery M. Leving | Aug 22, 2023, 3:05pm CDT

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A visitor passes the TikTok exhibition stand at the Gamescom computer gaming fair in Cologne, Germany in August 2022. The Kids Online Safety Act is a proposed law aimed at protecting kids from the dangers of the internet. | Martin Meissner/AP file

In July, the Kids Online Safety Act drew one step closer to becoming law when a Senate committee advanced the bill. However, despite bipartisan support and the fact that most people in the U.S. agree that kids need internet safeguards, the bill faces hurdles.

Some are trying to politicize the bill by claiming that it will be used by anti-LGBTQ+ groups to censor content under the guise of preventing depression, anxiety and eating disorders in children. Others claim it is a threat to free speech.

But since the bill made it to the floor of Congress last year and was dropped because of criticism, some language was changed and LGBTQ+ advocacy groups that initially opposed it, like the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation and the Human Rights Campaign, wisely [dropped their opposition](#).

Of course, there are some groups that still oppose the bill, but their opposition seems to be more rooted in the support from some conservative groups, rather than the substance of the bill. All groups need to realize that compromise is essential to passing any law.

Those who say the bill is a threat to free speech claim that the vast majority of speech that might be considered unsuitable for minors is protected by the First Amendment. However, it seems to me that the proposed law is not aiming to restrict speech, but to restrict those who can read and see harmful speech.

Sadly, what is getting lost with these objections is what the law would do.

We know that social media can bring us closer together and help us communicate and learn about what's going on in the lives of people we care about. But for kids, unchecked use can have a negative impact.

I fear children are suffering more and more from eating disorders, depression and bullying because they spend too much time online. Some kids have gone to social media to find drugs, been bamboozled into sexual relationships with adults or discussed disturbing plans to shoot up a school.

Surgeon general weighs in

The alarm has been sounding for some time. Even U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy weighed in, issuing an [advisory](#) in May that said “we cannot conclude that social media is sufficiently safe for children and adolescents.”

Murthy also said he believes [13-year-olds are too young](#) to join social media, and that being on those platforms does a “disservice” to children.

Murthy did not choose age 13 randomly. Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter require users to be 13 or older. Those younger than 13 can use TikTok, but that platform has a safety setting that limits the information collected from this group, and prevents them from messaging users or allowing others to see their user profile. TikTok's action has been copied by other social media companies, who may fear stricter regulation or lawsuits.

But many social media companies claim to not allow kids under 13 on their platforms, yet instead rely on self-reporting methods, which can be easily bypassed by children. This is why the Kids Online Safety Act is needed.

Bill includes new legal standards

If passed, the law would set a new legal standard for the Federal Trade Commission and state attorneys general, allowing them to police companies that fail to prevent kids from seeing harmful content on their platforms.

Supporters say the bill would keep kids from seeing content that glamorizes eating disorders, suicidal thoughts, substance abuse and gambling. It would also ban kids 13 and under from using social media at all, and require companies to acquire parental consent before allowing children under 17 to use their platforms.

A majority of teens say they use social media like TikTok and YouTube at least once a day, and others admit to using the sites almost “constantly,” according to a recent [Pew Research study](#). Over half of the teens polled said it would be hard for them to stop using social media.

The Kids Online Safety Act would put parents back in control of what their kids experience online. It would eliminate the need to hope that social media companies will do the right thing and ensure the internet is safe for kids; reduce the need for lawsuits; and reduce reliance on third-party apps that some parents buy to keep their kids safe.

No child under 13 should be on social media. Groups on both sides of the aisle need to compromise and support the Kids Online Safety Act.

Attorney Jeffery M. Leving is the recipient of President Biden’s 2023 Presidential Lifetime Achievement Award for volunteer service. Leving wrote “Fathers’ Rights,” “Divorce Wars” and “How to be a Good Divorced Dad.”