Leading Advocates Launch Push For Design Code To Protect Kids Online

Groups urge Congress to stop Big Tech's manipulation of young people

BOSTON – Thursday, December 2, 2021 – Today a coalition of leading advocacy groups launched Designed With Kids in Mind, a campaign demanding a design code in the US to protect young people from online manipulation and harm. The campaign seeks to secure protections for US children and teens similar to the UK's groundbreaking Age-Appropriate Design Code (AADC), which went into effect earlier this year.

The campaign brings together leading advocates for child development, privacy, and a healthier digital media environment, including Fairplay, Accountable Tech, American Academy of Pediatrics, Center for Digital Democracy, Center for Humane Technology, Common Sense, ParentsTogether, RAINN, and Exposure Labs, creators of The Social Dilemma. The coalition will advocate for legislation and new Federal Trade Commission rules that protect children and teens from a business model that puts young people at risk by prioritizing data collection and engagement.

The coalition has launched a website that explains how many of the most pressing problems faced by young people online are directly linked to platform's design choices. They cite features that benefit platforms at the expense of young people's wellbeing, such as:

- **Autoplay:** increases time on platforms, and excessive time on screens is linked to mental health challenges, physical risks like less sleep, and promotes family conflict.
- **Algorithmic recommendations:** risks exposure to self-harm, racist content, pornography, and mis/disinformation.
- **Location tracking:** makes it easier for strangers to track and contact children.
- **Nudges to share**: leads to loss of privacy, risks of sexual predation and identity theft.

The coalition is promoting three bills which would represent a big step forward in protecting US children and teens online: the Children and Teens' Online Privacy Protection Act S.1628; the Kids Internet Design and Safety (KIDS) Act S. 2918; and the Protecting the Information of our Vulnerable Children and Youth (PRIVCY) Act H.R. 4801. Taken together, these bills would expand privacy protections to teens for the first time and incorporate key elements of the UK's AADC, such as requiring the best interest of children to be a primary design consideration for services likely to be accessed by young people. The legislation backed by the coalition would also protect children and teens from manipulative design features and harmful data processing.

Members of the coalition on the urgent need for a US Design Code to protect children and teens:

Josh Golin, Executive Director, Fairplay:
We need an internet that helps children learn, connect, and play without exploiting their developmental vulnerabilities; respects their need for privacy and safety; helps young children disconnect at the appropriate time rather than manipulating them into spending even more time online; and prioritizes surfacing high-quality content instead of maximizing engagement. The UK's Age-Appropriate Design Code took an important step towards creating that internet, and children and teens in the US deserve the same protections and opportunities. It's time for Congress and regulators to insist that children come before Big Tech's profits.

Nicole Gill, Co-Founder and Executive Director of Accountable Tech:
You would never put your child in a car seat that wasn't designed for them and met all safety standards, but that's what we do every day when our children go online using a network of apps and websites that were never designed with them in mind. Our children should be free to learn, play, and connect online without manipulative platforms like Facebook and Google's YouTube influencing their every choice. We need an age appropriate design code that puts kids and families first and protects young people from the exploitative practices and the perverse incentives of social media.

Lee Savio Beers, MD, FAAP, President of the American Academy of Pediatrics:
The American Academy of Pediatrics is proud to join this effort to ensure digital spaces are safe for children and supportive of their healthy development. It is in our power to create a digital ecosystem that works better for children and families; legislative change to protect children is long overdue. We must be bold in our thinking and ensure that government action on technology addresses the most concerning industry practices while preserving the positive aspects of technology for young people.

Jeff Chester, Executive Director, Center for Digital Democracy:
The "Big Tech" companies have long treated young people as just a means to generate vast profits – creating apps, videos and games designed to hook them to an online world designed to surveil and manipulate them. It's time to stop children and teens from being victimized by the digital media industry. Congress and the Federal Trade Commission should adopt commonsense safeguards that ensure America's youth reap all the benefits of the online world without having to constantly expose themselves to the risks.

Randima Fernando, Executive Director, Center for Humane Technology:
We need technology that respects the incredible potential – and the incredible vulnerability – of our kids' minds. And that should guide technology for adults, who can benefit from those same improvements.

Irene Ly, Policy Counsel, Common Sense:
This campaign acknowledges harmful features of online platforms and apps like autoplay, algorithms amplifying harmful content, and location tracking for what they are: intentional

design choices. For too long, online platforms and apps have chosen to exploit children's vulnerabilities through these manipulative design features. Common Sense has long supported designing online spaces with kids in mind, and strongly supports US rules that would finally require companies to put kids' well-being first.

Julia Hoppock, The Social Dilemma Partnerships Director, Exposure Labs:
For too long, Big Social has put profits over people. It's time to put our kids first and build an online world that works for them.

Dalia Hashad, Online Safety Director, ParentsTogether:
From depression to bullying to sexual exploitation, tech companies knowingly expose children to unacceptable harms because it makes the platforms billions in profit. It's time to put kids first.

Scott Berkowitz, President of RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network):
Child exploitation has reached crisis levels, and our reliance on technology has left children increasingly vulnerable. On our hotline, we hear from children every day who have been victimized through technology. An age-appropriate design code will provide overdue safeguards for children across the U.S.