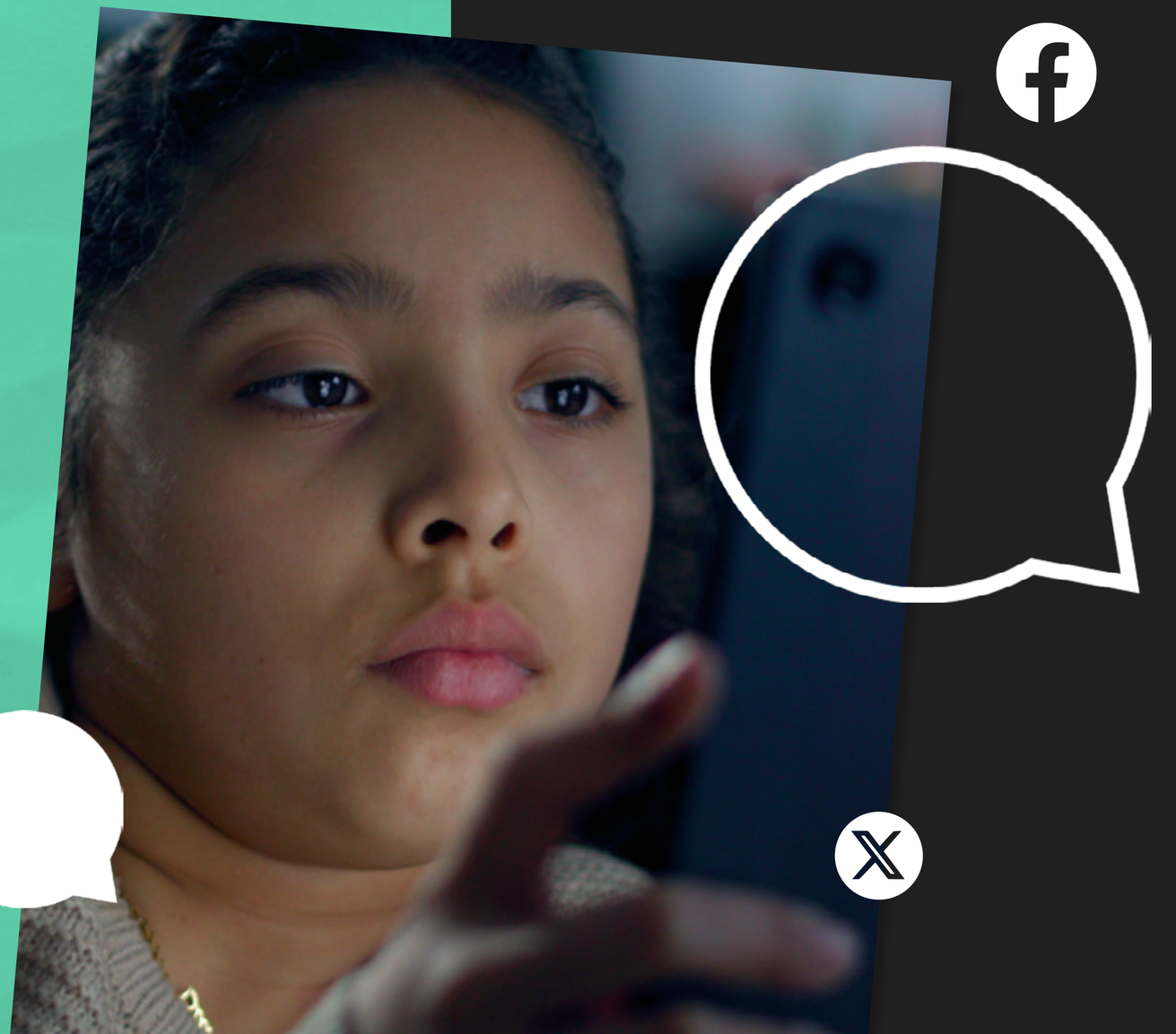
Center for Countering Digital Hate

PARENTS GUIDE

HOW TO NAVIGATE SOCIAL MEDIA SAFELY WITH YOUR KIDS



What is an algorithm, and how does it work?

There is way too much content in the world for anyone to read. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube have billions of users. If you saw everything everyone wrote, frankly, it would be an unpleasant and chaotic experience. You'd log off pretty quickly.

That's why social media platforms use programs - algorithms - to artificially construct our "newsfeeds". These algorithms have one main goal: they seek to make the user experience addictive so people stay on the platforms.

The reason why they want us addicted to the newsfeed is that all social media platforms make their money through advertising, so they need us to scroll as long as possible.

↓

This lets them gather huge amounts of data on your habits and preferences to create psychological profiles that are then sold to advertisers.



→

Social media companies earn less when you spend less time on their platforms–they spend a lot of resources, time, and money to figure out every tactic that will keep you scrolling.[9]

It's like a designer drug, made just for you, artificially constructed by computers.

Since online spaces are the main space where people share news, exchange ideas, social norms, and connect with others across the globe, algorithms have a huge impact: they shape what we see, when we see it, and how often we see it. And because they're designed to addict, not present an accurate picture, that lens is distorted. It can make the world look a lot scarier, it can make others look happier or 'better looking,' and it can make us feel less good about ourselves.



Researchers have found that viewing extreme and provocative content can be addictive – social media algorithms have learned to amplify this content in our feeds, pushing people towards addiction and extremism.[10] Social media companies do not disclose how their algorithms work, leaving the public in the dark about how they manipulate content to keep users engaged.

Once you even briefly look at content, the algorithm will continue pushing that content, however harmful, to keep you engaged at any cost.

Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, once admitted that the most “violative” or outrageous content is the stuff that gets the heaviest engagement and gets people sticking around to read more, or argue back, or share with others. [11]

According to a recent complaint submitted by 42 bipartisan state Attorneys General, Meta, which owns Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, designs its algorithms to deliver the most engaging content in a pattern that keeps our kids in “perpetual anticipation”.[12]

One of Meta's own employees wrote, "teens are insatiable when it comes to 'feel good' effects…".[13] Kids are discovering themselves, the world around them, how they fit in with others, and what their place is in society. Social media algorithms, designed to keep them addicted and maximize commercial revenues for the companies that own them, massively influence their opinions, self-esteem, relationships and perceptions of reality.

These algorithms create norms that can shape an alternate reality for young children. Children and teenagers are particularly vulnerable to these normative pressures.[14]

So when they see harmful content hundreds of times in their social media feeds, they are inclined to believe that the content is normal, typical, and appropriate.



2. KNOWN HARMS TO KIDS ONLINE

CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Social media platforms connect people. But they don't take sufficient care to ensure those connections are healthy..
As a result, there is a real risk of platforms enabling sexual exploitation, abuse, or exposure to illegal or explicit content.

CCDH has documented how social media companies have failed to protect children from abuse:

- In Meta's virtual reality (VR) product, the *Metaverse*, we found kids exposed to abusive behavior such as graphic sexual content and racial slurs every 7 minutes on VR Chat, the most popular VR social app.[15]
- Our researchers found that young teens were encouraged to join virtual sex clubs and drug boutiques on Meta's flagship VR app, Horizon Worlds.[16]



Meta's Internal Research on Harms to Kids

Meta, the parent company of Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp, has recently been sued by 42 U.S. state Attorneys General for concerns related to child safety.[17] These Attorneys General allege that Meta has willfully ignored children under 13 on its apps, neglected to address child safety risks, and actively suppressed internal research that directly documented the harms experienced by children.

One example of Meta's negligence has been its response to its internal "Bad Experiences and Encounters Framework" (BEEF) survey. The survey asked children and adults whether they saw harms on Instagram in the previous 7 days.

The findings, from 2021, are shocking:[18]

- **More than half of teenage users** had **encountered at least one online harm** in the previous 7 days.
- **68.6% of users** reported **unwanted sexual advances on Instagram's DM/Chat feature** in the previous 7 days.
- **1 in 8 of 13- to 15-year-olds** reported receiving unwanted sexual advances on Instagram.

Arturo Bejár, an engineer responsible for user safety Instagram, shared these findings with Meta's senior leaders, including CEO Mark Zuckerberg.

Meta ignored the survey results and ordered Bejar not to share the survey's results with other employees and took no direct action to address its findings.

Meta only disclosed this research once it was forced to in its litigation with state Attorneys Generals.

Kids’ Mental Health

Content on social media can damage children’s mental health. One major concern about social media algorithms is that they recommend content from other people that causes children to feel bad about themselves. Documents disclosed by Meta to U.S. state Attorneys General reveal that its researchers call this experience “negative social comparison”, and it is particularly common in teens and young girls, although it can affect boys too.[19]

Bullying and harassment are other major risks of social media use. These behaviors occur frequently on large platforms and are often exacerbated by their designs, which have few safeguards against abuse.



Children may also be exposured repeatedly to content about eating disorders, self-harm, and suicide. Our research has shown that social media apps recommend this potentially deadly content to vulnerable children and teens:[20]

- In *Deadly by Design*, we found that TikTok hashtags hosting eating disorder content had over 13.2 billion views. In that study, we opened new accounts on TikTok pretending to be 13-year-old girls and recorded the first 30 minutes of recommended content on TikTok's 'For You' feed.
    - Self-harm content was recommended within 2.6 minutes.
    - Eating disorder content was recommended within 8 minutes.
    - Body image and mental health content was recommended every 39 seconds on average.
- Worse still, if we renamed the accounts so they had the word "loseweight" in their username, to indicate a vulnerability to harmful content, TikTok's algorithm recommended *more* eating disorder and suicide content to those accounts they received:
    - 3 times as many harmful videos as standard teen accounts
    - 12 times as many self-harm videos as standard teen accounts



Illegal Drugs and Steroids

Researchers have found that drug dealers are operating on nearly every major social media platform.[21] Many drugs sold through these platforms have been laced with deadly doses of fentanyl, killing many young people.[22] In addition to illicit drugs, the platforms have also facilitated the sale of steroid-like drugs (SLDs) to boys and young men.

CCDH researchers have found that hashtags on TikTok promoting the consumption of dangerous SLDs to boys and young men received up to 587 million views over the last three years. We confirmed the existence of communities who peddle these substances to youth online, identifying 35 TikTok influencers with links to 13 websites selling these drugs.

Popular videos on these hashtags downplay the risks of drugs, deliberately targeting teens. For example, they

- Encourage followers to “just tell your parents they’re vitamins”



- Display large amounts of steroids with the caption “Risk it”
- Advocate for viewers to start using steroid-like drugs in their teens

The types of drugs we studied all carry significant health risks, including potentially damaging children’s hearts.[23]

Incels, Toxic Masculinity, Violence against Women and Girls

Many young boys are being exposed to horrifying messages encouraging hatred of women. We have studied and exposed fringe online cultures promoting extreme hate, violence against women, rape - even encouraging mass shootings - on social media. [24]

The U.S Secret Service assessed that there is a rising threat to women and girls in the US, and the U.K.'s Intelligence and Security Committee is also concerned.[25]

In our study of the "Incelosphere", we found that incel forums actively promote pedophilia and child abuse.[26]Our researchers identified several young boys who were amongst the incel community's most active members and expressed extreme views.[27]

In CCDH's polling, we found that 54% of high-use teens agreed with the statement, "Some men are destined to be alone because of their looks."[28]

This is a very dark part of the internet and if your child is exhibiting behaviors or attitudes that are outlined in our "What is an Incel?" guide, we highly recommend that you seek mental health resources for them, which are outlined later in this guide.

Hateful Fringe Platforms

Over the last five years, parents have witnessed the rise of fringe platforms that refuse to remove deceptive, often hateful content, helping to drive extremism among young people. Some of which can be found below:

Rumble - an alternative video-sharing site that has recently become a haven for provocateurs who have been removed from more mainstream platforms.[29]

Gab - a social media platform that largely opposes removing any harmful content. Gab was implicated in planning ahead of the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol.[30]

Telegram - an "encrypted" messaging service that allows users to create channels where they can share information to thousands of users. Telegram has been used by extremist groups, including terrorists, to spread propaganda and organize violence.[31]

3. PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR PARENTS OR GUARDIANS

HAVE AN OPEN CONVERSATION WITH YOUR CHILD

Many parents are worried about the impact of social media on their children. Far too many parents have lost their children due to the harassment, bullying, or harmful content they experienced online.

As a user, your child is up against a multi-billion dollar industry that is trying to figure out every psychological trick that will keep your child online. **It is really important to realize that your child's recommended content is not a reflection of who they are—it is an algorithm's attempt to keep your child online as much as possible.**

Think of the algorithm as an abusive salesperson that will do anything to keep your child engaged—they will resort to anything, including content that makes your child feel angry, ashamed, and frustrated. Children cannot be blamed for what the algorithm shows them and it is really important that kids don't end up ashamed to the point that they are too afraid to discuss what they see.



The best way to talk to children about social media is to create an open, shame-free conversation:

Discuss how platforms and algorithms work; what they usually see on their feeds, and how it is not a full reflection of their personality, interests, and hobbies.

Negotiate an agreement with them to establish boundaries and norms that will encourage further dialogue. This can include figuring out which apps to use, device-free times during bedtime and meals, time limits on phone usage, or delaying access to devices until they are ready. As you discuss this, reflect on your own social media usage and the peer pressure faced by young children to engage on social media platforms.

Establish an open dialogue with your child about what they see online and how they feel after seeing good and bad content. Remember not to direct blame at the child – but rather at the algorithm that is exploiting them.

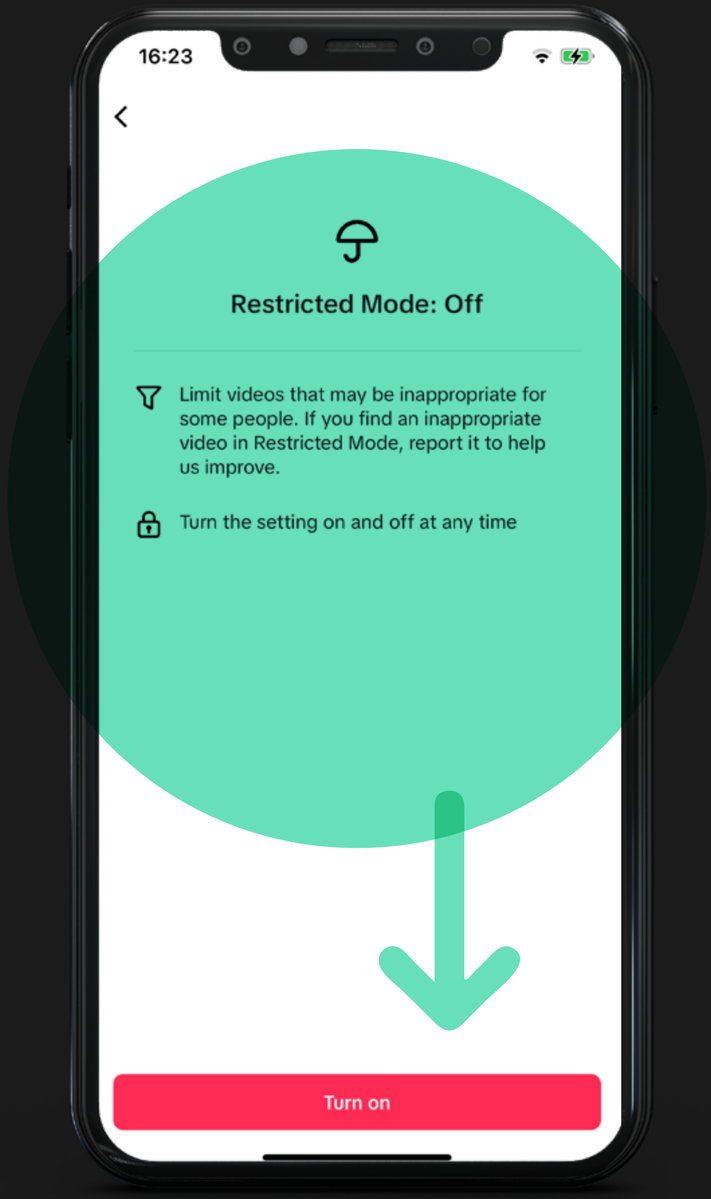
Assess the privacy and security settings they have on their accounts and whether it is sufficient for their safety, we list out app-specific tools and suggestions in the next section.

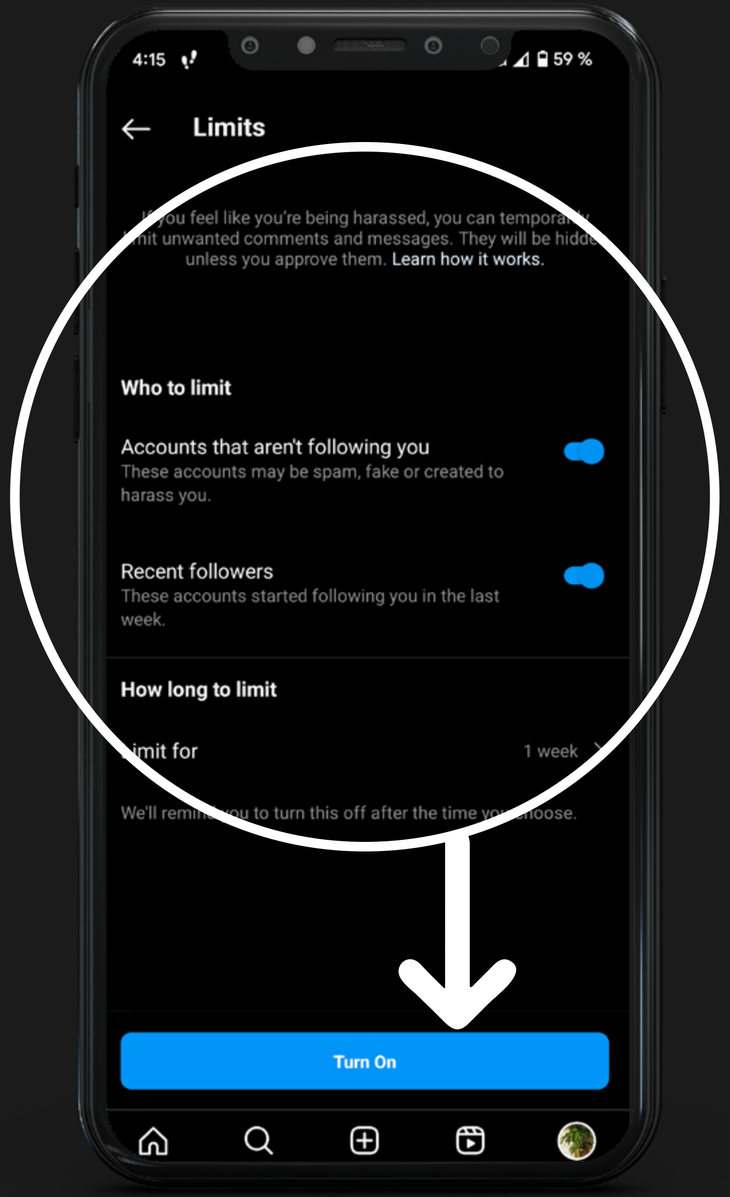
Seek help early and refer to the resources outlined in the appendix if you need more tailored advice.

Know the tools that you can use

Many social media platforms have designed controls and features that can create a safer experience for children on social media. These tools are insufficiently effective, and do not address the root of the problem, but they remain the main mechanism available to users.

- **Activate “restricted mode” or “sensitive content control”**: Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok have features that allow you to restrict content that the algorithm assesses may be too mature or offensive. YouTube also restricts children under 18 from viewing certain mature content.
  - TikTok
  - Instagram
  - YouTube



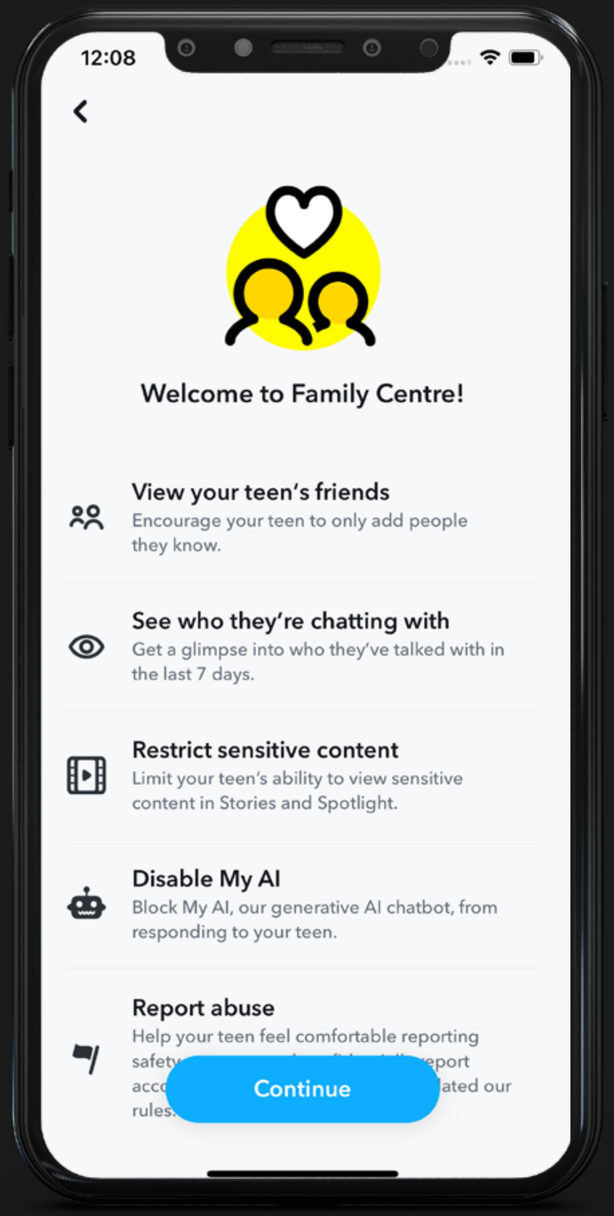


- **Strengthen your child's privacy settings:** Instagram and TikTok allow you to set your child's account to "private", which means all followers must be approved. Snapchat also allows you to set various limits on who can send friend requests to your child's account.
  - TikTok
  - Instagram
  - Snapchat

- **Limit who can message your child and view their content:** Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat allow your child to prevent strangers and people they don't follow from sending them messages. TikTok also allows you to control who can view and comment on your child's content.
  - Instagram
  - TikTok
  - Snapchat

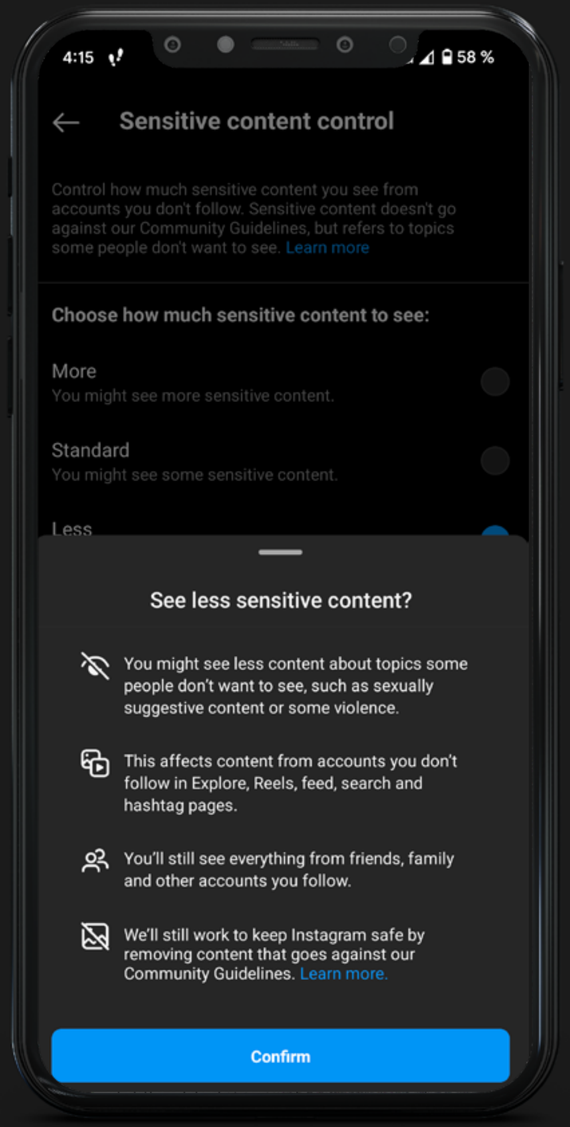
- **Report harmful accounts and content:** If your child is ever at risk of encountering these harms, you can report harmful content or accounts.

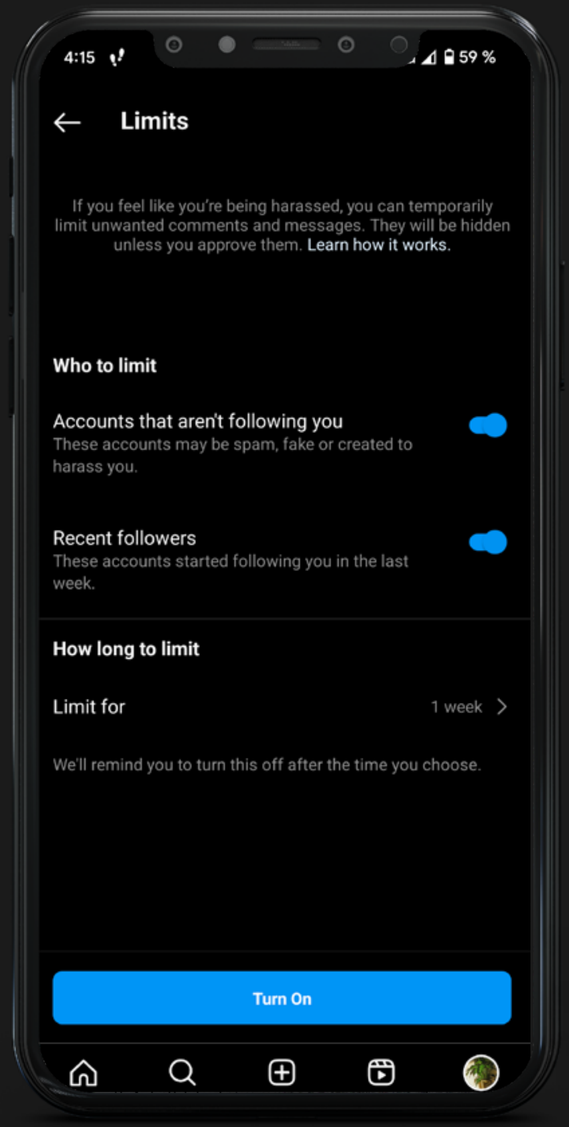
- **Turn off notifications:** Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok allow you to mute notifications sent to your child about content the algorithm predicts they will find engaging.
  - Instagram
  - YouTube
  - TikTok

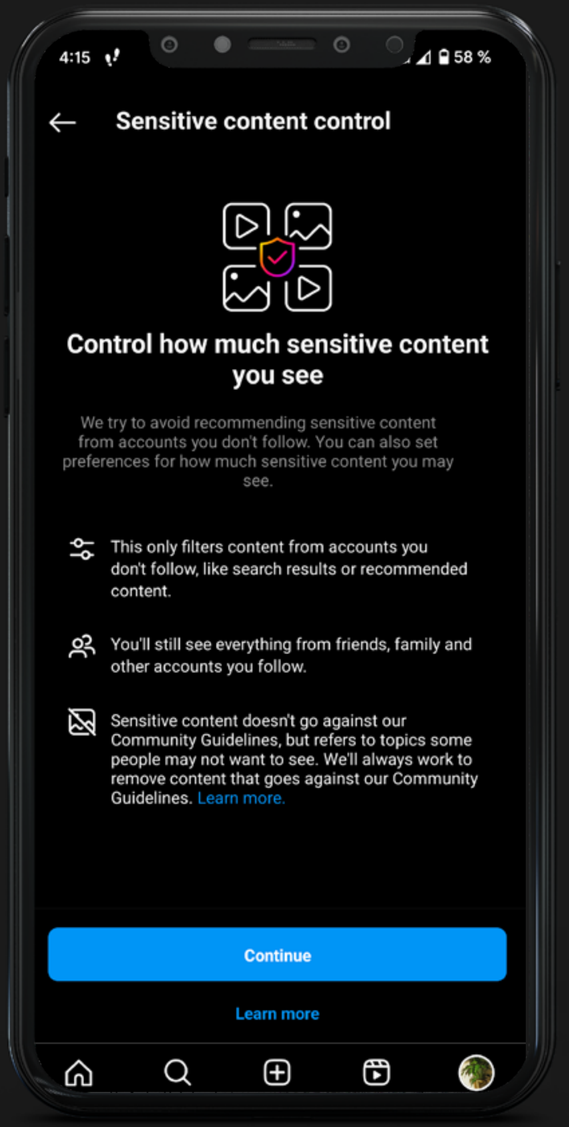


- **Schedule reminders to take breaks**: Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok allow you to schedule reminders for your child after they have used social media for more than a certain length of time.
  - Instagram
  - YouTube
  - TikTok

- **Hide like counts:** Instagram has a feature that allows your child to opt out of seeing like counts on their and other people's content, lessening social pressure online.
  - Instagram


4:15
58 %
Sensitive content control
Control how much sensitive content you see from accounts you don't follow. Sensitive content doesn't go against our Community Guidelines, but refers to topics some people don't want to see. Learn more
Choose how much sensitive content to see:
More
You might see more sensitive content.
Standard
You might see some sensitive content.
Less
See less sensitive content?
You might see less content about topics some people don't want to see, such as sexually suggestive content or some violence.
This affects content from accounts you don't follow in Explore, Reels, feed, search and hashtag pages.
You'll still see everything from friends, family and other accounts you follow.
We'll still work to keep Instagram safe by removing content that goes against our Community Guidelines. Learn more.
Confirm


4:15
59 %
Limits
If you feel like you're being harassed, you can temporarily limit unwanted comments and messages. They will be hidden unless you approve them. Learn how it works.
Who to limit
Accounts that aren't following you
These accounts may be spam, fake or created to harass you.
Recent followers
These accounts started following you in the last week.
How long to limit
Limit for
1 week
We'll remind you to turn this off after the time you choose.
Turn On

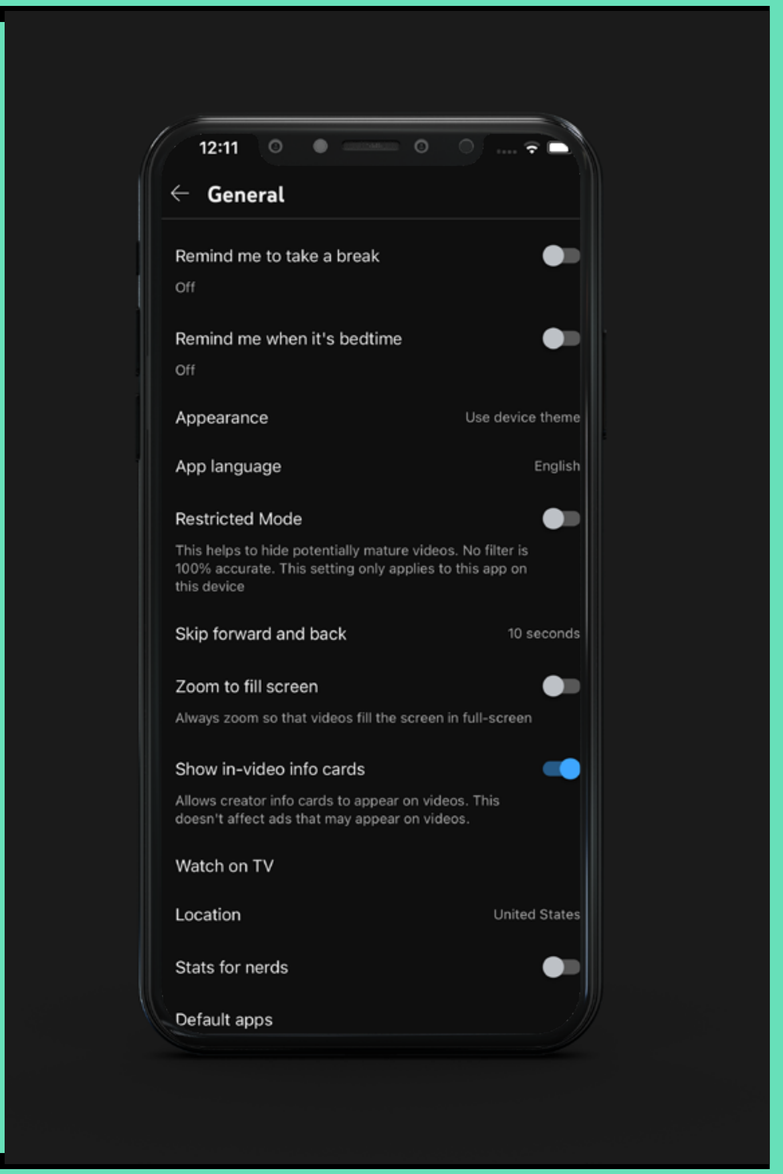

4:15
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Sensitive content control
Control how much sensitive content you see
We try to avoid recommending sensitive content from accounts you don't follow. You can also set preferences for how much sensitive content you may see.
This only filters content from accounts you don't follow, like search results or recommended content.
You'll still see everything from friends, family and other accounts you follow.
Sensitive content doesn't go against our Community Guidelines, but refers to topics some people may not want to see. We'll always work to remove content that goes against our Community Guidelines. Learn more.
Continue
Learn more

Using Parental Tools to Protect Your Child

Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Snapchat all have parental controls that you can use to protect your child's account. Parental controls allow you to adjust the settings of your child's account to give them a safer experience.

- This process starts by "linking" your account with your child's account on each app.
- For instance, using TikTok's Family Pairing feature allows you to send your child an invitation to activate Family Pairing. Once activated, Family Pairing allows you to control their privacy settings and limit their daily screen time.[32]

Important note: Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Snapchat's parental controls give you different levels of access to your child's account settings, so depending on the app you may have to speak with your child about changing these settings directly.



Talk to your elected officials, community leaders, and educators

There are more rules and laws ensuring the safety of your washing machine or a sandwich shop than the apps our children spend nearly five hours on every day.[33] We all deserve to be safe and know our kids are safe, but we can only get that if we demand better from our elected officials.

We need our lawmakers to hold social media companies accountable and have our backs as parents.



You have the power to make a difference on this issue by talking to your elected officials about your concerns.

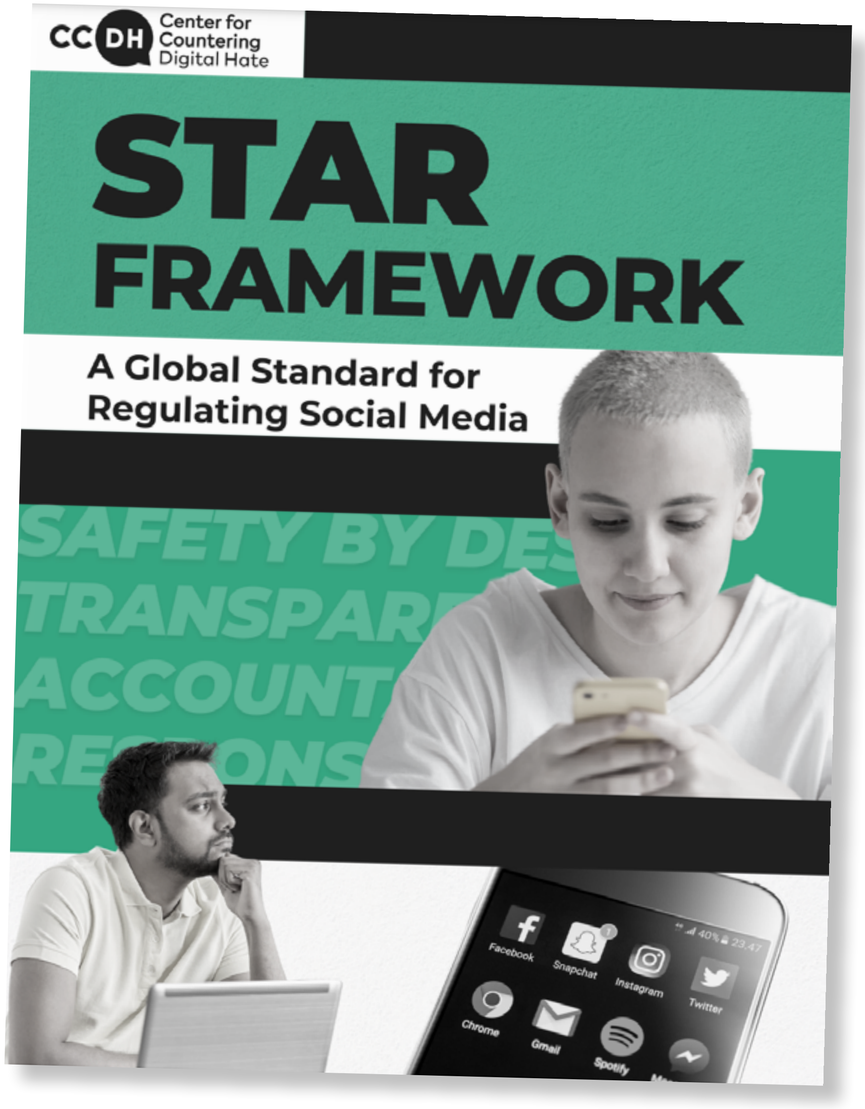
If you are interested in learning more about routes to reforming social media, you can read CCDH's STAR Framework. We developed this legal framework with lawmakers from the US, UK, EU, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. In almost all of those countries, apart from the US, they have since passed legislation. The framework explains how we can encourage safety, transparency, accountability, and responsibility from social media companies.

Download report

Fundamentally, until we revise Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act 1996, which shields social media companies from being legally challenged on grounds of negligence or product design failures, even if they harm our kids, we won't be able to change the incentives so these companies think about safety seriously. We are working hard to make sure that law is changed to bring social media in line with every other industry in America today.

You can also raise awareness about how social media platforms affect children and teenagers with community leaders, family members, educators, and coaches.
Send them this guide.

Having friends and other adults looking out for signs of worrying behavior or attitudes can prevent serious harm to children. We've also listed organizations that can provide further guidance and information if you want to learn more.



4. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

NEDA — US eating disorder support and advice. To reach a helpline call 800 931 2237 from 11am – 9pm ET Monday to Thursday, and from 11am – 5pm ET on Friday. To access web chat support use this link between 9am – 9pm ET on Monday to Thursday, and 9am – 5pm on Friday.

BEAT — UK eating disorder support and advice. To reach a helpline use this link to find phone numbers for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, 365 days a year, 9am – midnight during the week and 4pm – midnight on weekends. For 24 hour web chat support use this link.

Butterfly — Australian eating disorder support and advice. To reach a helpline call 1800 33 4673, available from 8am – midnight seven days a week.

Nedic — Canadian eating disorder support and advice. For their helpline call 1866 633 4220 from 9am – 9pm Monday to Thursday, and 9am – 5pm on Friday. For web chat support use this link at the same times above, and between 1pm – 7pm on weekends.

The Trevor Project – Free 24/7 crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth ages 13–24 in the US.

IASP – International Association for Suicide Prevention. Global Directory of crisis hotlines and resources providing free, confidential self-harm and suicide prevention interventions and support.

AAP — American Academy of Pediatrics tips and tools from children's health experts to communicate and create a Family Media Plan.

Fairplay — Resources from experts on navigating social media harms, screen time, and child development.

American Federation of Teachers, on social media harms to students and educators. Developed a set of specific feature change demands for social media companies

- Likes vs. Learning Report - outlines specific harms to kids witnessed by US school districts

Endnotes

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