



APP STORE ACCOUNTABILITY ACT

ONLINE HARMS AND SCREEN ADDICTION IN CHILDREN

American children are facing a civilizational crisis due to the harms fomented by digital devices and services. A 2025 study reviewing the mental health and well-being of 10,475 Internet-enabled adolescents found the following:

- 56% of 13 to 17-year-olds had Mind Health Quotient (MHQ)* scores in the distressed or struggling range, compared with 20% for their adult counterparts.
- 51% of American children report being detached from reality, and more than 50% acknowledged that constant feelings of sadness, guilt, fear, and anxiety cause serious problems in everyday life.
- Feelings of anger and irritability, aggression, and debilitating hallucinations were found in much higher concentrations in 13-year-olds compared to their older counterparts, afflicting 40%, 37%, and 20% of 13-year-olds, respectively.
- Importantly, this study discovered that these problems are associated with smartphone ownership occurring at even younger ages, a trend previously revealed in 18 to 24-year-olds that is more salient for children as young as 13. ([Sapien Labs, 2025](#))

As revealed by the now infamous Facebook Files, social media companies and other digital service providers employ a strategy of addiction, targeting children and teens for as long as possible to scrape every morsel of sensitive information they can. Importantly, this report and subsequent lawsuits made clear that social media companies are targeting children earlier in life, with the goal of cultivating and capturing lifelong users ([Brooks, 2023](#)). For example, researchers at Facebook illustrated this with six age brackets that they aimed to target with varying products: adults, late teens ages 16 to maturity, teens ages 13 to 15, tweens ages 10 to 12, children ages 5 to 9, and young kids ages 0 to 4 ([Wells & Horwitz, 2021](#)). Device manufacturers are no better, with Apple creating marketing campaigns and websites targeting children with their products ([Apple, n.d.](#)).

* The Mind Health Quotient (MHQ) is a comprehensive assessment of 47 aspects of mental function across six dimensions of mind health including Mood & Outlook, Adaptability & Resilience, Social Self (our ability to relate to others), Drive & Motivation, Cognition and Mind-Body Connection. The aggregate score, or MHQ, relates to functional productivity, with higher scores associated with an increased number of productive days.



The same applies with in-app purchases, with the Federal Trade Commission bringing suit against Apple and settling over a case that revealed that the company enabled children to make unlimited purchases without parental involvement ([Hunton Andrews Kurth LLP, 2014](#)). Once again, the data overwhelmingly indicates that device manufacturers have been successful in their bid to addict children.

Consider the following:

- More than 75% of children younger than 2 years old failed to meet the American Academy of Pediatrics' screen time guidelines. Further, nearly two-thirds of children aged 2 to 5 also failed to meet the guidelines ([McArthur et al., 2022](#)).
- On average, children ages 8 to 12 in the United States spend 4 to 6 hours a day watching or using screens, and teens spend up to 9 hours ([American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 2024](#)).
- Nearly all teens (95%) report having access to a smartphone, up from 73% in 2014-2015. The share of teens who report being online "almost constantly" has roughly doubled since 2014-2015 (24% vs. 46%) ([Pew Research Center, 2024](#)).

The list of harms children are exposed to and experience as a result of increased use of digital services is troubling and ever-growing: addiction, depression, loneliness, dissatisfaction with life, anxiety, self-harm, eating disorders, sex trafficking, cyberbullying, Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM), suicide, and more ([Whiting, 2023](#)). The unfortunate reality is that for many of the physical, emotional, and psychological harms outlined above, there was a steady decrease in these symptoms from 1991 to 2011, with a sharp rise after 2011 coinciding with the mass adoption of smart devices ([Twenge et al., 2022](#); [Keyes et al., 2019](#)).

- Finally, polling conducted by WPA Intelligence in April of 2023 concludes that parents are desperately in need of tools and legislative support. The findings show:
 - When parents were asked if social media companies do enough to protect children, nearly 80% disagreed, with 60% in strong disagreement.
 - 91% of parents believe that they should be empowered to approve or deactivate the social media accounts of their children if they so choose.
 - When asked if parents should be given tools to monitor the time their child spends online, to control privacy settings, to approve of data collection, and more, more than 90% of parents said they would support each of these tools.



The Solution

The App Store Accountability Act extends the framework established by previous state-level laws and proven safeguards aimed at protecting children from harmful digital products. By holding app stores (notably the Apple App Store and Google Play Store) accountable for ensuring appropriate age restrictions, the Act takes aim at the growing concern of children accessing addictive and harmful digital content. At its core, the Act enforces a longstanding legal principle: multi-trillion-dollar companies such as Apple and Google should not be allowed enter into contracts with children.

This Act proposes a clear framework to combat the issue of children accessing harmful or addictive digital products: the responsibility for age verification and consent rests with the app stores. This approach mirrors established practices in other industries. For instance, when a customer purchases cigarettes, alcohol, or other age-restricted products, the responsibility for ensuring age compliance falls on the retailer, not the manufacturer. The same logic applies to app stores, which serve as the primary gateway for children to access many digital products and services.

This legislative solution would enact the following:

- Requires age verification when creating an account with the app store using a commercially reasonable method of age verification. App stores would then break users into the following age categories: child (younger than 13), younger teenager (13 to 16), older teenager (16 to 18), and adults (over 18).
- App stores would require a minor account be affiliated with that of a parent or guardian, and the parent would be empowered to provide consent for a minor looking to download an app or make an in-app store purchase.
- App store operators would be required to accurately reflect age ratings on individual apps as they relate to the newly established age categories.
- Requires strong data privacy standards, including data minimization, deletion of personal data used to verify age, and enhanced data security for any personal information transmitted.
- If app stores fail to meet these new requirements, it would be considered a deceptive trade practice, enforced by the Attorney General.



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