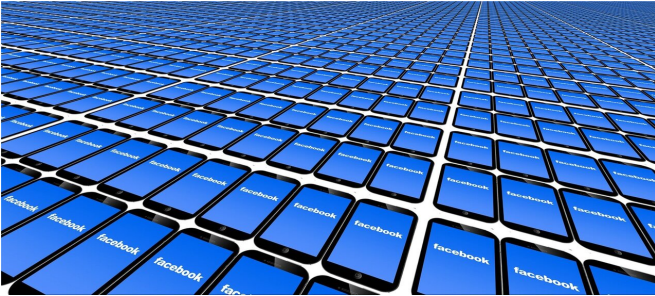


Facebook says it spoke to FTC about kids chat app that had flaw

29 August 2019, by Ben Brody And Kurt Wagner



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Facebook Inc. said it had spoken to the U.S. Federal Trade Commission, which recently settled with the social media giant for \$5 billion over allegations of privacy violations, about its Messenger Kids app that the company acknowledged had a flaw.

"We are in regular contact with the FTC on many issues and products, including Messenger Kids," Kevin Martin, the company's vice president, U.S. [public policy](#), wrote in a letter to Democratic Senators Ed Markey of Massachusetts and Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut dated Aug. 27.

In the letter, which Markey's office provided on Wednesday, Martin did not say when any conversations with the FTC occurred or what they were about. The flaw, which Martin called a "technical error," allowed some children to chat with users their parents had not approved.

Spokesmen for Facebook and the FTC declined to comment.

Democratic FTC Commissioner Rohit Chopra, who voted against the settlement with Facebook, wrote in a dissenting statement that a provision of the agreement would have the effect of releasing the company from claims under the Children's Online

Privacy Protection Act, or COPPA. Chopra did not say whether any probes existed.

The company has also attracted complaints from [consumer groups](#) about its [privacy](#) practices involving children on other issues, including youngsters who charged money to their parents' credit cards without consent.

Facebook launched Messenger Kids almost two years ago for children younger than 13—the minimum age for having a Facebook account and the age at which the COPPA protections cease. The app has some extra privacy elements in place, such as the requirement that parents approve each friend.

Approval Loophole

That approval process had a loophole, however. Children were able to create group messages with multiple users, and while those users had to be approved to message with the group's creator, they might not be approved to message everyone in the group, the company confirmed in the days leading up to the FTC settlement. This meant that some children were put on a group thread with strangers.

Facebook said it alerted parents and turned off affected chats. Martin wrote in his letter to the senators that the flaw in Messenger Kids had existed since last October and was discovered in June. It was fixed a day after the discovery, he added.

The company believes the app complies with the law, Martin added, and Facebook is "committed to continually improving it and our safeguards."

Facebook has a long history of complaints about privacy issues, and introducing an app for young children didn't sit well with some critics who said the company shouldn't be handling the private communication for elementary-school kids.

Markey, who was a key force behind the passage of COPPA and has repeatedly questioned the company on its children's privacy record, said he was "particularly disappointed" that the company didn't commit to a review of the app for other potential flaws or privacy issues.

"If Facebook wants [children](#) and parents' trust, it has to do a lot better than this," he said in a statement.

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