

# EXPLAINER: Why Facebook is holding off on kids' Instagram

28 September 2021, by Barbara Ortutay



This Friday, Aug. 23, 2019, file photo shows the Instagram app icon on the screen of a mobile device in New York. Bowing to pressure from lawmakers, critics, the media and child development experts, Facebook said Monday, Sept. 27, 2021, it will "pause" its work on a kids' version of its photo-oriented Instagram app. Credit: AP Photo/Jenny Kane, File

Bowing—perhaps only for a moment—to pressure from lawmakers, critics, the media and child development experts, Facebook said Monday [it will "pause"](#) its work on a kids' version of its photo and video-oriented Instagram app.

But what's not yet clear is just how seriously Facebook is taking the concerns of experts and parents. Its decision to merely pause the project suggests it still plans to expose a much younger audience to Instagram, its well-documented harms and possibly the user profiling that feeds Facebook's targeted ad machine. That ad machine, of course, has made the company one of the most profitable on the planet.

## WHY IS FACEBOOK DOING THIS NOW?

The company's move follows an [explosive mid-](#)

[September report](#) by The Wall Street Journal that found Facebook knew from its own research that Instagram was harming some teens, especially girls, leading to mental health and body image problems and in some cases eating disorders and suicidal thoughts.

In public, however, Facebook has consistently played down the app's negative side and until now has barreled ahead with the kids' version despite alarms from experts, lawmakers and its own research. It has also relentlessly criticized the Journal article as cherry-picking from Facebook's research, though it did not dispute the facts. That story, however, was based on internal research leaked by a whistleblower at the company.

It's likely not a coincidence that on Thursday, a panel of the Senate Commerce Committee will hold a hearing examining the "toxic effects" of Facebook and Instagram on young people. It's the latest of several hearings to look at whether Big Tech companies are hiding what they know about the harms their products cause.

## SO IS INSTA FOR KIDS CANCELED?

Facebook has very specifically not said that it will abandon the project. Instead, Adam Mosseri, the head of Instagram, said in a blog post Monday that the company will use its pause time "to work with parents, experts and policymakers to demonstrate the value and need for this product."

Translation: Expect Facebook to sharpen its message on the "benefits" of Instagram for Kids in hopes that the furor will die down.

Consider that Facebook had already said it was working with parents, experts and policymakers back in July when it introduced safety measures for teens on its main Instagram platform. In fact, the company has been "working with" experts and other advisors for another product aimed at

children—its Messenger Kids app that launched in late 2017.

"Critics of Instagram Kids' will see this as an acknowledgement that the project is a bad idea," Mosseri wrote. "That's not the case."

#### WHO ARE THE EXPERTS WORKING WITH FACEBOOK?

Four years ago, Facebook said it gathered a group of experts in the fields of online safety, child development and children's media to "share their expertise, research and guidance." The group it calls Youth Advisors include some well-known and some lesser-known nonprofit groups, including the Family Online Safety Institute, Digital Wellness Lab, MediaSmarts, Project Rokit and the Cyberbullying Research Center.

All of these groups receive some form of funding from Facebook, according to their websites. Meanwhile, some of the best-known children's online advocacy groups—and Facebook's biggest critics on this matter—such as Common Sense Media and Fairplay (formerly known as the Campaign for Commercial-Free Childhood) are notably absent.

Critics acknowledge that many of the cooperative experts mean well, but say their influence has been negligible. "Facebook has shown time and time again that it is incapable of governing or advising itself with any integrity," said Kyle Taylor, program director for the Real Facebook Oversight Board, a group critical of the social network. "Facebook's funding of research and civil society is hugely problematic, and prevents the kind of direct, open process that is required for any real change to occur."

When Facebook seeks feedback for its projects, Taylor added, "the decks are always stacked with experts who have a financial interest or who will never criticize Facebook's core issues - their algorithm and their profit margin."

#### COULD FACEBOOK STILL PULL THE PLUG?

Fairplay executive director Josh Golin argues that

Instagram for Kids may have already sunk beneath the waves. The "pause," he said, is a good way for Facebook to save face and hope that after a while people will forget about it.

He acknowledges that his group and other advocates failed to pressure Facebook into canceling its kids' messaging product, but says Instagram for Kids is different.

"Instagram is a much much worse platform for children" than Messenger, he said, noting Facebook's own internal research and a "wealth of evidence" supporting this point. The climate has also changed since 2017 and 2018, when the "techlash" against Big Tech's harmful effects on society was just emerging. Now, it's in full force and much more organized. Finally, there's tech product inertia.

"With Messenger Kids, the backlash didn't start until it had already come out," he said. "It is much easier for a corporation to walk back a product that doesn't yet exist than to take a product off the market,"

#### WHAT ABOUT OTHER PLATFORMS?

Facebook, of course, is not the only tech platform whose products have caused ripples of concern about the well-being of children. And creating kids' versions in the face of these concerns is a popular response. After getting in trouble with U.S. regulators for violating children's privacy rules, for instance, TikTok created a "limited, separate app experience" for users who are under 13. They can't share videos, comment on other people's videos or message people. But as with any other app, if kids enter a fake birthdate when they register with the app, they can get around that provision.

YouTube has a kids version too. Lawmakers [earlier this year called it](#) a "wasteland of vapid consumerist content" and launched an investigation that's still ongoing.

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