

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Subcommittee on Consumer Protection and Commerce
Chair Schakowsky

Kids Online During COVID: Child Safety in an Increasingly Digital Age

March 11, 2021

Good morning, and welcome to our hearing on child safety online during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Children are spending twice as much time online compared to before the pandemic. This time is increasingly spent on digital platforms not designed with children in mind. Although we all hope that kids will be able to safely return to school soon, we should not be naive and believe that in-person schooling will mean that companies stop targeting our children online.

Techniques honed by companies during the pandemic, and online habits developed by kids, will continue long after they are back in school.

Many online platforms are addictive by design, grabbing attention, and maximizing profits. Children are especially vulnerable to addictive or manipulative technologies. They are more susceptible to coercive advertising and have trouble resisting attention-grabbing features.

The more time children spend online, the more likely they are to be subjected to harmful or age-inappropriate content. There are few effective barriers protecting children and teens from the harmful content and hateful speech that plague our online discourse.

Nor are they shielded from the loss of privacy that has become a feature of online platforms. Platforms that are intended for general audiences aren't required to protect children's privacy.

Many of the most popular platforms say they do not allow children under the age of 13 but do almost nothing to enforce their minimum age requirement.

The harms that children and teens experience online have very real and lasting side effects offline. More screen time has been associated with higher levels of anxiety, depression, sleep deprivation, obesity and even suicide.

Children need tailored protections from privacy infringements and manipulative marketing practices. Children's privacy must be protected by updating COPPA, the current law, for our increasingly complex and connected digital world.

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Thanks, and thank you to the witnesses for joining us today.

I yield the remainder of my time to my colleague Ms. Castor.