

Explainer: How YouTube is changing what it shows kids

4 September 2019, by Rachel Lerman And Matt O'brien



Federal Trade Commission Chairman Joe Simons arrives for a news conference at the Federal Trade Commission in Washington, Wednesday, Sept. 4, 2019, to announce that Google's video site YouTube has been fined \$170 million to settle allegations it collected children's personal data without their parents' consent. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

YouTube is changing what it shows kids.

The new business practices, along with \$170 million in fines, settle allegations by the Federal Trade Commission and New York state that YouTube owner Google violated children's online privacy by collecting [personal data](#) without parents' permission.

Some of the new responsibilities will be on [video](#) creators themselves, as they will have to label videos that are geared toward kids under 13.

Here's a look at what's behind the dispute and what's changing.

WHAT THE LAW SAYS

The FTC's complaint is based on a 1998 federal

law called the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, or COPPA. It bans websites from collecting personal information from children under 13 without their parents' consent.

Tech companies, however, have long skirted this by saying they officially exclude kids from their services, even if they don't really check. A group of privacy advocates asking the FTC in April 2018 to investigate YouTube's compliance.

MIXED MESSAGES

YouTube has long said its service is intended for people ages 13 and older, a message that theoretically kept it in line with that law.



A sign with coming changes to kids' comment on YouTube is displayed as Federal Trade Commission Chairman Joe Simons speaks at a news conference at the Federal Trade Commission in Washington, Wednesday, Sept. 4, 2019, to announce that Google's video site YouTube has been fined \$170 million to settle allegations it collected children's personal data without their parents' consent. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

Ask any kid or parent, however, and the reality was

far different. Younger kids commonly watch videos on YouTube, and many popular YouTube channels feature cartoons or sing-a-longs made for children. YouTube acknowledged Wednesday that "the likelihood of children watching without supervision has increased" since its founding because there are more shared devices and a "boom in family content."

The FTC's complaint details how Google boasted about its youthful audience when talking to major advertisers. The FTC includes as evidence Google's visual presentations made to toy companies Mattel and Hasbro where YouTube is described as the "new Saturday Morning Cartoons" and the "#1 website regularly visited by kids."

CHANGES ON YOUTUBE'S MAIN SERVICE

Starting early next year, anyone who uploads a video to YouTube will have to designate whether or not that video is directed at children.

If a video is identified as child-focused, such as a cartoon or the "unboxing" of a new toy, Google has agreed not to put up "behavioral" ads—those that cater to specific viewers based on their age and other social characteristics. Google also won't track the viewers' online identities. Google says these restrictions will be in place even if the viewer is an adult.

But Google will still show generic ads, as well as "contextual" ads—those that cater to the type of content rather than the specific viewer. These typically don't bring in as much money as viewer-specific ads.

And Google is stopping short of seeking [parental consent](#) on its main service, even for kids-focused video. The law doesn't require it to, as long as there's no data collection.



Federal Trade Commission Chairman Joe Simons departs after speaking at a news conference at the Federal Trade Commission in Washington, Wednesday, Sept. 4, 2019, to announce that Google's video site YouTube has been fined \$170 million to settle allegations it collected children's personal data without their parents' consent. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

CHANGES ON YOUTUBE KIDS

Google already gets parental consent for its kids-focused service, YouTube Kids. But the service has traditionally been used far less frequently—after all, the main service had all the same videos and more.

YouTube said it will start promoting the kids service more aggressively. On Wednesday, kids-focused pages on YouTube's main service had pop-ups suggesting YouTube Kids.

YouTube Kids similarly does not offer behavioral ads targeted at individuals, but it does collect some basic viewer information to recommend videos. It also collects the device's numeric IP address.

YouTube said it will dole out \$100 million over three years to encourage more videos for children.

NEW ONUS ON CREATORS

Google says the changes to the main service will happen in four months to give video creators a chance to adjust. In taking this approach, Google is putting much of the responsibility on video creators

themselves, though the company says it will also use artificial intelligence to flag content that targets children but wasn't properly identified as such.



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Those who consider the settlement too weak are already concerned about what happens when video creators try to cheat the new system.

Democratic FTC Commissioner Rebecca Kelly Slaughter, in a dissenting opinion, said high-profile companies like Hasbro and Mattel will likely comply, as they won't want to run afoul of federal rules even it means fewer kids seeing their toy promotions.

But she said it's less clear how it will curb abuses by the millions of others who post videos on YouTube—especially those outside the United States who are beyond the FTC's "practical reach."

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