

POLICY PAGES

Protecting Children Online

November 2023

OVERVIEW

Walker Montgomery was a normal American teenager. He lived with his parents and siblings in Mississippi where he helped with chores, hunted with his dad, played on the high school football team, and recently earned his driver's license. One night, as he scrolled through Instagram, a teen girl who supposedly lived in the area and shared mutual friends with him, messaged him. They exchanged texts for hours, and the messages went from flirty to sexual. Eventually Walker agreed to a video chat where he committed a sexual act. The girl then announced she had recorded him and demanded \$1000 to stop her from sharing the video with his friends and family. Walker did not have the money, but the perpetrator escalated the threats until Walker took his own life.¹

Sextortion schemes, like Walker's, are not so rare. They are exploding in a global crisis. In 2022 alone, the FBI received over 7,000 reports of online sextortion of minors, ballooning from previous years.² Sadly, Walker is not the only victim of these schemes who committed suicide. So how did the culture get here?

There is no question that the internet has greatly increased the impact of early sexual exposure and sexual exploitation of children. The problem is that many parents struggle to even understand the scope of online sexual activity whether it is app-based pornography, sexting, or trafficking, much less how to protect their children when internet-enabled screens populate the lives of children at home, school, the library, homes of friends and family, and even church.

The harms of sexual exposure and exploitation are so profound that protecting children is more critical than ever.

ANALYSIS

CHILDREN ONLINE

The iPhone was introduced in 2007. For the first time, people would have full access to the internet on a portable device. The delight over the popular technology was universal with little discussion of what this could mean for children.



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Children use smart phones and other devices at astronomically high rates. Over 95% of teenagers have access to a smart phone and 45% admit they are “almost constantly” online.³ Smartphones and other screens have displaced traditional ways of playing and socializing. Instead of teens playing pick-up basketball in the cul-de-sac or inviting friends over to hang out, they rely on their phones to avoid boredom, connect with friends, learn new things, and, sadly, to avoid face-to-face interaction with other people.⁴

Younger children fare little better. Instead of playing outside, building Legos, or reading books, children spend increasing amounts of their free time on internet-enabled devices. Upwards of 75% of young children have their own tablets,⁵ while 60% of children begin using smartphones before age five.⁶ Nearly one-in-five parents of a child younger than 12 say their child has their own smartphone, and a portion of those children use social media.⁷

The results have been catastrophic. Anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicide has risen dramatically among adolescents⁸ with early smartphone use linked to long-term mental health issues, especially for girls.⁹ Increased screen time also contributes to serious health issues including childhood obesity and chronic sleep deprivation, as well as decreased cognitive, social, and behavioral development.¹⁰

The most tragic consequence of smartphones and internet-enabled devices for children is their potential early exposure to massive amounts of sexual solicitation and pornography. Predators use sites such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) to spread explicit content and connect with vulnerable teens. Some 13% of X’s content, for example, is pornographic.¹¹ One in eight users under the age of 16 on the popular Instagram app report that they have experienced “unwanted sexual advances on the platform over the past seven days.”¹²

Today’s technology-savvy children are especially vulnerable to marketing efforts to push pornography on every type of mobile and media device, as revealed by these statistics:

- The average age of a child’s first internet exposure to pornography is 11 years old.¹³
- Among teens ages 13-17, 21% came across pornography once or twice a month, and 57% sought it out at least monthly.¹⁴
- Some 71% of teens report hiding online activity from their parents (this includes clearing browser history, minimizing a browser when in view, deleting inappropriate videos, lying about behavior, using a phone instead of a computer, blocking parents with social media privacy settings, using private browsing, disabling parental controls, or having e-mail or social media accounts unknown to parents).¹⁵
- In a survey at a large Catholic high school, students reported their smart phone (57%) or tablet (24%) as their primary way to view pornography, and their bedroom as the primary place for viewing it (61%) followed by some other place in their home (24%).¹⁶

To pile tragedy upon tragedy, children are not only vulnerable to viewing pornography but also to creating it. Sexting—defined as the action or practice of sending sexually-explicit photographs or messages via mobile phone—is becoming more and more common. Among 13–18-year-olds in the UK, 38% have sent a sext and 32% said they sent one to someone

they knew *only* online; another 60% said they have been asked to share explicit photos or videos of themselves.¹⁷

The effects of exposure to pornography are well-documented. For more, read Center for Arizona Policy's [Harms of Pornography](#) Policy Page.

PARENTAL STEPS TO PROTECT CHILDREN

The first defense against child exposure to pornography and exploitation is vigilance by parents. As researcher Dr. Patricia M. Greenfield puts it, "A warm and communicative parent-child relationship is the most important factor. In addition, open parent-child channels for communicating about sexual and media experiences, sex education at home or school, and parental participation with children on the Internet are constructive influences."¹⁸ By taking a few key steps, parents can greatly minimize the chances that their children will be exposed to sexually explicit material.

Make your home a safe space. Pornographers are trying to reach teens with pornography even when the child is not actively seeking it. In fact, 79% of *unwanted* exposure of youth to pornography happens right in the home.¹⁹

- Install a [good router](#) on your home wireless network or add hardware to filter your router. There are many good filter options including the [Circle](#) and [Bark Home](#).
- Keep the computer in a high traffic area, never in a child's bedroom, even if filtered internet service is used. No filter is 100% effective, and savvy children can circumvent most filters.
- If your child has a smartphone with internet capability, contact your carrier about parental control options or install a mobile internet filter such as SafeEyes. For younger teens and tweens, consider giving them a [Gabb phone](#) instead of a smart phone.
- Supervise children's online communication from email and social media to apps and video games to make sure that they are used appropriately.

Keep abreast of the technology used by your children.

- If your child has an internet-enabled device that can receive pictures or video, familiarize yourself with how the device works and what parental controls are available. Also check the device frequently for pornographic content. Sometimes it is hidden in "previews" available on the app even if the child does not have full access to the app.
- Learn about the websites, games, software, and apps that your children use. [Protecting Young Eyes](#), [Common Sense Media](#), and [Axis](#) are good organizations providing reviews to parents.
- Understand how predators operate on the internet.²⁰

Talk to your children about internet use regularly and in age-appropriate ways. Just as a parent protects a small child from busy roads, then teaches an older child the rules of the road, and eventually instructs a teenager in driving technique before sending them out

on the highway, so also parents protect their children from damaging sites and predators on the internet before slowly transitioning them onto the information highway as they become adults.

- Instruct children not to give out any personal information to anyone they may meet on the internet. This is particularly important with social networking sites like Facebook, X, and Instagram, where children might unwittingly provide a predator with details like their birth date, where they go to school, and the route they take walking home.
- Review with your children the dangers and harms of pornography. For elementary kids, read to them *Good Pictures Bad Pictures Jr.* or *Good Pictures Bad Pictures* by Kristen Jenson. For teens, consider the resources at [Fight the New Drug](#) and [Axis](#). Ask your teens about [sexting](#) and [sextortion](#).
- Consider watching [The Social Dilemma](#) or [Dopamine Nation](#) with teens. Discuss the role of addiction in internet use and the negative effects of social media.

POLICY STEPS TO PROTECT CHILDREN

Congress has tried to protect children online for decades, but the U.S. Supreme Court has stymied its efforts time and again. The Court struck down a 1996 law that punished entities who knowingly sent obscene or indecent messages to children as unconstitutionally vague under the First Amendment.²¹ Then the Court struck down a law requiring age-verification in order for children to visit sites with harmful material, stating that “filters are more effective than age-verification requirements” and do not impinge free speech rights.²²

Still, parents have grown more and more vocal with their concerns, especially after COVID-19-related school shutdowns placed more children online. Congress is deliberating over the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA) designed to offer safeguards for children online.²³ In 2023, more than 40 states joined a lawsuit against Meta (parent company of Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp among others) for intentionally ensnaring and addicting children to its social media platforms in violation of consumer protection laws.²⁴

In addition, several states have proposed and passed laws to protect children from addictive technology, including online pornography. Utah successfully passed legislation that requires social media companies to age-verify users, obtain parental consent for children who wish to join the platform, and allow parents to access to their children’s accounts.²⁵ A number of states have followed suit including Texas, Arkansas, California, and Louisiana although most of the laws are enmeshed in litigation.²⁶

TALKING POINTS

- **The internet is not a safe place for children; parents need to be involved in overseeing their children’s online activity.**

- **Pornography exposure can happen at a very young age. With pornography more accessible than ever, children run a greater risk today of being exposed and developing an addiction.**
- **Children can easily and inadvertently become victims of the online sex industry through sexting and sextortion.**
- **Child pornography exploits, endangers, and forever scars children.**

CONCLUSION

Over 25 years ago, while the internet was still young, the U.S. Department of Justice anticipated the future, declaring, “Never before in the history of telecommunications media in the United States has so much indecent (and obscene) material been so easily accessible by so many minors in so many American homes with so few restrictions.”²⁷ That description is truer today than ever. Parents can and must avail themselves of tools and resources to raise children with clear eyes and clear heads in this broken world.

¹ Ross Reily, ‘Imagine the panic’: A teen was catfished, extorted and took his own life. Now, his father is speaking out., USA Today, 2023, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2023/02/22/mississippi-teen-sextortion-case-dangers/11324554002/> (last visited Sept. 28, 2023). See also Mary Jackson, *Speaking for his son: One Mississippi father is warning of the deadly dangers that online sextortion schemes pose to teen boys*, World, May 6, 2023.

² *Id.*

³ Katherine Schaeffer, *Most U.S. teens who use cellphones do it to pass time, connect with others, learn new things*, August 23, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/08/23/most-u-s-teens-who-use-cellphones-do-it-to-pass-time-connect-with-others-learn-new-things/> (last visited Nov. 3, 2023).

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Jenny S. Radesky, et al, *Youth Children’s Use of Smartphones and Tablets*, Pediatrics, July 1, 2020, <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/146/1/e20193518/77025/Young-Children-s-Use-of-Smartphones-and-Tablets?autologincheck=redirected> (last visited Sept. 22, 2023).

⁶ Brooke Auxier, et al, *Parenting Children in the Age of Screens*, Pew Research Center (July 28m2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/07/28/childrens-engagement-with-digital-devices-screen-time/> (last visited Sept. 29, 2023).

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Jonathan Haidt, *Overview: The Anxious Generation*, <https://jonathanhaidt.com/anxious-generation/> (last visited Sept. 29, 2023).

- ⁹ Jon Haidt and Zach Rausch, Kids Who Get Smartphones Earlier Become Adults With Worse Mental Health, *After Babel*, May 15, 2023, https://jonathanhaidt.substack.com/p/sapient-smartphone-report?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email (last visited Sept. 29, 2023).
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- ¹⁵ *Id.*
- ¹⁶ *Id.* (citing Amanda Zurface, “Survey Shows Why Parents Should Keep Smartphones out of the Bedroom,” *Covenant Eyes*. <http://www.covenanteyes.com/2018/05/10/parents-keep-smartphones-out-of-bedroom/> (accessed June 15, 2018)).
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- ²² *Ashcroft v. ACLU*, 535 U.S. 564 (2002) (striking down portions of the 1998 Child Online Protection Act (COPA)). One section of COPA that is still good law is Section 230. While initially intended to enable internet providers to remove illicit content without liability, it has perversely been used by internet platforms to protect themselves for failing to remove obscene and otherwise indecent content posted by users. Morell, C. (2022, August 24). *Protecting Teens From Big Tech: Five Policy Ideas for States*. Institute for Family Studies. <https://ifstudies.org/blog/protecting-teens-from-big-tech-five-policy-ideas-for-states> (last visited Nov. 10, 2022).
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²⁷ U.S. Department of Justice. Post Hearing Memorandum of Points and Authorities, at I, ACLU v. Reno, 929 F. Supp. 824, 1996.