



Common Sense Media Supports the Massachusetts Act Protecting Children From Addictive Social Media Feeds (S.30)

Common Sense Media supports the Massachusetts Act Protecting Children From Addictive Social Media Feeds (S.30). This Act would protect Massachusetts children's and teens' mental health and well-being, including improving their sleep, by limiting social media companies' use of addictive feeds and disruptive notifications.

Common Sense Media, a national non-profit organization, is dedicated to improving the lives of kids and families by providing the trustworthy information, education, and independent voice they need to thrive in the digital era. Our ratings, research, and resources reach more than 150 million users worldwide and 1.4 million educators every year. In Massachusetts alone, more than 18,000 teachers have registered to teach Common Sense's Digital Literacy & Well-Being Curriculum to their students in over 1,900 in-state schools.

Risks Abound for Kids Online

Kids' internet usage is at an all-time high. According to the U.S. Surgeon General's 2023 advisory, Social Media and Youth Mental Health, up to 95% of youth ages 13-17 report using social media, with more than a third saying they use social media "almost constantly." The advisory stated that more than 3 hours of daily use doubles the risk of poor mental health outcomes for 12-15-year-olds. Our research found that teens spend an average of 4.5 hours per day on their phones, with about a quarter of teens spending as much as 5 to 8 hours daily in front of their screens. This research also revealed that kids and teens struggle to set their own screentime boundaries due to the large number of notifications on their smartphones.

Time on social media platforms makes up a large portion of screentime for kids and teens. Teens connect through social media platforms at higher rates and report that these platforms form a larger part of their social life than any other group. Once they start using these technologies, they have real difficulty stopping. Our research on girls and social media use found that, despite positive perceptions of social media's overall impact on their lives, a significant proportion of girls report challenges in regulating their use. This research found that numerous social media design features, such as algorithmic video recommendations, endless scrolling, constant notifications, and autoplay, can make these platforms difficult to stop using.

This constant exposure to harmful design features can have severe effects on children. This applies across the age spectrum of kids. Younger children, such as those aged 11-12, may spend less time online unsupervised, but face the same age-inappropriate exposure risks on social media

platforms as older children—exposures that can have a significant impact on them. Our research on girls and social media showed that social media can play a critical, potentially negative role in girls' mental health. According to the participants, social media can provide access to "information and resources, social connection, self-expression, and identity affirmation." At the same time, these girls also identified many risks of social media use, including "exposure to harmful content, bullying and drama, unwanted contact by strangers, negative social comparisons, and interference with sleep." Across all major social media platforms, 11% of surveyed girls found social media increased their stress, and significant proportions reported seeing racist, homophobic, suicidal, and negative body image content. Our research on young people found that half of the participants saw comments denigrating the identities or body images of themselves or others.

Social media companies intentionally use manipulative design features to increase kids' online engagement, regardless of the danger to children, to generate more advertising revenue. These companies process enormous amounts of data about users' behavior, using millions of user data points to filter information through sophisticated algorithms to create personalized social media feeds. These personalized and addictive feeds keep kids glued to their devices. Repeat notifications (or 'nudging') pull youth back into apps and extend their attention and time online. Indeed, our research shows popular social media apps, like TikTok, provide low-friction access to infinite, personalized content, which short-circuits kids' and teens' attention and drives compulsive engagement. Furthermore, these feeds and notifications continue throughout the night, negatively impacting sleep and being particularly harmful to children's health, according to research. Platforms create these features to promote user engagement and increase ad revenue, regardless of the negative consequences. The never-ending pursuit of higher company profits is to blame.

Business models built around maximizing users' time spent online enable harm to many of our kids and teens. The public, as well as teenagers, are increasingly aware of these harmful social media practices. Our research earlier this year revealed widespread distrust of major technology companies among teens. Over half of teens surveyed do not trust tech companies to make ethical and responsible design decisions (53%) or to prioritize user safety over profits (62%). Polling also shows that parents of all political backgrounds support establishing guardrails to protect kids online - guardrails that do not exist today for Massachusetts's kids and teens. But it is clear that kids, teens, and their parents are outmatched when it comes to fighting back against powerful, addictive, and manipulative design features.

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The Massachusetts Act Protecting Children From Addictive Social Media Feeds is essential to enhance online safety for Massachusetts' children and families. The Act protects kids and teens from the harms tied to addictive features on social media platforms while preserving their ability to learn, explore, and find community on the internet. This Act protects kids online by limiting

social media companies' ability to use addictive feeds that subvert user autonomy and keep kids glued to their devices, and preventing companies from waking kids throughout the night with notifications and pings.

First, the Act requires an operator who provides an addictive social media platform to prohibit addictive feeds to a covered user until the operator has determined the covered user is not a minor. This language is critical. It means an operator must provide a non-addictive feed experience (a feed that only contains information sought by the user and not pushed upon the user by an algorithm) to all users - by default - until they determine a user isn't a minor. The Act further specifies that covered operators must use "commercially reasonable and technically feasible age determination methods" to obtain actual knowledge that a covered user is not a covered minor. Otherwise, operators must operate under the presumption that a user is a covered minor. Therefore, under this Act, all users will receive the less addictive form of the platform by default until the platform determines the user is not a minor.

Second, the Act requires an operator who provides an addictive social media platform to not allow notifications to a covered user between the hours of 12:00 a.m. and 6:00 a.m., unless the operator has determined the covered user is not a minor. Again, the language is critical here. Requiring no notifications - by default - to users of the addictive social media platform from 12:00 a.m. and 6:00 a.m. until the platform determines the user is not a minor is really important. These 6 hours are when a covered user - but really most users - are trying to sleep, and these notifications only hinder this attempt. By requiring this default setting, all users of the addictive social media platform will benefit from these limited notifications for 6 hours a night. At least until the addictive social media platform determines - using "commercially reasonable and technically feasible age determination methods" - that the user is not a minor.

Notably, industry falsely claims the Act would block access to content. This Act does not require the blocking of any content at all. There is an exception for content when "the user expressly and unambiguously requested the specific media." This Act actually elevates the content the user is seeking by eliminating platform-pushed content that the user is not seeking.

Furthermore, industry is falsely claiming that instead of giving teenagers a healthier online experience, the Act could prevent platforms from ensuring age-appropriate feeds for teens. They claim the Act could cause only the most recent posts to the top of a teen's feed - even if that post is spam, hate speech, or other harmful content. However, the Act actually gives teenagers a healthier online experience by elevating content that the minor user is actually seeking. Also, nothing in the Act prevents the platforms from using an algorithm to filter out spam, hate speech, or other harmful content. Currently, with all of the targeted advertising and content an algorithm determines a user should see, feeds are loaded with content users didn't actually choose. Social media companies use these addictive feeds to get kids and teens to view and engage with platforms longer to make larger profits.

Finally, industry has falsely claimed that the Act could endanger privacy by putting personal data at risk due to privacy-invasive age assurance requirements. The Act requires that operators of an addictive social media platform use “commercially reasonable methods to determine that the covered user is not a covered minor.” There are a number of ways that platforms can, and already do, conduct age assurance of their users through their millions of user-collected data points without putting personal data at risk.

Ultimately, this Act would protect Massachusetts children’s and teens’ mental health and well-being, including improving their sleep, by limiting social media companies’ use of addictive feeds and disruptive notifications. The Bay State would be in good company if it passed this Act, as both New York and California took similar steps in 2024. In the absence of federal action to safeguard children online, it is critical that Massachusetts join other states in passing this legislation.

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