

Cancel Instagram for kids: It 'preys' on children's fear of missing out, advocates say to Zuckerberg

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Instagram, which is owned by social media giant Facebook, is exploring the launch of a version for children under 13

Nearly 100 worldwide experts and advocates are urging Facebook CEO

Mark Zuckerberg to ditch plans to create an Instagram for kids, claiming such a platform will exploit kids' overall well-being.

A coalition led by the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood and groups including the Center for Humane Technology, Common Sense Media and the Center for Digital Democracy along with dozens of researchers sent a letter Thursday to Zuckerberg expressing their concerns.

The group says that a version of Instagram—the photo- and video-sharing app with more than 1 billion users—for kids under 13 preys on their fear of missing out as their ravenous desire for approval by peers exploits their developmental growth. The experts also worry that "automated decision-making" could affect what kids see.

"The platform's relentless focus on appearance, self-presentation, and branding presents challenges to adolescents' privacy and well-being," the letter said. "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 during this crucial window of development."

These public pleas come nearly a month after the world's largest social media network said an Instagram for kids is in its "very early stages," with Zuckerberg confirming those plans during a Congressional hearing on misinformation.

"I think helping people stay connected with friends and learn about different content online is broadly positive," Zuckerberg told members of the House Energy and Commerce Committee on March 25. "There were clearly issues that need to be thought through and worked out, including how parents can control the experience of kids, especially kids

under the age of 13.

"And we haven't worked through all of that yet," Zuckerberg continued. "I think something like this could be quite helpful for a lot of people."

Stephanie Otway, a Facebook spokeswoman, reiterated the tech giant's position on exploring an Instagram for kids.

"We agree that any experience we develop must prioritize their safety and privacy, and we will consult with experts in child development, child safety, and mental health, and privacy advocates to inform it," Otway said. "The reality is that kids are online. They want to connect with their family and friends, have fun and learn, and we want to help them do that in a way that is safe and age-appropriate. We also want to find practical solutions to the ongoing industry problem of kids lying about their age to access apps."

Otway added that an Instagram for kids will be free from ads and the accounts will be managed by their parents.

Some lawmakers who Zuckerberg addressed last month aren't buying it despite Facebook announcing an update to Instagram's safety tools and privacy settings for its teen users.

Last week, Senators Ed Markey and Richard Blumenthal, along with Congresswomen Kathy Castor and Lori Trahan, sent a letter to Facebook demanding answers by April 26 about the proposed Instagram for kids platform.

The lawmakers raised several questions for Facebook including how would the company commit to independent audits focusing on privacy, marketing and harmful content. They also ask if they would commit that an Instagram for kids won't include features such as "stories" and

"vanishing mode," they say make it difficult to track bullying and child exploitation.

The politicians added if the tech giant fails to fully show how they will meet "the highest standards" of protecting users, "we would advise you to abandon your plans to launch this new platform."

On Thursday, Blumenthal tweeted that his consumer protection subcommittee will hold hearings "to pass laws meeting the threat—dangerous appeals to young minds who can't see the deception."

Meanwhile, Jim Steyer, CEO of the nonprofit Common Sense Media, said Facebook is back to their "old bag of tricks" with yet another product to hook kids at a vulnerable stage in their lives. Facebook and Instagram have "zero credibility," Steyer told U.S. TODAY, claiming they have repeatedly proven their priority is to profit from "manipulative and addictive tactics" to keep users scrolling.

Furthermore, Steyer said Instagram can also harm a young person's perception of body image, especially girls. He cited Common Sense's latest mental health report that found the percentage of teens encountering hateful content online has nearly doubled in the last two years.

"We do not want even younger children to be exposed to that kind of negative content and to contribute to a new generation of mental health issues," said Steyer who suggested Facebook should create better "privacy-protective products" for adults.

The experts said in its letter to Zuckerberg that kids between 10 and 12 with existing Instagram accounts are unlikely to convert to a "babyish" version. The experts believe that a kids version of Instagram will instead attract younger kids without an account.

"We urge you to abandon those plans," the letter said. "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."

Instagram recently introduced a new set of privacy tools aimed at teens on the platform where, among others, it restricts the way adults communicate with them via direct messaging—especially if the youths don't already follow them on Instagram.

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