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Hard Questions: So Your Kids Are Online, But Will They Be Alright?

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Raising the Next Generation: What Are Parents Thinking and How Can Facebook Help?

By Antigone Davis, Public Policy Director, Global Head of Safety

Raising a child in today's digital world can be overwhelming. As the mom of a college-aged daughter, I've seen how technology can be beneficial and educational in some ways, but distracting and concerning in others. My daughter and online technologies have grown up together. She's always been more adept than I am at moving around in her digital universe, and I've often found myself anxiously trying to keep up.

I know I'm not alone in the questions I've asked, the mistakes I've made and the worries I've had as a parent when it comes to kids and technology. As a mom and a former teacher and policy advisor for a state attorney general, I have heard many people voice these concerns. I believe that the largest social media platform in the world has the opportunity and obligation to address these issues, and I wanted to be a part of that. Many of us at Facebook are parents, and naturally we're thinking about technology's role in the lives of children and families. Other technology companies are grappling with this as well.

Children today are online earlier and earlier. They use family-shared devices — and many, as young as six or seven years old, even have their own. They love to take photos, watch videos, talk to their grandparents and of course they want to be just like their older siblings and use the apps they're using too. It can be hard for caregivers to manage. While kids have more ways than ever to learn and benefit from online experiences, three out of four parents say they worry about their kids' online safety and want more control.

Over the last 18 months, we've worked closely with leading child development experts, educators and parents as we prepared to build our first product for kids. We created an advisory board of experts. With them, we are considering important questions like: Is there a "right age" to introduce kids to the digital world? Is technology good for kids, or is it having adverse effects on their social skills and health? And perhaps most pressing of all: do we know the long-term effects of screen time?

Today we're rolling out our US preview of Messenger Kids — a new app that makes it easier for kids to video chat and message with family and friends when they can't be together in person. And so I wanted to explain why Facebook decided to create an app for children, and why I think it's the right time.

We'll share what we've learned so far and the principles we've created with the help of external experts as our company launches its first product built for kids.

What Research Tells Us

If it feels like kids are starting to use technology at younger ages, you're right. Data from the research firm Dubit shows that kids are already using technology on a regular basis. Some **93% of 6-12 year olds in the US have access to tablets or smartphones, and 66% have their own device.** They're playing games, watching videos and video chatting with family.

Research shows that kids are using apps that are intended for teens and adults. We collaborated with National PTA on a study with more than 1,200 American parents of children under the age of 13, and **three of every five parents surveyed said their kids under 13 use messaging apps, social media or both**, while 81 percent reported their children started using social media between the ages of 8 and 13.

As kids become more tech-savvy, parents are worrying about the potential dangers that exist online. According to a Dubit study, 74% of parents of 6-12 year olds are concerned about their children interacting with strangers or people they don't know online, and we've heard in countless conversations that parents' top concern about their kids using technology is online safety.

> "My concern is safety, getting friend requests from people you don't know, chatting with people you don't know, giving out information to strangers."
> —Christine, parent participant, National PTA Roundtable

We know that when building for kids, we have to get it right and we're taking that responsibility seriously. Simply complying with the law is not enough. We want to create technologies that benefit, rather than harm or are merely neutral on the lives of children. We're proceeding carefully and will share what we learn along the way.

Listening to Parents and Kids

Over the last 18 months, we've talked to thousands of parents and kids across the country in Arizona, California, Colorado, Kentucky, Maryland, New York, North Carolina and Virginia, as well as parents overseas. With National PTA and Blue Star Families, we brought parents together to hear how they're using technology with their kids and their views on how to parent in a tech-filled world.

What we found is that nearly all of these conversations involved both positive and negative experiences with kids and tech. On the positive side, we heard wonderful stories of connection between military parents stationed abroad and their families back home using Facebook and other apps. But we also heard some scary things, like a mom who found the online chat her 7 year-old had while playing a video game with an adult male stranger. It began with seemingly friendly questions about her son's favorite sports teams but slowly led to questions about what he looked like, before finally pushing the boy to send a photo of himself. She was terrified.

> "I do feel overwhelmed, particularly because I'm not a big tech person. There's a lot to keep up with, and I'm not keeping up with it."
> —Norah, parent participant, New Mexico State University Learning Games Lab

Kids told us that the primary reason they want to use social media and messaging platforms is to have fun, which means that an environment that emphasizes safety at the expense of joy and laughter will fail the customer satisfaction test — and potentially leave kids vulnerable to less controlled and more risky social environments. We believe that it's possible to give kids a fun experience that provides more peace of mind for parents, too.

Though parents often feel confused or unprepared for how to handle their children's online experiences, many also told us that they're conflicted because they see the benefit of technology in their children's lives — particularly when it's used for education or connecting with family. In the study we conducted with National PTA, 63% of parents said they believe social media provides children with digital skills that are mandatory in society today.

> "Because [my kids] see my presence on Facebook and that I'm talking with family… they want a bit part of that. But obviously one of the biggest concerns we have is safety. So that's a challenge, but I also don't want them not to be familiar with it because it's going to be important as they get older."
> —Nikki, parent participant, National PTA Roundtable

But in all of our research, there was one theme that was consistent: parents want to know they're in control. They want a level of control over their kids' digital world that is similar to the level they have in the real world. Just as they want to know whose house their child will be visiting for a playdate, they want to know who their child is connecting with online. And just as they want to say "lights out" at night, they also want to be able to say "phones off."

Talking to the Experts

With all of this feedback in mind, we knew it was important to consult with experts to help us shape our work and own principles as a technology company. Our team of advisors includes top experts in the fields of child development, online safety and children's media currently and formerly from organizations such as the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, Connect Safely, Center on Media and Child Health, Sesame Workshop and more. The American Academy of Pediatrics offers excellent guidelines to

parents for monitoring their kids' digital consumption, though we know there are still a lot of unanswered questions about the impact of specific technologies on children's development.

These advisors are helping us grow our knowledge and guide us as we develop products like Messenger Kids. They challenge us as we think about these important issues.

In partnership with these advisors, we've developed a set of principles to guide us. They are:

1. Putting kids first
2. Providing a safe space that fosters joy, humor, play and adventure
3. Enabling kids to mine their own potential by building for empowerment, creativity and expression
4. Helping kids build a sense of self and community
5. Recognizing the relationship between parent and child, and that we take our responsibility and their trust in us seriously.

These guiding principles help us as we navigate a world where children are increasingly using technology at younger ages, parents are asking for more help, and we're considering how to provide technologies to meet the needs of the modern family and benefit kids and parents alike.

Applying These Principles When Building Products

We created Messenger Kids with the belief that parents are ultimately the best judges of their kids' technology use, and the parents we've spoken to have asked for a better way to control the way their children message.

We hope that developing an app that gives parents more control over their kids' online experience is a step in the right direction, but we think the industry also needs a better understanding of tech's long-term impact on children. That's why today we're also announcing a new $1 million research fund to work with academics, experts and partners across the industry to further explore this issue.

Read more about our Hard Questions series.

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