



October 14, 2025

Chairman Andrew Ferguson and Commissioners Melissa Holyoak and Mark Meador
Federal Trade Commission
600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20580

Re: Request by Child Advocates for the FTC to Investigate Google's and IARC's Deceptive Age Ratings and Google's Unfair Play Store Practices, Violations of COPPA, and the 2014 FTC Consent Decree

Via E-Mail

Dear Chairman Ferguson and Commissioners Holyoak and Meador:

We sincerely appreciate your attention to our FTC complaint against Apple, submitted on August 19, 2025.¹ While many of the harmful practices we identified are common across app stores, we believe it is important to submit a separate complaint addressing Google's practices to highlight critical differences that merit independent consideration. In this filing, we briefly summarize the fundamental issues outlined in our Apple complaint and then focus on the egregious violations unique to Google and its Android devices.

For example, Google uses no human moderation in its initial rating of apps, relying instead on an automated survey by the International Age Rating Coalition (IARC) that takes only minutes to complete.² The IARC system appears to be little more than a self-regulatory ratings pretense that relies on developers to self-report harmful content.

Additionally, Google permits children to unilaterally withdraw from parental supervision upon turning 13,³ thereby creating significant risks for young users. Enabling minors at this critical stage of development to terminate parental oversight, even when parents expressly seek to maintain such protections, constitutes a clear breach of duty of care and may amount to an unfair and deceptive practice under established consumer protection and child safety laws.

The remainder of this complaint examines Google's products, policies, and market power, and documents its specific failures: inaccurate and misleading age ratings, ineffective parental

¹ Digital Childhood Institute, "Request by Child Safety Advocates for the FTC to Investigate Apple's Deceptive and Unfair App Store Practices, Violations of COPPA, and the 2014 FTC Consent Decree," e-mail to Chairman Andrew Ferguson and Commissioners Melissa Holyoak and Mark Meador, Federal Trade Commission, August 19, 2025, https://www.digitalchildhoodinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/FTC-Complaint-Against-Apple_25.pdf.

² "IARC Ratings for Mobile and Digitally Delivered Games from International Age Rating Coalition," Globalratings.com, 2019, <https://www.globalratings.com/>.

³ "How Google Accounts Work When Children Turn 13 (or the Applicable Age in Your Country) - Google for Families Help," Google.com, 2019, <https://support.google.com/families/answer/7106787?hl=en#zippy=%2Cwhen-children-decide-to-take-full-responsibility-for-their-account-and-stop-supervision>.

controls, exploitative contracting practices with minors, widespread COPPA noncompliance, and ongoing violations of the 2014 FTC consent decree on in-app purchases.

We look forward to working with the FTC to address the systemic lack of accountability in app stores and to remedy the significant harms caused to children by the absence of effective oversight in the digital environments where they now spend nearly one-third of their time.⁴

Respectfully,

Digital Childhood Institute
DigitalChildhoodInstitute.org

⁴ Common Sense , “The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens ,” August 18, 2019, https://www.common sense media.org/sites/default/files/research/report/2019_8-18-infographic_final-release.pdf.

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I. Background

We want to begin by recognizing Google’s willingness in the past to engage with online safety advocates in good faith. As experts in child protection, we deeply appreciate companies that demonstrate a genuine commitment to improving product design voluntarily, rather than delaying until regulatory action requires it.

Our hope is that Google will live up to its former informal corporate motto, “Don’t be evil,”⁵ and its published code of conduct for investors, which states:

*“Part of being useful and honest is being responsive: We recognize relevant user feedback when we see it, and we do something about it. We take pride in responding to communications from our users, whether questions, problems, or compliments. If something is broken, fix it.”*⁶

Beyond responsiveness, Google’s code of conduct emphasizes accountability: “Google holds all individuals responsible for their actions, and ensures that where appropriate, those individuals hold others accountable too.”⁷ As advocates, we urge Google to address this complaint with the same responsiveness and accountability it promises to its shareholders.

While Google’s app stores may not see the same level of use among American teenagers as Apple’s, Google’s search engine and YouTube are used by nearly every minor in the United States.⁸ In fact, *Bloomberg* reported that in 2022, Google paid Apple \$20 billion to remain the default search engine on Apple devices.⁹

This means that even children who begin on Apple products are often quickly funneled into Google’s ecosystem. Recent reports indicate that Apple is in discussions with Google to integrate the Gemini AI model into a revamped version of Siri.¹⁰ As we will show, this behavior fits an established pattern; despite their rivalry, Apple and Google collaborate when it serves their shared interest in maintaining economic power and ensuring minimal regulation.

⁵ Google Investor Relations, “Google Code of Conduct,” Archive.org, 8, 2004, <https://web.archive.org/web/20050204181615/http://investor.google.com/conduct.html>.

⁶ Alphabet Investor Relations, “Google Code of Conduct,” Alphabet Investor Relations, January 17, 2024, <https://abc.xyz/investor/google-code-of-conduct/>.

⁷ Alphabet Investor Relations, “Google Code of Conduct.”

⁸ Michelle Faverio and Olivia Sidoti, “Teens, Social Media and Technology 2024,” Pew Research Center, December 12, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2024/12/12/teens-social-media-and-technology-2024/>.

⁹ Leah Nylen, “Google’s Payments to Apple Reached \$20 Billion in 2022, Antitrust Court Documents Show,” *Bloomberg*, May 1, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-05-01/google-s-payments-to-apple-reached-20-billion-in-2022-cue-says>.

¹⁰ Mark Gurman, “Apple Explores Using Google Gemini AI to Power Revamped Siri,” *Bloomberg*, August 22, 2025, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-08-22/apple-explores-using-google-gemini-ai-to-power-revamped-siri>.

We believe all actors whose practices place children at risk should be held accountable and penalized. In our experience, addressing problems and unlawful behavior on an app-by-app basis can be valuable, and sometimes necessary, but that approach is insufficient considering the rapid speed of technological innovation and the continual emergence of new threats to children. By implementing strong safeguards at the app store and device level, lawmakers and regulators can resolve thousands of downstream child safety issues at once and ensure that children receive meaningful and lasting protection.

A. Evidence Of Google’s Knowing Deception To Consumers Since At Least 2018

Because we have already detailed at length our efforts to publicly warn both Apple and Google about misleading age ratings in our Apple complaint, we will provide only a summary of those efforts in this filing.

In 2018, child advocates joined together as a coalition to address the wildly misleading nature of the App Store’s age ratings. We engaged the media¹¹ and started the nationwide #FixAppRatings campaign.¹²

In 2019, we met with Senator Mike Lee of Utah and asked him to hold a congressional hearing to address deceptive app ratings and broken parental controls. Our meeting directly led to a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing titled “Protecting Innocence in a Digital World.”¹³

That same year, we worked with Louisiana to pass a resolution urging Congress to support the #FixAppRatings initiative. The resolution warned that app store ratings, self-assigned by developers, are misleading, inconsistent, and fail to alert parents to serious risks like bullying, grooming, sex trafficking, pornography, glamorized self-harm, and illegal drug sales.¹⁴

¹¹ Dan Rascon, “‘Honestly, It Terrifies Me’ Teen-Related Apps May Actually Contain X-Rated Material,” KUTV, February 15, 2019, <https://kutv.com/news/local/honestly-it-terrifies-me-teen-related-apps-may-actually-contain-x-rated-material>.

¹² “#FixAppRatings | a Movement to Create Safer Digital Places for Kids,” #FixAppRatings, July 12, 2021, <https://fixappratings.com/>; “Fixappratings | Caledonia MI,” Facebook.com, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/fixappratings/>.

¹³ “Protecting Innocence in a Digital World | United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary,” Senate.gov, July 9, 2019, <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/committee-activity/hearings/protecting-innocence-in-a-digital-world>.

¹⁴ Senator Beth Mizell, Senator Barrow Peacock, and Representative Bodi White, “Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 36” (2019), <https://www.legis.la.gov/legis/ViewDocument.aspx?d=1135721>.

In 2020, we helped Utah pass HJR 9, a resolution similar to Louisiana's.¹⁵ In 2021, we worked with Representative (now Speaker) Mike Johnson of Louisiana to introduce a congressional version of these state-level resolutions.¹⁶

That same year, our team again assisted Senator Lee's team with questions for tech executives about the accuracy of their age ratings. He questioned YouTube executive Leslie Miller about why their app was rated "Teen" in the Google Play Store, but 17+ in the Apple App Store. She was unable to explain the difference at the hearing.¹⁷

The National Center on Sexual Exploitation also named Google to its "Dirty Dozen" list in both 2020 and 2022,¹⁸ largely due to exploitative issues associated with its search engine.

In 2025, the App Store Accountability Act (ASAA) was introduced in Utah and passed with near-unanimous support.¹⁹ The bill has since passed in Texas²⁰ and Louisiana²¹ and has been introduced federally.²² The ASAA was born out of the frustration of child safety advocates who had exhausted all other options.

Midway through the legislative session in Utah, when it became clear the bill would pass, a Google lobbyist urged the Utah sponsor to replace the App Store Accountability Act with their App Store and Developer Age Assurance Responsibility Act.²³ The Google bill stripped out all real accountability and stated in part:

"Developers are solely responsible for correctly identifying whether their applications are Covered Applications under this statute. No Covered Company is required to proactively identify Covered Applications, and a Covered Company will not be held

¹⁵ Rep. Susan Pulsipher and Sen. Todd Weiler, "H.J.R. 9 Joint Resolution Calling for an Application Ratings Board for Internet Ready Devices" (2020), <https://le.utah.gov/~2020/bills/static/HJR009.html>.

¹⁶ Rep. Mike Johnson, "H.Res.721 - Calling for the Establishment of an App Ratings Board to Enforce Consistent and Accurate Age and Content Ratings of Apps on Internet-Ready Devices and Calling on Technology Companies to Ensure the Implementation of User-Friendly and Streamlined Parental Controls on Devices Used by Minors." (2019), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/721?r=9&s=1>.

¹⁷ Forbes Breaking News, "'Wildly Inappropriate for a Child': Lee Presses Snapchat Executive on Suitability of Their App," YouTube, October 26, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36nyxOYySjg>.

¹⁸ "Google - NCOSE," National Center on Sexual Exploitation, October 15, 2024, <https://endsexualexploitation.org/google/>.

¹⁹ Sen. Todd Weiler and Rep. James Dunnigan, "App Store Accountability Act," Pub. L. No. S.B. 142 (2025), <https://le.utah.gov/~2025/bills/static/SB0142.html>

²⁰ Sen. Angela Paxton et al., "An Act Relating to the Regulation of Platforms for the Sale and Distribution of Software Applications for Mobile Devices," Pub. L. No. S.B. 2420 (2025), <https://legiscan.com/TX/sponsors/SB2420/2025>.

²¹ Rep. Kim Carver, "Commercial Regulations: Provides Relative to Minors Use of Applications," Pub. L. No. H.B. 570 (2025), <https://www.legis.la.gov/Legis/BillInfo.aspx?i=248616>.

²² "Lee Introduces Bill to Protect Children Online, Hold App Stores Accountable," Mike Lee US Senator for Utah, May 2025, <https://www.lee.senate.gov/2025/5/lee-introduces-bill-to-protect-children-online-hold-app-stores-accountable>.

²³ Appendix A

liable under this statute in cases where a Developer provides inaccurate information about its application.”²⁴

This provision would have effectively absolved app stores from responsibility, even in cases where they knowingly permitted developers to misrepresent their products to children and families.

Immediately after Utah’s bill passed, Google published a blog post attacking the legislation while promoting its own weaker framework, dismissing the need for stronger safeguards and insisting that its inadequate proposal offered better protection for children.²⁵

B. Background On Google’s Central Role In Child Online Harms

As explained in more detail in the Apple complaint, minors are being harmed online. Children spend an average of 7.5 hours per day using screens.²⁶ When teens use their smartphones, most of their time is spent using apps, with some studies estimating app usage as high as 90 percent of time spent on a smartphone.²⁷ The average teen receives approximately 240 app notifications each day.²⁸

In 2024, Google distributed more than 113 billion apps and games.²⁹ Google’s Play Store is the second-largest gatekeeper to children’s online experiences in the United States. Google’s app marketplace is designed, as we will show, to maximize commercial benefits, not to protect children.

Numerous studies have described the harms that children suffer from apps and smartphone usage, including increased anxiety, depression, eating disorders, suicidal thoughts, early exposure to pornography, sleep disorders, and contact with child predators.³⁰

²⁴ Appendix A

²⁵ Kareem Ghanem, “Google’s Legislative Proposal for Keeping Kids Safe Online,” Google, March 12, 2025, <https://blog.google/outreach-initiatives/public-policy/google-legislative-proposal-for-keeping-kids-safe-online/>.

²⁶ AACAP, “Screen Time and Children,” American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, June 2024, https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-And-Watching-TV-054.aspx.

²⁷ Andrew Buck, “Mobile Apps vs Mobile Websites (Why 90% of Mobile Time Is Spent in Apps),” MobiLoud, August 28, 2025, <https://www.mobiloud.com/blog/mobile-apps-vs-mobile-websites>.

²⁸ Beata Mostafavi, “Study: Average Teen Received More than 200 App Notifications a Day | Michigan Medicine,” Michigan Medicine (University of Michigan, September 26, 2023), <https://www.michiganmedicine.org/health-lab/study-average-teen-received-more-200-app-notifications-day>.

²⁹ David Curry, “Google Play Store Statistics (2023),” Business of Apps, August 5, 2025, <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/google-play-statistics/>.

³⁰ Jon Haidt, “The Teen Mental Illness Epidemic Began around 2012,” After Babel, February 8, 2023, <https://www.afterbabel.com/p/the-teen-mental-illness-epidemic>;; Elia Abi-Jaoude, Karlina Treurnicht Naylor, and Antonio Pignatiello, “Smartphones, Social Media Use and Youth Mental Health,” Canadian Medical Association Journal 192, no. 6 (February 10, 2020): E136–41, <https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.190434>;; Adventist Health, “How

Two months ago, a study found that children, especially girls, experience significantly worse mental health outcomes when they own a smartphone before age 13.³¹ Young adults who first used a smartphone at age 5 or 6 were far more likely to report suicidal thoughts, aggression, and hallucinations compared to those who started at age 13 or later. Among females, the rate of severe suicidal thoughts nearly doubled, from 28 percent to 48 percent. Early smartphone ownership was also linked to reduced self-worth and emotional resilience in girls, and to diminished empathy, calmness, and confidence in boys.³²

Neuroscience demonstrates that the medial prefrontal cortex, which governs impulse control and regulates reward sensitivity, continues maturing into the mid-20s.³³ This leaves adolescents especially vulnerable to manipulative smartphone design and harmful online experiences that exploit heightened reward sensitivity.

Among teens, addictive mobile phone use is the most prevalent form of problematic screen-based behavior. One study found that “almost 1 in 2 youths had a high addictive use trajectory for mobile phones.”³⁴ The smartphone’s constant accessibility and the minimal friction between user and app create the perfect conditions for compulsive engagement. As the central delivery system for digital life, the smartphone does more than enable risk: it amplifies it across platforms.

Recent research from the *Understanding America Study* shows that young adults’ personalities are shifting in troubling ways. Conscientiousness has fallen sharply, with people in their twenties and thirties reporting they are more easily distracted, careless, and less likely to follow through on commitments. At the same time, neuroticism has risen almost as much, while agreeableness and extraversion have also declined, leaving today’s young adults less connected, less resilient, and more distressed than previous generations.³⁵ Experts attribute these changes in part to

Screen Time Affects Teens: Mental Health & Depression,” Adventist Health, August 4, 2023, <https://www.adventisthealth.org/blog/2023/august/how-screen-time-affects-teens-mental-health-and-/>; Denis Storey, “Chronic Smartphone Use Linked to Teen Anxiety, Depression, and Insomnia,” Psychiatrist.com, August 7, 2024, <https://www.psychiatrist.com/news/chronic-smartphone-use-linked-to-teen-anxiety-depression-and-insomnia/>; Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (2024).

³¹ Tara C. Thiagarajan, Jennifer Jane Newson, and Shailender Swaminathan, “Protecting the Developing Mind in a Digital Age: A Global Policy Imperative,” *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, July 20, 2025, 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2025.2518313>.

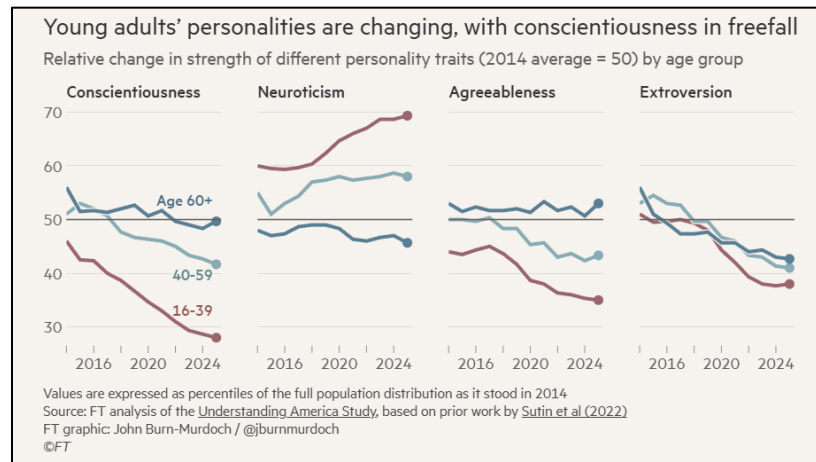
³² Thiagarajan et al, “Protecting the Developing Mind,” 1-12.

³³ Caitlin M Goodpaster et al., “Prefrontal Cortex Development and Its Implications in Mental Illness,” *Neuropsychopharmacology*, July 3, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41386-025-02154-8>.

³⁴ Yunyu Xiao et al., “Addictive Screen Use Trajectories and Suicidal Behaviors, Suicidal Ideation, and Mental Health in US Youths,” *JAMA* 334, no. 3 (June 18, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2025.7829>.

³⁵ USC Dornsife Center for Economic and Social Research, “Understanding America Study,” Usc.edu, 2017, <https://uasdata.usc.edu/page/About+The+UAS>.

smartphones, streaming, and online life, as digital convenience makes it easier to avoid plans and abandon responsibilities.³⁶



***Financial Times* graphic³⁷ (based on the *Understanding America Study*) showing the sharp drop in conscientiousness and corresponding rise in neuroticism among young adults.**

Taken together, these developmental vulnerabilities, rising rates of compulsive use, and measurable shifts in youth personality paint a clear picture: today's adolescents are struggling. This makes the role of specific products and services especially critical. Among these, YouTube, owned by Google, stands out as one of the most powerful forces shaping young people's daily lives.

i. YouTube's Outsized Influence on Children's Online Risks

YouTube is the most widely used video platform among minors in the United States, with 90 percent of teens using it and nearly three-quarters visiting daily. Notably, 28 percent of Black teens and 24 percent of Hispanic teens say they use the platform almost constantly, underscoring how heavy use can disproportionately affect certain groups of young people.³⁸ Overall, teens spend an average of two hours a day on YouTube.³⁹ YouTube comes preloaded on Android devices.⁴⁰

³⁶ John Burn-Murdoch, "The Troubling Decline in Conscientiousness," *Financial Times*, August 8, 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/5cd77ef0-b546-4105-8946-36db3f84dc43>; Colby Hall, "Alarming New Study Finds Smartphones Ruining Our Brains at Unprecedented Speed," *Mediaite*, August 9, 2025, <https://www.mediaite.com/opinion/alarming-new-study-finds-smartphones-ruining-our-brains-at-unprecedented-speed/>.

³⁷ John Burn-Murdoch, "The Troubling Decline in Conscientiousness."

³⁸ Faverio and Sidoti, "Teens, Social Media and Technology 2024."

³⁹ Jonathan Rothwell, "Teens Spend Average of 4.8 Hours on Social Media per Day," *Gallup* (Gallup, Inc., October 13, 2023), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/512576/teens-spend-average-hours-social-media-per-day.aspx>.

⁴⁰ "What Is Preloaded Apps? Apps List for Android & IOS," *SplitMetrics*, March 28, 2024, <https://splitmetrics.com/glossary/what-are-preloaded-apps/>.

YouTube was initially exempted from Australia’s planned social media ban for children, but that changed when eSafety Commissioner Julie Inman Grant recommended the platform be included. She explained that YouTube was the most frequently cited platform where children aged 10 to 15 reported encountering harmful content. A survey conducted by the eSafety Commission found that 37 percent of children who had encountered harmful material online said their most recent or most impactful exposure occurred on YouTube, the highest rate for any major platform.⁴¹

A 2022 report found that YouTube’s algorithms directed boys and young men in Australia toward misogynistic, anti-feminist, and extremist material.⁴² In May 2025, new research showed that 13-year-olds browsing YouTube were served harmful content in 15 percent of recommended videos.⁴³ The following month, *The New York Times* reported that YouTube had loosened its content-moderation rules,⁴⁴ raising further concerns about the platform’s safety for young users.

After the recent assassination of Charlie Kirk, graphic, close-up footage of his killing spread rapidly on YouTube.⁴⁵ Because the platform’s algorithms promote content based on engagement rather than safety, many users encountered these videos without seeking them out.⁴⁶ YouTube allowed the content to remain available behind a “content warning screen,”⁴⁷ a safeguard that is easily bypassed. As a result, vulnerable children and teens were exposed to graphic violence, leaving parents to grapple with the emotional fallout.⁴⁸

A Michigan Medicine study mimicked children’s YouTube searches with popular terms like “Minecraft,” “Fortnite,” and memes, and analyzed 2,880 video thumbnails recommended after

⁴¹ Byron Kaye, “Australia Regulator and YouTube Spar over Under-16s Social Media Ban,” Reuters, June 24, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/australia-regulator-youtube-spar-over-under-16s-social-media-ban-2025-06-24/>.

⁴² ISD Global, “Algorithms as a Weapon against Women: How YouTube Lures Boys and Young Men into the ‘Manosphere’” (Reset Australia, 2022), <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Algorithms-as-a-weapon-against-women-ISD-RESET.pdf>.

⁴³ Fatmaelzahraa Eltaher et al., “Protecting Young Users on Social Media: Evaluating the Effectiveness of Content Moderation and Legal Safeguards on Video Sharing Platforms,” arXiv.org, May 16, 2025, <https://arxiv.org/abs/2505.11160>.

⁴⁴ Nico Grant and Tripp Mickle, “YouTube Loosens Video Content Moderation Rules,” *The New York Times*, June 9, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/09/technology/youtube-videos-content-moderation.html>.

⁴⁵ Barbara Ortutay and Kelvin Chan, “Widespread Availability of Graphic Charlie Kirk Shooting Video Shows Content Moderation Challenges,” AP News, September 12, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/charlie-kirk-video-violence-content-moderation-c6aa91558f5827c59aed1e82893a8ce6>.

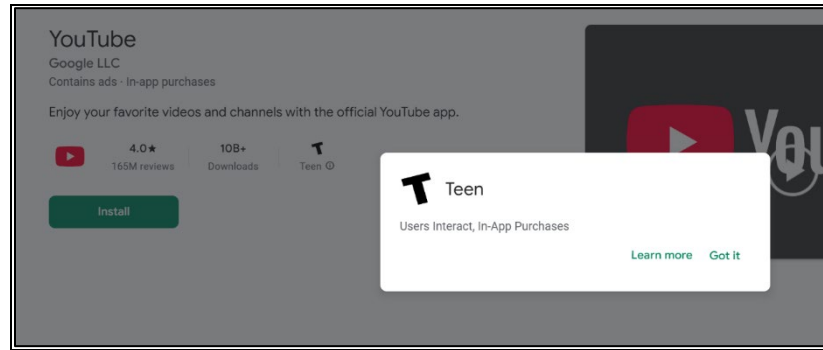
⁴⁶ WRAL News, “Graphic Videos of Kirk and Zarutskas Deaths Reignite Debate over Social Media Moderation,” WRAL.com, September 11, 2025, <https://www.wral.com/story/graphic-videos-of-kirk-and-zarutskas-deaths-reignite-debate-over-social-media-moderation/22155572/>.

⁴⁷ Jared Perlo, “Why Charlie Kirk Assassination Videos Are Still Spreading Online,” NBC News, September 11, 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/social-media/charlie-kirk-assassination-videos-are-still-spreading-online-rcna230690>.

⁴⁸ Tatum Hunter and Will Oremus, “My Kid Has Seen This. Now What?: Parents Reel as Charlie Kirk Video Goes Viral,” *The Washington Post*, September 12, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2025/09/12/charlie-kirk-death-video-kids-teens/>.

those searches. More than half of the thumbnails included “shocking, dramatic, or outrageous” imagery, and nearly one-third showed violence, peril, or pranks.⁴⁹

YouTube is rated as safe for teens 13+ in Google’s Play Store with no additional content warnings other than “Users Interact” and “In-App Purchases.”⁵⁰ We submit that this does little to describe the risks and potential harms that YouTube presents to teens.



Google Play advertises that YouTube is safe for “Teens” and only includes warnings about users interacting and in-app purchases.⁵¹

Although Google promotes YouTube Kids as a safer alternative, research shows it is effectively abandoned once children reach school age. 95 percent of kids ages 7 to 12 opened the regular YouTube app, while only 3 percent used YouTube Kids.⁵²

YouTube Kids is rated “E” for “Everyone” in the Google Play Store and is even marketed as “Teacher Approved,”⁵³ giving parents the impression that it is a safe and educational environment. In reality, that label is misleading. Investigations have uncovered harmful videos on YouTube Kids about drugs, guns, diet culture, skin bleaching, and overtly commercial or promotional content.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Beata Mostafavi, “Children Often Exposed to Problematic Clickbait during YouTube Searches | Pediatrics | Michigan Medicine,” University of Michigan Department of Pediatrics, May 31, 2024, <https://medicine.umich.edu/dept/pediatrics/news/archive/202405/children-often-exposed-problematic-clickbait-during-youtube-searches>.

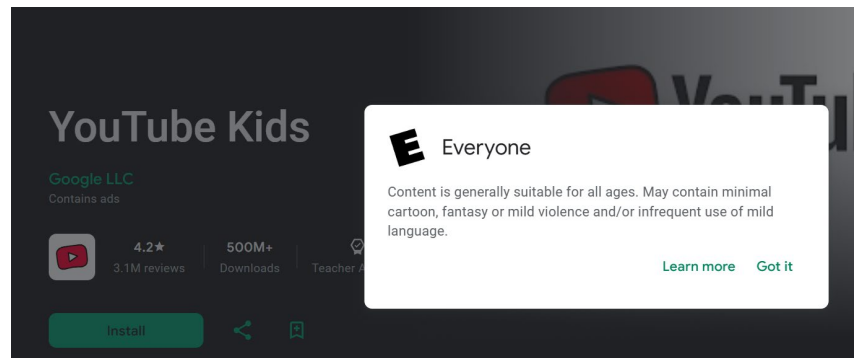
⁵⁰ “Youtube - Android Apps on Google Play,” Google.com, 2021, https://play.google.com/store/search?q=Youtube&c=apps&hl=en_US.

⁵¹ “YouTube - Apps on Google Play,” Google.com, 2001, https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.google.android.youtube&hl=en_US.

⁵² Sofia Coelho, “YouTube or YouTube Kids? Reaching the Right Audience Effectively and Safely,” Kidscorp, April 7, 2025, <https://kidscorp.digital/kidscorp-youtube-or-youtube-kids/>.

⁵³ Google LLC, “YouTube Kids,” Google Play, September 11, 2025, https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.google.android.apps.youtube.kids&hl=en_US.

⁵⁴ Tech Transparency Project, “TTP - Guns, Drugs, and Skin Bleaching: YouTube Kids Still Poses Risks to Children,” www.techtransparencyproject.org, May 5, 2022, <https://www.techtransparencyproject.org/articles/guns-drugs-and-skin-bleaching-youtube-kids-still-poses-risks-children>.

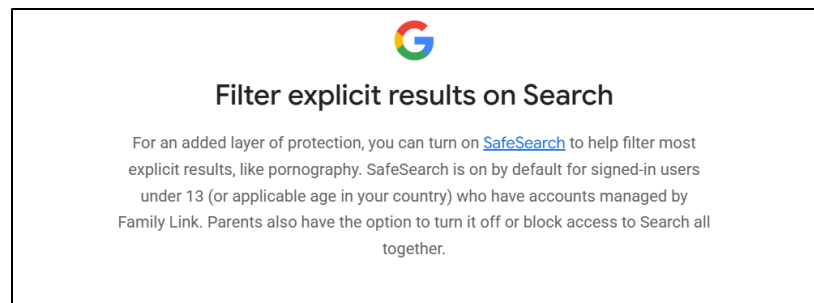


YouTube Kids is rated safe for “Everyone” and claims it is “Teacher Approved.”

ii. *Google Search: Opening the Door to Harmful Content for Kids*

Google’s search engine also contributes to systemic failures that endanger children and families. Millions of children spend their days “Googling” questions, yet it still fails to provide adequate protections for young users.

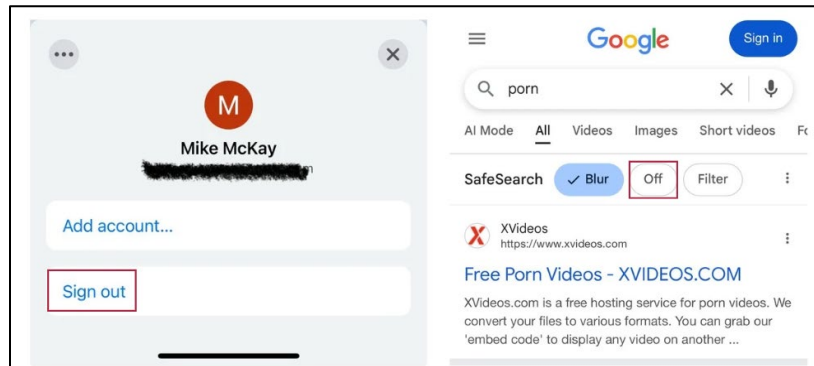
Even Google’s much-touted SafeSearch offers little real safety, since children can simply not log into their supervised accounts on their computers or iPhones. Obscene images that appear blurred in search results can then be revealed with just a few clicks, creating a loophole that evades both device-level filters and website-level age verification and leaves children exposed to harmful material. Children can also unilaterally choose to bypass parental controls as soon as they turn 13.⁵⁵ These conditions help to explain why 30% of children have encountered pornography on a search engine.⁵⁶



Google’s marketing materials explain how SafeSearch only protects signed-in users.

⁵⁵ Google, “Google’s Parental Controls - Google Safety Center,” safety.google, n.d., <https://safety.google/families/parental-supervision/>.

⁵⁶ Children's Commissioner, “Growing up with Pornography: Advice for Parents and Schools,” Children’s Commissioner for England, February 1, 2023, <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/blog/growing-up-with-pornography-advice-for-parents-and-schools/>.



Children can log out of their supervised accounts in seconds, turn off SafeSearch, and easily access obscene content. This tester account belongs to a 12-year-old.

Google is currently noncompliant with Utah’s Children’s Device Protection Act (CDPA). The law requires that any smartphone or tablet manufactured on or after January 1, 2025 and activated in Utah must include a filter that prevents the accessing or displaying of obscene material through any internet browser or search engine owned or controlled by the device manufacturer. The filter must be enabled by default when the user is a minor, and it may be deactivated only by a non-minor using a password.⁵⁷ A similar law also recently passed in Alabama.⁵⁸

For users over 13, Google does not require parental linkage, nor does it enable an obscene content filter secured by a passcode, despite having clear knowledge that the user is underage.⁵⁹ Large-scale studies confirm that a substantial share of minors are exposed to pornography through search engines, making this risk not hypothetical but highly plausible.

In August 2025, a bipartisan coalition of 47 state Attorneys General issued formal letters to Google, Microsoft, and Yahoo, urging them to “take more decisive action” against searches for deepfake pornography, nudify apps, and nonconsensual intimate imagery (NCII). The letters emphasized that search engines should not facilitate access to such harmful material and called on the companies to strengthen their safeguards to protect the public.⁶⁰ In the letter they noted

⁵⁷ Todd D. Weiler and Susan Pulsipher, “CHILDREN’S DEVICE PROTECTION ACT,” Pub. L. No. S.B. 104 (2024), <https://le.utah.gov/~2024/bills/static/SB0104.html>.

⁵⁸ Sen. Clyde Chambliss, “Consumer Protection; Filter Requirements on Internet Enabled Devices, Penalties for Violation,” No. S.B. 186 (2025) <https://alison.legislature.state.al.us/files/pdf/SearchableInstruments/2025RS/SB186-int.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Appendix B

⁶⁰ Lisa Jeter, “State and Territory Attorneys General Urge Tech and Payment Platforms to Address Deepfake Exploitation - National Association of Attorneys General,” National Association of Attorneys General, August 26, 2025, <https://www.naag.org/press-releases/state-and-territory-attorneys-general-urge-tech-and-payment-platforms-to-address-deepfake-exploitation/>.

that search engines “do not demonstrate any apparent effort to limit or redirect the results of these searches.”⁶¹

Two simple, common-sense steps would transform online safety overnight. First, make safety the default. Obscene images and websites should be blocked unless a user has been verified as an adult. This would close the loophole that allows kids to bypass filters just by signing out of their accounts. Such a requirement would be consistent with the Supreme Court’s recent decision in *Free Speech Coalition (FSC) v. Paxton* that states have a compelling interest in protecting minors from harmful content online and may require age verification to restrict their access to obscenity.⁶²

Second, every parent should be provided with a free, child-friendly browser as the default option for children under 18, with the choice to use a standard browser if they prefer. With safer, AI-powered browsers already on the market,⁶³ the technology to provide stronger, automatic protections for children already exists. This proposal is also consistent with the reasoning in the recent district court ruling on Google Chrome, which underscored how powerful default settings are in shaping user behavior.⁶⁴

C. Google’s Monopoly Power and a Deceptive Age Rating System

Google’s market capitalization is nearly \$3 trillion, placing it among the world’s top five largest corporations.⁶⁵ One source of Google’s profits is its Play Store, which, according to some estimates, generates almost \$50 billion in revenues for apps and games.⁶⁶ A jury found that Google was a monopolist in the sale of apps for Android phones such as Samsungs and Pixels.⁶⁷

In exchange for access to this marketplace, Google collects a substantial commission on each app sale and in-app purchase, typically 30 percent.⁶⁸ This percentage-based commission directly

⁶¹ National Association of Attorneys General to Tiffany Hall et al., “LTRS Combined Payment and Search Platform,” Letter, August 22, 2025.

⁶² *Free Speech Coalition, Inc. et al. v. Paxton, Attorney General Of Texas*, 606 U.S. 1-36 (2025).

⁶³ Angelq.ai, 2025, <https://www.angelq.ai/>.

⁶⁴ Office of Public Affairs, “Department of Justice Wins Significant Remedies against Google,” U.S. Department of Justice, September 2, 2025, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/departments-justice-wins-significant-remedies-against-google>.

⁶⁵ CompaniesMarketCap, “Alphabet (Google) (GOOG) - Market Capitalization,” companiesmarketcap.com, 2025, <https://companiesmarketcap.com/alphabet-google/marketcap/>.

⁶⁶ Stefan Larson, “Google Play Store Revenue, Ratings & Subscription Stats 2023,” Priori Data, January 7, 2025, <https://prioridata.com/data/google-play-revenue-statistics/>; “Google Play Store Statistics (2023),” Business of Apps, n.d., <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/google-play-statistics/>.

⁶⁷ Sean Hollister, “Epic Win: Jury Decides Google Has Illegal Monopoly in App Store Fight,” The Verge, December 11, 2023, <https://www.theverge.com/23994174/epic-google-trial-jury-verdict-monopoly-google-play>.

⁶⁸ Laura Ceci, “Revenue Split for App Stores Worldwide 2024,” Statista, October 8, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/975776/revenue-split-leading-digital-content-store-worldwide/>.

links Google's revenue with that of developers, creating incentives for Google to reduce its oversight and tolerate developers' harmful practices.⁶⁹

Once considered a relatively "open" ecosystem compared to Apple's, Android recently announced plans to restrict sideloading by requiring developer identity verification.⁷⁰ Beginning next year, every app on certified devices must be tied to a developer verified by Google. While sideloading remains technically possible, it is now subject to Google's mandatory gatekeeping, ensuring that no app can reach users without first passing through Google's developer verification system. This shift further locks in Google as the sole gatekeeper of the Android ecosystem, consolidating its monopoly power over which apps can access millions of devices.

Because Google developed and owns the operating system for Android smartphones and tablets, it has significant knowledge about each user before any Android app is downloaded. Most importantly, Google knows whether an Android user is an adult, a teen, or a child under 13.

When setting up a new account on an Android device, users are required to enter their date of birth. If the stated age is under 13, the account must be managed through Google's Family Link,⁷¹ which connects it to a parent or guardian.⁷²

Google requires that each developer agree to its Google Play Developers Distribution Agreement (GPDDA). The GPDDA empowers Google to act as the developers' "agent or marketplace service provider" to distribute the app through Google Play.⁷³ Through the GPDDA, Google requires the developer to make the apps available for sale to family groups.⁷⁴ Google obtains the right to use pictures of the app for "marketing the presence, distribution, and sale" of the app.⁷⁵ Google can run promotions on its Play Store for the app.⁷⁶ The GPDDA requires that the

⁶⁹ Francine Lafontaine and Margaret Slade, "Inter-Firm Contracts: Evidence," Economics.ubc.ca, April 2010, https://economics.ubc.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/38/2013/05/pdf_paper_margaret-slade-interfirm-contract.pdf.

⁷⁰ Suzanne Frey, "A New Layer of Security for Certified Android Devices," Android Developers Blog, 2025, <https://android-developers.googleblog.com/2025/08/elevating-android-security.html?m=1>.

⁷¹ "Create a Google Account for Your Child - Google for Families Help," Google.com, 2019, <https://support.google.com/families/answer/7103338>.

⁷² "Set up Parental Controls for Your Child - Google for Families Help," Google.com, 2019, <https://support.google.com/families/answer/16398726>.

⁷³ Google, "Google Play Developer Distribution Agreement," Google Play, February 5, 2024, Section 3.1, <https://play.google/developer-distribution-agreement.html>.

⁷⁴ Google, "Google Play Developer Distribution Agreement," Google Play, February 5, 2024, Section 5.3, <https://play.google/developer-distribution-agreement.html>.

⁷⁵ Google, "Google Play Developer Distribution Agreement," Google Play, February 5, 2024, Section 6.3, <https://play.google/developer-distribution-agreement.html>.

⁷⁶ Google, "Google Play Developer Distribution Agreement," Google Play, February 5, 2024, Section 7.1, <https://play.google/developer-distribution-agreement.html>.

developer abide by Google’s policies.⁷⁷ Among other things, those policies prohibit apps that sexualize minors,⁷⁸ or “promote sexual content.”⁷⁹

Google reserves the right, the company states, “to conduct its own review of the app information” that the developer provides to determine if it is “accurate.”⁸⁰ Yet, there is little evidence that Google has policed the age ratings. Taken together, these provisions show that Google has full knowledge of when a user is a child and full authority over how apps are marketed to them, but it chooses not to enforce that authority when doing so would reduce commercial benefits.

D. The International Age Ratings Coalition (IARC) Model: Quick, Automated, and Developer-Determined Ratings

Since 2015, Google has relied on the International Age Rating Coalition (IARC) to supply the age ratings it displays in the Play Store.⁸¹ The International Age Ratings Coalition was created in December of 2013.⁸² Less than a year later, Google published a blog post touting the system and pledging to adopt it.⁸³

According to its own description, “The IARC rating process is designed to be as quick and easy as possible”⁸⁴ by replacing traditional, stringent ratings processes with a self-administered questionnaire that can be completed by developers in minutes. While this arrangement is convenient and free for developers,⁸⁵ it lacks the independent scrutiny that parents reasonably expect from a trusted rating system.

According to IARC’s website, age ratings are assigned immediately after developers fill out a short form:

⁷⁷ Google, “Google Play Developer Distribution Agreement,” Google Play, February 5, 2024, Section 4.1, <https://play.google/developer-distribution-agreement.html>.

⁷⁸ “Child Endangerment - Play Console Help,” Google Support, 2019, <https://support.google.com/googleplay/android-developer/answer/9878809>.

⁷⁹ “Inappropriate Content - Play Console Help,” Google Support, 2019, https://support.google.com/googleplay/android-developer/answer/9878810?hl=en&ref_topic=9877466&sjid=6773585776055263932-NA.

⁸⁰ “Google Play Families Policies - Play Console Help,” Google Support, 2019, https://support.google.com/googleplay/android-developer/answer/9893335?hl=en&ref_topic=9877766&sjid=3892800301296822747-NA.

⁸¹ Beth Llewlyn, “ESRB Ratings Expand to Mobile via New Global Rating System,” Esrb.org, April 17, 2015, <https://www.esrb.org/blog/esrb-ratings-expand-to-mobile-via-new-global-rating-system/>.

⁸² Entertainment Software Rating Board, “Our History - ESRB Ratings,” ESRB Ratings, 2022, <https://www.esrb.org/history/>.

⁸³ Eunice Kim, “Creating Better User Experiences on Google Play,” Android Developers Blog, April 17, 2015, <https://android-developers.googleblog.com/2015/03/creating-better-user-experiences-on.html>.

⁸⁴ International Age Rating Coalition (IARC), “How Developers Can Get Their Games and Apps Rated with IARC,” www.globalratings.com, n.d., <https://www.globalratings.com/for-developers.aspx>.

⁸⁵ International Age Rating Coalition (IARC), “How Developers Can Get Their Games.”

“Once a developer completes the questionnaire, the ratings are issued immediately. The questionnaire is programmed with unique algorithms that assign ratings for each of the participating rating authorities which reflect their own distinct local standards about the age appropriateness of various content featured in the app. The length of time it takes to complete the questionnaire depends on how much ratings-pertinent content is in the game or app. For a game or app that contains very little pertinent content the questionnaire can be finished in a few minutes. If a game or app has more content - like violence, profanity, sexual content, nudity, gambling or other pertinent material - the questionnaire may take a few more minutes to complete.”⁸⁶

IARC ratings are presented in a way that makes them appear to come from the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), a trusted independent ratings system with more than three decades of credibility. The fonts, symbols, and overall design so closely mirror the ESRB’s system that parents could easily assume the ratings were issued by the ESRB itself. A cynic might conclude that the IARC deliberately structured its self-reported rating system to appropriate the appearance of rigor associated with the ESRB, while avoiding the independent and objective vetting that gives the ESRB’s ratings their hard-won credibility.

Because Google does not clearly disclose that many IARC ratings are generated through developer self-reporting with minimal oversight, the presentation creates a misleading impression. That omission is material to a reasonable parent’s decision and therefore deceptive under Section 5.

It is difficult to reconcile the ESRB’s decision to align with a system in which developers can obtain ratings within minutes without independent human review, particularly given that the ESRB board has already faced repeated public scrutiny and has vigorously defended its credibility against such attacks.⁸⁷ Public disclosures show that the President of the ESRB, Patricia Vance, also serves as the Founding Chair of IARC,⁸⁸ blurring the boundary between trusted independent oversight and an industry-driven ratings scheme.

In 2006, Ms. Vance, was called before Congress in the aftermath of the Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas “Hot Coffee” scandal. The controversy erupted when it was discovered that a hidden, sexually explicit mini game could be unlocked in the game, despite the title having been rated “Mature” rather than “Adults Only.”⁸⁹

⁸⁶ International Age Rating Coalition (IARC), “How Developers Can Get Their Games.”

⁸⁷ “ESRB Flunks National Institute for Media for Misleading Parents,” ESRB Ratings, December 6, 2005, <https://www.esrb.org/blog/esrb-flunks-national-institute-for-media-and-the-family-for-its-disservice-to-parents-and-their-children>.

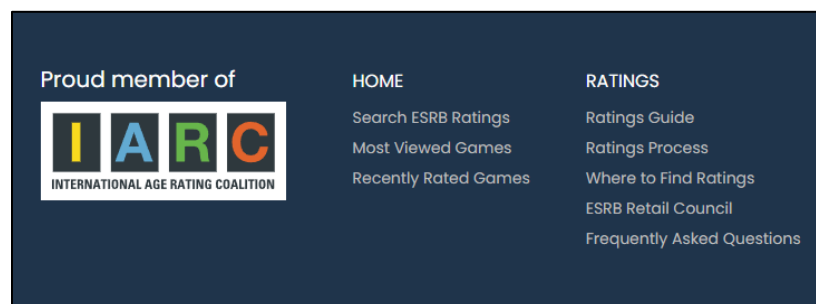
⁸⁸ “Patricia E. Vance,” ESRB Ratings, n.d., <https://www.esrb.org/team/patricia-e-vance/>.

⁸⁹ EXPRESSING SENSE OF THE HOUSE THAT THE FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION SHOULD

During these hearings, Ms. Vance defended the ESRB as a reliable and effective self-regulatory body, emphasizing its oversight mechanisms, including advertising and marketing compliance enforced through the ESRB's Advertising Review Council (ARC). By stressing these guardrails, she sought to reassure Congress that the industry's self-policing model was robust enough to protect children from inappropriate content without additional government regulation.⁹⁰

Adding to questions about independence, Ms. Vance also serves as the “longstanding director” of the Family Online Safety Institute (FOSI),⁹¹ an industry-friendly “online safety organization” that receives financial support from companies like Google, Apple, Roblox, CTIA, and TikTok.⁹² FOSI recently published a critical blog on the App Store Accountability Act, reflecting talking points commonly raised by Google, while citing an “Age Assurance Working Group”⁹³ made possible through funding from Google.⁹⁴

The ESRB displays the IARC logo on its website, showing that they are a “proud member of IARC.” IARC's incorporation can also be found on the ESRB's timeline.⁹⁵



The IARC logo appears at the bottom of ESRB.org.

The International Age Rating Coalition (IARC) reports only two paid employees on its Form 990. One of them, David Kassack, serves as Senior Vice President for both IARC and the

INVESTIGATE THE PUBLICATION OF THE VIDEO GAME "GRAND THEFT AUTO: SAN ANDREAS", HR 376, 109th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 151, pt. 102: H6401-H6405, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2005-07-25/html/CREC-2005-07-25-pt1-PgH6401.htm>.

⁹⁰ Tor Thorsen, “Views Clash at Senate Game Hearing,” GameSpot, April 3, 2006, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/views-clash-at-senate-game-hearing/1100-6146902/>.

⁹¹ “Patricia E. Vance,” Family Online Safety Institute, March 17, 2025, <https://fosi.org/people/patricia-e-vance/>.

⁹² “Home - Family Online Safety Institute,” Family Online Safety Institute, April 9, 2025, <https://fosi.org/>.

⁹³ Stephen Balkam, “FOSI Response to the App Store Accountability Act,” Family Online Safety Institute, May 7, 2025, <https://fosi.org/policy/fosi-response-to-the-app-store-accountability-act/>.

⁹⁴ Family Online Safety Institute, “Making Sense of Age Assurance: Enabling Safer Online Experiences,” Family Online Safety Institute, November 14, 2022, <https://fosi.org/research/making-sense-of-age-assurance-enabling-safer-online-experiences/>.

⁹⁵ Entertainment Software Rating Board, “Our History - ESRB Ratings.”

Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB).⁹⁶ In addition, both IARC and the ESRB use the same tax preparer for their filings.⁹⁷

The ESRB itself operates within the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), a powerful trade association that reported nearly \$40 million in revenue in 2023 and describes its mission on public tax disclosures as “...enhancing public trust in the industry.”⁹⁸

These complex cross-institutional relationships between these entities underscore the insufficiency of IARC’s standard practices, and, given the history of the institutions involved, it clearly knows better. The standard ESRB process that parents trust requires boxed games to submit a detailed questionnaire, provide gameplay footage, and undergo review by three trained raters. Even after release, games can be tested to verify that disclosures were accurate.⁹⁹ IARC bypasses these safeguards, allowing developers to effectively assign their own ratings behind the veneer of the ESRB brand.

IARC’s developer-driven questionnaire is effectively a rubber stamp and goes against the ESRB’s stated mission of consumer protection. By design, the system reduces scrutiny, lowers costs for industry, and enables misleading ratings to be presented as independent oversight. IARC’s own Form 990 filings state that its mission is to provide “a streamlined system for app and game developers to obtain age ratings that consumers recognize and trust.”¹⁰⁰

Just this month, Roblox announced that it was adopting the IARC rating system amidst a firestorm of controversy over child sexual exploitation and ongoing lawsuits. Roblox’s Chief Safety Officer Matt Kaufman claimed: “Roblox is committed to creating a safe platform for our users and empowering parents to make the best decision for their children. We’re excited to partner with IARC and hope it will provide parents globally with more clarity and confidence regarding age-appropriate content.”¹⁰¹

Under IARC’s system, 90 percent of Google’s apps are rated as appropriate for everyone, 7 percent as appropriate for Teens, 2 percent as Mature, and 0 percent as Adult Only.¹⁰² The system

⁹⁶ “David Kassack,” ESRB Ratings, February 23, 2023, <https://www.esrb.org/team/david-kassack/>.

⁹⁷ United States, Internal Revenue Service, *Return of International Age Rating Coalition Exempt From Income Tax (Form 990)*, for tax year 2023,

<https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/472494638/202530449349301508/full>; United States, Internal Revenue Service, *Return of Entertainment Software Association Exempt From Income Tax (Form 990)*, for tax year 2023, <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/133768378/202500449349301105/full>.

⁹⁸ United States, Internal Revenue Service, *Return of Entertainment Software Association*, 2023.

⁹⁹ ESRB, “Ratings Process - ESRB Ratings,” ESRB Ratings, 2019, <https://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings-process/>.

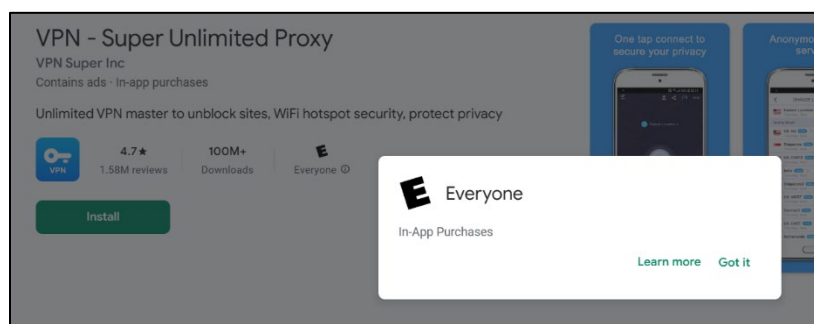
¹⁰⁰ United States, Internal Revenue Service, *Return of International Age Rating*, 2023.

¹⁰¹ Roblox and IARC, “Roblox Partners with IARC to Enhance Global Age and Content Ratings,” Businesswire, September 3, 2025, <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20250903736247/en/Roblox-Partners-With-IARC-to-Enhance-Global-Age-and-Content-Ratings>.

¹⁰² 42matters, “Google Play App Content Rating Statistics 2021,” September 6, 2025, <https://42matters.com/google-play-app-content-rating-statistics>.

appears to incentivize developers to downplay or misrepresent app risks to reach a broader, younger audience. One developer on Reddit explained that “if your app has the ability to display porn” just “don’t flag the app as sexually explicit” and then “you will be good to go.”¹⁰³

Unlike boxed games rated through the ESRB, the Google Play Store provides virtually no additional detail about the nature of game or app content beyond the bare age rating, as illustrated in this screenshot of a top VPN listing.¹⁰⁴ Beyond masking location, VPNs can also enable children to bypass parental controls, access age-restricted content, and expose themselves to privacy and safety risks. Such minimal disclosure fails to equip parents with the information necessary to make informed decisions and cannot reasonably be described as informed consent.



This VPN provides virtually no clear explanation of its inherent risks, offering only the generic designation of “E for Everyone.”¹⁰⁵

When comparing the IARC rating disclosure to one found online for a standard ESRB-rated video game, like the one below for Grand Theft Auto V,¹⁰⁶ it becomes clear how the IARC provides minimal critical information. Parents who are accustomed to the detailed ESRB format are left uninformed and misled by IARC’s limited representation of app content.

¹⁰³ U/alexgophermix, “Beware of the Content Rating Questionnaire,” *Reddit*, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/androiddev/comments/4uvyxw/beware_of_the_content_rating_questionnaire/?rdt=38566.

¹⁰⁴ Google Play, “VPN - Super Unlimited Proxy,” Google, 2021, https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.free.vpn.super.hotspot.open&hl=en_US.

¹⁰⁵ Google Play, “VPN - Super Unlimited Proxy,” 2021.

¹⁰⁶ ESRB, “Grand Theft Auto V,” ESRB Ratings, n.d., <https://www.esrb.org/ratings/38445/grand-theft-auto-v/>.



Blood and Gore, Intense Violence,
Mature Humor, Nudity, Strong
Language, Strong Sexual Content,
Use of Drugs and Alcohol

Users Interact
In-Game Purchases

ESRB-rated games provide parents with an easy-to-understand, reliable “nutrition label” of a game’s contents, enabling them to quickly determine whether a title is appropriate for their child.¹⁰⁷

Rating Summary

Grand Theft Auto V is rated M for Mature 17+ by the ESRB with Blood and Gore, Intense Violence, Mature Humor, Nudity, Strong Language, Strong Sexual Content, and Use of Drugs and Alcohol. Also includes Users Interact and In-Game Purchases. In this open-world action game, players assume the roles of three criminals whose storylines intersect within the fictional city of Los Santos. Players can switch between each character to follow his storyline, completing missions which often include criminal activities (e.g., stealing cars, executing heists, assassinating targets). Players mostly use pistols, machine guns, sniper rifles, and explosives to kill various enemies (e.g., rival gang members); players also have the ability to attack/kill non-adversary civilians, though this may negatively affect players' progress as a penalty system triggers a broad police search. Blood-splatter effects occur frequently, and the game contains rare depictions of dismemberment. In one sequence, players are directed to use various instruments and means (e.g., pipe wrench, tooth removal, electrocution) to extract information from a character; the sequence is intense and prolonged, and involves some player interaction (i.e., responding to on-screen prompts). The game includes depictions of sexual material/activity: implied fellatio and masturbation; various sex acts (sometimes from a close-up or first-person perspective) that the player procures from a prostitute—while no nudity is depicted in these sequences, various sexual moaning sounds can be heard. Nudity is present, however, in other settings (e.g., a topless lap dance in a strip club; a man with exposed genitalia in a non-sexual context). Within the game, some cutscenes, TV programs, and radio ads contain instances of mature humor: myriad sex jokes; depictions of raw sewage and feces on a worker's body; caricatures of ethnic/racial groups. Some sequences within the larger game allow players' character to use drugs (e.g., smoking from a bong, lighting a marijuana joint, hallucinating from peyote); cocaine use is also depicted. Players' character can, at various times, consume alcohol and drive while under the influence. The words “f**k,” “c*nt,” and “n*gger” can be heard in the dialogue.

For parents seeking more detail, many ESRB-rated games include an independent, plain-language description of exactly what the player will encounter.¹⁰⁸

A 2023 Royal Society Open Science study found that industry self-regulation of “loot box” labeling is failing. On Google Play, where IARC governs ratings, 71 percent of popular games with loot boxes lacked the required warning label, leaving most high-grossing titles undisclosed.

¹⁰⁷ ESRB, “Call of Duty®: Black Ops 7,” ESRB Ratings, 2017, <https://www.esrb.org/ratings/40736/call-of-duty-black-ops-7/>.

¹⁰⁸ ESRB, “Grand Theft Auto V.”

Loot boxes are randomized in-game reward containers that players purchase or earn, often compared to gambling because their contents are uncertain. The report highlights major inconsistencies and shows that current policies do not adequately protect consumers.¹⁰⁹

On their website, the ESRB claims:

“Through a combination of post-release testing and monitoring of public comments, ESRB verifies that all content pertinent to a rating has been reviewed. Should we find that a game or app has been assigned a rating based on incomplete or inaccurate content disclosure, we work to ensure that the rating is promptly corrected wherever it is displayed to consumers, be it a game box, an advertisement, or an online or mobile storefront. For physical (boxed) games, failure to disclose pertinent content during the rating process may also be addressed with formal sanctions and penalties.”¹¹⁰

What the ESRB means by “monitoring public comments” is undefined, particularly when social media platforms dominate headlines almost daily over risks to teens, yet nearly every major social media app in the Google Play Store still carries a “Teen” rating.

In the era of AI, it is reasonable to expect that Google or IARC would employ such tools to systematically review apps at scale, flagging those that merit human evaluation. Instead, it defers almost entirely to developer self-reporting. This lack of oversight allows errors and mislabeling to persist, leaving consumers, especially children, without the protections the rating system is supposed to guarantee.

II. Core Violations

This complaint urges the Commission to investigate five core violations, all arising from Google’s deliberate design of an app marketplace that profits from children while evading accountability. The remainder of this filing closely follows the structure of our Apple complaint, with adjustments specific to Google’s practices.

Knowingly Marketing Harmful or Age-Restricted Apps as Safe for Kids: Google falsely markets and distributes apps containing adult, violent, and sexually explicit content as appropriate for minors. It routinely advertises lower age ratings than those required by an app’s own terms of service or privacy policies, despite likely knowing that the rating is inaccurate and misleading. By accepting and promoting developer-assigned ratings without independent verification, Google exposes children to serious harm while profiting from downloads,

¹⁰⁹ Leon Y. Xiao, “Beneath the Label: Unsatisfactory Compliance with ESRB, PEGI and IARC Industry Self-Regulation Requiring Loot Box Presence Warning Labels by Video Game Companies,” Royal Society Open Science 10, no. 3 (March 29, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.230270>.

¹¹⁰ ESRB, “Frequently Asked Questions,” ESRB Ratings, September 9, 2021, <https://www.esrb.org/faqs/#how-does-the-esrb-know-companies-have-fully-disclosed-all-of-the-content-in-their-game-or-app-and-what-happens-if-they-dont>

advertising, and in-app purchases. This conduct constitutes a deceptive and unfair practice in violation of Section 5 of the FTC Act.

Other Deceptive Safety Claims and the Failure of Google’s Parental Controls: Google advertises Family Link as a way for parents to “set digital ground rules,” “approve or block apps,” and “help guide your child as they learn, play, and explore online.” Yet, on a child’s 13th birthday, Google allows a child to unilaterally remove parental supervision entirely,¹¹¹ undermining the very protections it markets to families. By allowing a child to terminate oversight at a critical stage of development, Google negates its own promises of safety and gives parents a false sense of security, making these assurances deceptive under consumer protection standards. Additionally, even with all parental controls properly engaged, hidden in-app browsers often bypass restrictions, exposing minors to harmful content such as pornography.¹¹² This design flaw leaves children vulnerable at the very moment parents believe they are protected.

Unfair Trade Practices Involving Exploitative Contracting with Minors: Google knowingly facilitates exploitative digital contracts between children and app developers through its Play Store. These clickwrap agreements, which minors must accept to download or use an app, often include mandatory arbitration clauses and sweeping data licenses that grant developers access to sensitive information such as location data, contact lists, photos, camera, and microphone.¹¹³ Google enables children to enter into these contracts even when it knows the user is a minor and therefore lacks legal capacity to consent to such complex and binding terms. Parents are frequently excluded from this contracting process and given no meaningful opportunity to review or prevent these one-sided agreements. By facilitating exploitative contracting with minors and profiting from the resulting app distribution, Google engages in unfair practices in violation of Section 5 of the FTC Act.

Widespread Violations of the Children’s Online Privacy Protections Act (COPPA): A 2025 study found that 67 percent of Android apps could be misrepresenting data collection practices.¹¹⁴ Many of these apps are labeled for “Everyone” or certified by Google’s Family program, creating the false impression of compliance. By distributing and profiting from these apps while failing to require verifiable parental consent for children under 13, Google knowingly

¹¹¹ “How Google Accounts Work When Children Turn 13 (or the Applicable Age in Your Country) - Google for Families Help,” Google.com, 2019, <https://support.google.com/families/answer/7106787?hl=en#zippy=%2Cwhen-children-decide-to-take-full-responsibility-for-their-account-and-stop-supervision>.

¹¹² Chris McKenna, “How to Protect Kids from Porn,” Afterbabel.com (After Babel, July 17, 2025), <https://www.afterbabel.com/p/how-protect-kids-from-porn>.

¹¹³ Sherrod Degrippe, “Understanding the Information TikTok Gathers and Stores | Proofpoint US,” Proofpoint, January 8, 2020, <https://www.proofpoint.com/us/blog/threat-protection/understanding-information-tiktok-gathers-and-stores>.

¹¹⁴ Rawan Baalous et al., “Detecting the Inconsistency between Android Apps’ Data Collection and Google Play’s Data Safety Using Static Analysis,” *Cybernetics and Information Technologies* 25, no. 1 (March 1, 2025): 110–25, <https://doi.org/10.2478/cait-2025-0007>.

facilitates unlawful data collection and engages in deceptive practices in violation of 16 C.F.R. §312 and Section 5 of the FTC Act.¹¹⁵

Violation of the 2014 FTC Consent Decree on In-App Purchases: Google continues to bill parents for in-app purchases made by minors without obtaining express and informed parental consent in violation of the 2014 FTC consent decree.¹¹⁶ Despite being under federal order, Google permits children to initiate purchases within Play Store apps with inadequate safeguards and allows parents to disable consent mechanisms intended to protect very young children. In addition, Google does not require children over the age of 13 to remain linked to a parent account, thereby removing any effective means of ensuring parental consent.

A. Knowingly Marketing Harmful or Age-Restricted Apps as Safe for Kids

As discussed earlier, we have warned Apple and Google that their app ratings were false and harmful to children. Despite those warnings, Google continues to act deceptively and unfairly.

Other nonprofit and news organizations have also warned Google that its app age ratings are deceptive. For example, the Canadian Centre for Child Protection published a report in 2022, finding that Google markets apps such as Threesome, Kinkoo, and Hinge as appropriate for 17-year-olds, even though the developers of those apps stated in their terms of service that the user needed to be 18 to use the app.¹¹⁷

One technology executive complained that Google allowed underage users to download apps, even when it was clear from the user's stated age on the device that the child's age was well below the age the developer had set in its terms of service.¹¹⁸ The Canadian Centre found that when a child searches on Google's Play Store, Google will promote apps to that child that are rated for far older teens and even adults.¹¹⁹

Google's deceptive age ratings violate the law. Deceptive practices are those that are likely to mislead a consumer who is acting reasonably under the circumstances. As explained by the Seventh Circuit in *Porter & Deitsch v. FTC*, a retailer can be liable for false statements about products it sells and advertises.¹²⁰ Google unlawfully deceives the public about the safety of products it chooses to sell and advertise.

¹¹⁵ Federal Trade Commission, "Google and YouTube Will Pay Record \$170 Million for Alleged Violations of Children's Privacy Law," Federal Trade Commission, September 4, 2019, <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/news/press-releases/2019/09/google-youtube-will-pay-record-170-million-alleged-violations-childrens-privacy-law>.

¹¹⁶ Compl., *FTC v. Apple Inc.*, FTC Docket No. C-112-3108 <https://www.ftc.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cases/140115applecmpt.pdf>.

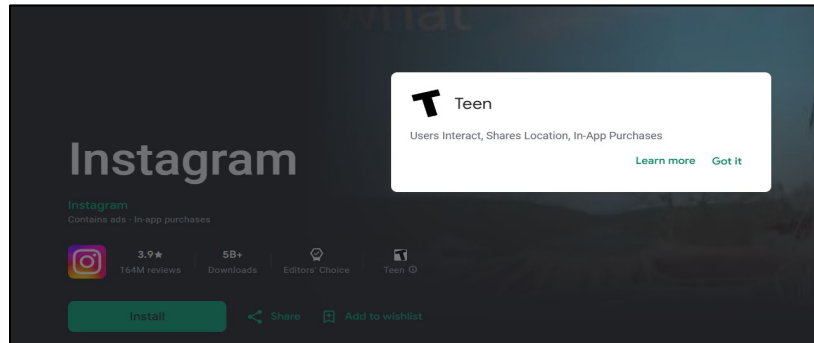
¹¹⁷ Canadian Centre for Child Protection, "Reviewing the Enforcement of App Age Ratings in Apple's App Store and Google Play," 2022, https://content.c3p.ca/pdfs/C3P_AppAgeRatingReport_en.pdf.

¹¹⁸ Canadian Centre for Child Protection, "Reviewing the Enforcement of App Age Ratings," 2022.

¹¹⁹ Canadian Centre for Child Protection, "Reviewing the Enforcement of App Age Ratings," 2022.

¹²⁰ *Porter & Deitsch v. FTC*, 605 F.2d 294, 308-09 (7th Cir. 2019)

On the Play Store, Google misleads parents about the safety of nearly every major social media app. Instagram has been in the headlines repeatedly for exposing teens to sextortion,¹²¹ enabling chatbots willing to discuss sex with children,¹²² and fueling eating disorders and body-image harms.¹²³ Despite this well-documented record, Google presents Instagram in the Play Store with age ratings and descriptions that suggest it is broadly appropriate for teens, even highlighting it as an “Editors’ Choice,” giving parents a false sense of security and downplaying the serious risks this platform poses.¹²⁴



Google Play advertises that Instagram is safe for “Teens” and only includes warnings about users interacting, location sharing, and in-app purchases.¹²⁵

A further click on the “Learn More” about the Teen content rating takes you to a Google page where it says it uses content ratings to “help you understand an app’s maturity,” but that the ratings are the “responsibility of the app developer and IARC.”¹²⁶

¹²¹ Olivia Carville, “Instagram Video Warns Teens about Sextortion,” Bloomberg, October 17, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-10-17/-let-s-talk-about-sextortion-instagram-warns-teens-of-cybercrime>.

¹²² Jeff Horwitz, “Meta’s ‘Digital Companions’ Will Talk Sex with Users—Even Children,” The Wall Street Journal, April 27, 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/tech/ai/meta-ai-chatbots-sex-a25311bf>.

¹²³ “Exploring the Effect of Social Media on Teen Girls’ Mental Health | Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health,” Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, September 14, 2023, <https://hsph.harvard.edu/news/exploring-the-effect-of-social-media-on-teen-girls-mental-health/>.

¹²⁴ Google Play, “Instagram,” n.d., https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.instagram.android&hl=en_US.

¹²⁵ Google Play, “Instagram.”

¹²⁶ Google, “Apps and Games Content Ratings on Google Play - Google Play Help,” 2019, https://support.google.com/googleplay/answer/6209544?visit_id=638895679712456672-947692525&p=appgame_ratings&rd=1.

Apps & Games content ratings on Google Play

Content ratings for apps and games help you understand an app's maturity.

Ratings are the responsibility of the app developers and the International Age Rating Coalition (IARC). In South Korea, ratings have been approved by the Game Rating Administration Committee (GRAC).

Google claims that IARC and app developers are the ones responsible for making sure app age ratings are accurate.¹²⁷

BeReal is a social media app that allows the sharing of photos that disappear after 24 hours. One study found that 59 percent of its users have been exposed to sexual content.¹²⁸ Google, however, rates the app as an “Editors’ Choice” that is appropriate for teens as young as 13.¹²⁹

Additionally, reviewers have found that TikTok contains “frequent or intense mature or suggestive content.” The app poses risks to minors, including allowing the “choking challenge” and other “challenges” to go viral, which have resulted in the death of several children and teens.¹³⁰ State attorneys general have investigated its age rating, demanding that it be rated 17+, and over a dozen states have sued TikTok for designing its platform to be addictive and harmful to the mental health of children.¹³¹

As seen in the screenshot below, TikTok’s own terms of service prohibit teens under 18 from accessing the app without parental consent.¹³² As written, TikTok places the onus on children, the least equipped to navigate pages of legalese, to secure informed parental consent for a legally binding contract, a burden that no company like TikTok or Google should allow. Regulators could deem this an inherently unfair and deceptive practice.

¹²⁷ Google, “Apps and Games Content Ratings on Google Play - Google Play Help,” 2019, https://support.google.com/googleplay/answer/6209544?visit_id=638895679712456672-947692525&p=appgame_ratings&rd=1.

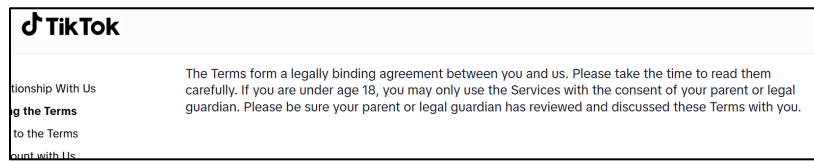
¹²⁸ Kyla Ford, “The Most Dangerous Apps of 2024 - Educate Empower Kids,” Educate Empower Kids, February 14, 2024, <https://educateempowerkids.org/the-most-dangerous-apps-of-2024/>.

¹²⁹ Google Play, “BeReal. Your Friends for Real.,” n.d., https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.bereal.ft&hl=en_US.

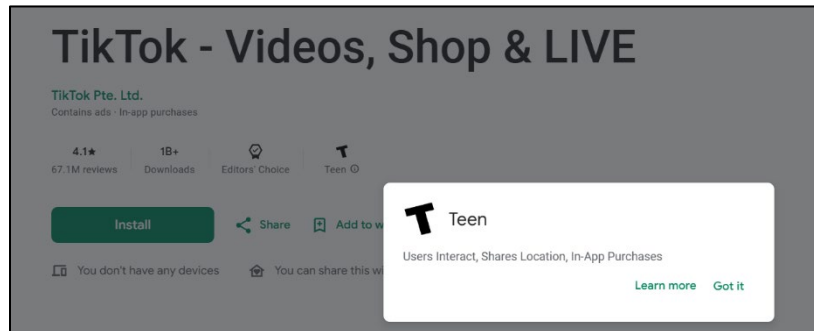
¹³⁰ Gigen Mammoser, “Dangerous Social Media ‘Blackout Challenge’ Can Cause Brain Damage, Death in Less than 5 Minutes,” Healthline, September 9, 2024, <https://www.healthline.com/health-news/tiktok-blackout-challenge>.

¹³¹ Bobby Allyn, “More than a Dozen States Sue TikTok, Alleging It Harms Kids and Is Designed to Addict Them,” NPR, October 8, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/10/08/g-s1-26823/states-sue-tiktok-child-safety-mental-health>.

¹³² TikTok, “Terms of Service | TikTok,” February 2019, <https://www.tiktok.com/legal/page/us/terms-of-service/en>.



TikTok’s own Terms of Service warns users that their terms represent a “legally binding agreement” and that parental consent is required.¹³³



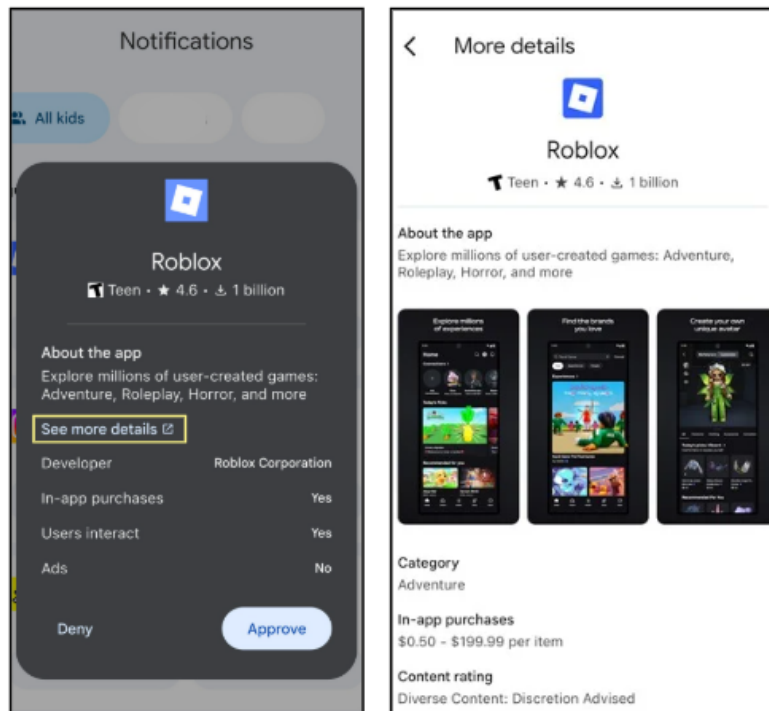
Google promotes TikTok with its “Editors’ Choice” award and rates the app as appropriate for users as young as 13, yet it fails to disclose information regarding the nature of TikTok’s content and the consent restrictions imposed by its own terms of service.¹³⁴

Video games can also carry wildly deceptive age ratings. Roblox has recently been in the headlines due to a lawsuit filed by the Louisiana Attorney General and growing concerns about the risks it poses to children.¹³⁵ Yet on the Google Play Store, the app is rated as safe for “Teens.” The “Require Approval” Android interface provides parents with virtually no information about what their child might experience.

¹³³ Google Play, “Instagram.”

¹³⁴ Google Play, “TikTok,” n.d., https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.zhiliaoapp.musically&hl=en_US.

¹³⁵ Jay Peters, “Louisiana Sues Roblox for Creating an Environment Where ‘Child Predators Thrive,’” The Verge, August 15, 2025, <https://www.theverge.com/news/760162/roblox-louisiana-lawsuit-child-predators-safety>.



Google Play advertises that Roblox is safe for “Teens” and only includes warnings about “Diverse Content, Discretion Advised.”

According to the Louisiana lawsuit, Roblox exposes children to anonymous interactions with adult predators, so-called “condo games” simulating sexual activity, user-generated content amounting to child sexual abuse material, and violent roleplay scenarios including rape simulations, all of which have been repeatedly exploited to groom and harm minors.¹³⁶

The Roblox rating appears to have been removed from the ESRB website. In August 2025, the ESRB president, also the Founding Chair of IARC (as mentioned above), published a standalone blog titled, “*What Parents Need to Know About Roblox.*”



ESRB Blog, written by Ms. Vance, downplays the risks of Roblox.

¹³⁶ Liz Murrill, State of Louisiana v. Roblox Corporation (2025).
https://d31hzhk6di2h5.cloudfront.net/20250814/5a/9b/81/2d/8841941ace76f62aa23238b8/Roblox_Lawsuit.pdf.

The Roblox blog adopts a reassuring, almost whimsical tone in its overview of the platform, conspicuously omitting the wave of alarming incidents that the app has caused, as well as its ongoing legal challenges.

Ms. Vance states:

“The main purpose of Roblox is for kids to have fun, but there are other benefits, including teaching kids the basics of coding, game design, and (for kids that want to try their hand at selling their creations) entrepreneurship. Who knows, it may even inspire a career in STEAM when they grow up!”

Certainly, both Google and the ESRB are aware of the controversy around Roblox, and yet neither is acting to update the rating or content warnings despite the ESRB’s promise to ensure that inaccurate ratings are promptly corrected wherever it is displayed to consumers, “be it a game box, an advertisement, or an online or mobile storefront”¹³⁷ through their partnership with IARC. They have taken little action to remedy the damages they have caused or prevent further such damages in the future. Instead, Roblox quickly joined the ranks of IARC users who enjoy the veneer of legitimacy conferred by the rating system, while evading any meaningful oversight or accountability.

Studies show that almost two out of three parents consider the age rating of an app when deciding if it is appropriate and safe for their child.¹³⁸ Google understands this and states that “[c]ontent ratings are used to inform consumers, especially parents, of potentially objectionable content that exists within an app.”¹³⁹

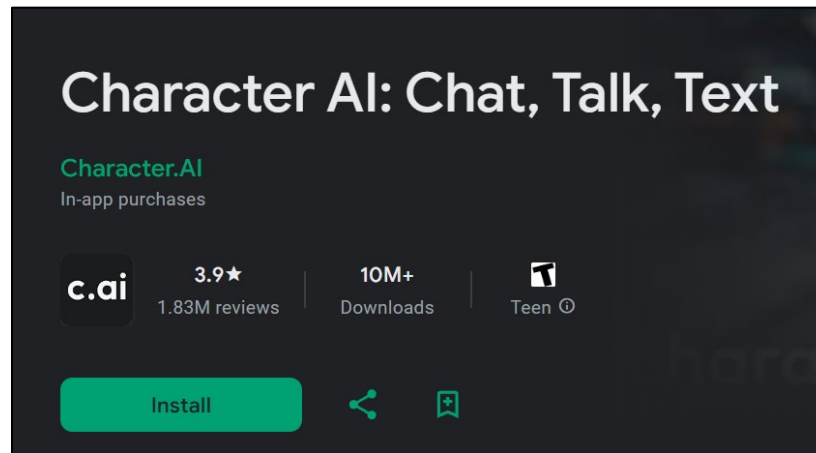
The age ratings are especially problematic for apps that rely on AI or algorithms to deliver content. Google’s and IARC’s questionnaire model may be reasonably suited for rating a static work such as a movie, book, or video game, where every user encounters the same material. But AI chatbots and social media platforms operate differently, using algorithms to generate or curate individualized streams of content. Such apps should also be required to implement safety-by-default features based on the user’s age, ensuring that the advertised age rating aligns with the actual experience and preventing parents from being misled by deceptive ratings.

¹³⁷ ESRB, “Frequently Asked Questions: How Does the ESRB Know Companies Have Fully Disclosed All of the Content in Their Game or App, and What Happens If They Don’t?,” ESRB Ratings, September 9, 2021, <https://www.esrb.org/faqs/#how-does-the-esrb-know-companies-have-fully-disclosed-all-of-the-content-in-their-game-or-app-and-what-happens-if-they-dont>.

¹³⁸ C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, “Sharing Too Soon? Children and Social Media Apps,” October 18, 2021, <https://mottpoll.org/reports/sharing-too-soon-children-and-social-media-apps>.

¹³⁹ Google, “Content Ratings - Play Console Help,” 2019, <https://support.google.com/googleplay/android-developer/answer/9898843?hl=en>.

Google and Character AI were recently named in a lawsuit alleging negligence in connection with the suicide of a 13-year-old girl. In August 2024, Google entered a “non-exclusive license agreement” with Character AI for its technology and hired Character AI’s cofounders.¹⁴⁰ Despite the app’s documented risks, Character AI is listed in the Google Play Store as appropriate for “Teens.” In response, Google has attempted to disclaim responsibility by asserting that age ratings on its platform are set by the International Age Rating Coalition (IARC), not by Google itself.¹⁴¹



Google Play advertises that Character AI is rated safe for “Teens.”¹⁴²

Google rates as “E” for “Everyone” the app “Amor AI: Sweetie AI Lovers.” The AI character has a “juicy” mode, and ad materials show the AI character teasing to see what is “inside the user’s pants.”¹⁴³ According to the Google Play store listing, over 100,000 copies of the app have been downloaded.¹⁴⁴ There is no justification for Google and IARC telling parents that the app is appropriate for everyone, including 4-year-olds.

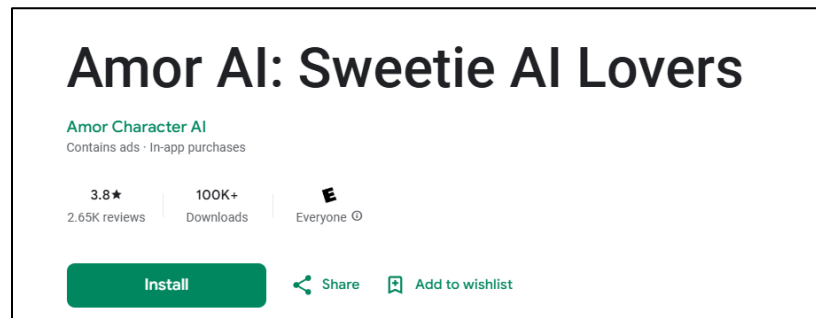
¹⁴⁰ Beatrice Nolan, “Google Is Tangled in a Chatbot Startup’s Lawsuit over a Teen’s Suicide,” Business Insider, October 28, 2024, <https://www.businessinsider.com/character-ai-chatbot-teen-suicide-lawsuit-google-2024-10>.

¹⁴¹ Nitasha Tiku, “A Teen Contemplating Suicide Turned to a Chatbot. Is It Liable for Her Death?,” The Washington Post, September 16, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2025/09/16/character-ai-suicide-lawsuit-new-juliana/>.

¹⁴² Google Play, “Character AI: Chat, Talk, Text,” September 3, 2025, https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=ai.character.app&hl=en_US.

¹⁴³ Google Play, “Amor AI: Sweetie AI Lovers,” 2021, https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.cocoai.aigf&hl=en_US.

¹⁴⁴ Google Play, “Spicy Chat: AI boy & girl,” 2025, https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=ai.spicy.spicychat.mate&hl=en_US.



Google Play advertises Amor AI: Sweetie AI Lovers as safe for “Everyone.”¹⁴⁵



Amor AI: Sweetie AI Lovers, rated safe for “Everyone,” teases the user that “I like what I can’t see now in those pants.”¹⁴⁶

One recent analysis found that 45 percent of the top 500 grossing apps have app store age ratings lower than the age required in their terms of service, and 74 percent have ratings lower than their stated privacy policies require.¹⁴⁷ When reviewing these statistics, Good Law Project stated, “These tech giants are refusing to do the right thing and act, simply because it is so lucrative not to do so.” The Executive Director of 5Rights, a UK based child safety group, commented how, “It is unfathomable how Apple and Google can so blatantly mislead consumers.”¹⁴⁸

The mismatch between Play Store ratings and corporate policies is not a minor oversight but a structural failure that amounts to consumer deception. It is unreasonable to expect children or

¹⁴⁵ Google Play, “Amor AI: Sweetie AI Lovers,” 2021.

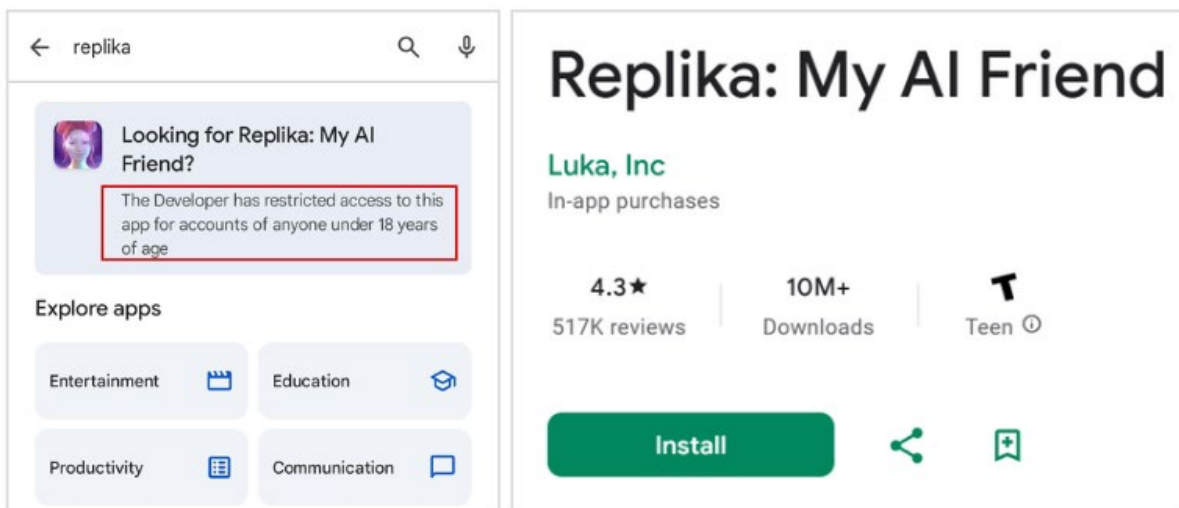
¹⁴⁶ Google Play, “Amor AI: Sweetie AI Lovers,” 2021.

¹⁴⁷ Mark Sellman, “Four-Year-Olds ‘Exploited’ by Tech Giants’ App Store Age Ratings,” The Times, June 30, 2025, <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/technology-uk/article/four-year-olds-exploited-by-tech-giants-app-store-age-ratings-6txf0z0zr>.

¹⁴⁸ Mark Sellman, “Four-Year Olds ‘Exploited,’” 2025.

parents to wade through dozens of pages of legal terms and privacy policies to uncover the true age requirements of an app. By advertising one age on the Play Store while burying stricter requirements in fine print, Apple and Google present a false picture of safety that misleads consumers and maximizes profit.

The solution is simple. App stores should automatically restrict the download of any app for users under the age stated in the app's own terms of service or privacy policy. Anything less is deceptive advertising, and regulators should treat these practices as violations of consumer protection law. Google recently restricted access to Replika at the developer's request while the company is under active investigation,¹⁴⁹ yet also failed to revise the app's rating from "Teen" to "18+."¹⁵⁰



Replika restricted access to its app for anyone under 18, though it is still rated as “Teen.”¹⁵¹

B. Google Deceptively Markets The Safety Of Its Parental Controls

In addition to displaying misleading app age ratings, Google deceptively tells parents: “We help you manage what’s right for your family online.”¹⁵² It claims that its parental controls “help keep your family safer online,”¹⁵³ and that they “build family-friendly experiences.”¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁹ Andrew R Chow, “AI Companion App Replika Faces FTC Complaint,” TIME, January 28, 2025, <https://time.com/7209824/replika-ftc-complaint/>.

¹⁵⁰ Google Play, “Replika: My AI Friend,” 2021, https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=ai.replika.app&hl=en_US.

¹⁵¹ Google Play, “Replika: My AI Friend.”

¹⁵² Google, “Online Safety for Children & Families - Google Safety Center,” n.d., <https://safety.google/families/>.

¹⁵³ Google, “Online Safety for Children & Families.”

¹⁵⁴ Google, “Online Safety for Children & Families.”

Building family-friendly experiences across our products.

Google claims they build “family-friendly” experiences across their products.¹⁵⁵

Google understands that “parents are looking for safe, high-quality content to share with their children.”¹⁵⁶ It agrees that app ratings “are meant to help consumers, especially parents, identify whether an app is appropriate.”¹⁵⁷

Google Play Families Policies

Help us improve this policy article by taking a [2-minute survey](#).

The use of technology as a tool for enriching families' lives continues to grow, and parents are looking for safe, high-quality content to share with their children. You may be designing your apps specifically for children or your app may just attract their attention. Google Play wants to help you make sure your app is safe for all users, including families.

The word “children” can mean different things in different locales and in different contexts. It is important that you consult with your legal counsel to help determine what obligations and/or age-based restrictions may apply to your app. You know best how your app works so we are relying on you to help us make sure apps on Google Play are safe for families.

Google claims that the word “children” can mean different things in different contexts.¹⁵⁸

As mentioned previously, Google undermines the very purpose of parental controls by treating 13-year-olds as if they are consenting adults and allowing them to unilaterally remove supervision.¹⁵⁹ As reflected in its own disclosures, Google asserts that “children can mean different things in different locales and legal contexts.” This gap underscores a fundamental misapplication of COPPA. The statute defines “children” only for the limited purpose of

¹⁵⁵ Google, “Online Safety for Children & Families.”

¹⁵⁶ Google, “Google Play Families Policies - Play Console Help,” 2019, https://support.google.com/googleplay/android-developer/answer/9893335?hl=en&ref_topic=9877766&sjid=3892800301296822747-NA.

¹⁵⁷ Google, “Requirements Related to Content Ratings for Apps, Games and the Ads Served on Both - Play Console Help,” 2019, <https://support.google.com/googleplay/android-developer/answer/9859655?hl=en>.

¹⁵⁸ Google Support, “Google Play Families Policies - Play Console Help,” Google.com, 2019, <https://support.google.com/googleplay/android-developer/answer/9893335?hl=en>.

¹⁵⁹ Google, “How Google Accounts Work When Children Turn 13 (or the Applicable Age in Your Country) - Google for Families Help,” n.d., <https://support.google.com/families/answer/7106787?hl=en>.

regulating the collection of personal information from those under 13.¹⁶⁰ It was never intended to establish 13 as an age of online consent or adulthood.

U.S. law broadly recognizes that individuals under 18 are minors who generally lack the capacity to enter binding contracts or waive statutory rights. Yet, by aligning its parental controls with COPPA's narrow definition of a child, Google suggests that protections cover all minors; in reality, it permits adolescents as young as 13 to go unsupervised by a parent.

By misapplying this framework, Google turns COPPA, a law intended to curb corporate exploitation of children's data, into a mechanism that undermines parental authority and increases minors' online exposure. In doing so, it strips parents of their fundamental right to direct their children's digital upbringing. This distortion raises serious concerns of deception and unfairness under established consumer protection principles.

Empowering your family to
safely **play**
online.

Google claims they “empower” families to safely play online.¹⁶¹

Adding insult to injury, the Canadian Centre report explains that Google's default settings in the parental control setup process steer parents toward allowing the company to market apps to children that are rated as containing content inappropriate for their age.¹⁶² This design runs directly against the FTC's “reasonable consumer” standard, which requires disclosures and safeguards to be clear and conspicuous to an ordinary parent. Instead, Google uses defaults and fine print that mislead families at the very moment they are trying to protect their children, exploiting parents' trust.

It is difficult to reconcile this with Google's advertising claim that parental controls make families “safer,” unless the defaults were structured not for protection but to maximize commercial benefits from pushing more content to young children. Even when parents configure parental controls correctly, they fail to provide real protection because the underlying system is flawed. The age ratings cannot be trusted, and even apps rated for “Everyone,” like the Bible App, often include in-app browsers that open the door to pornography.¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ “Children's Online Privacy Protection,” United States Code, § 6501 (2011).

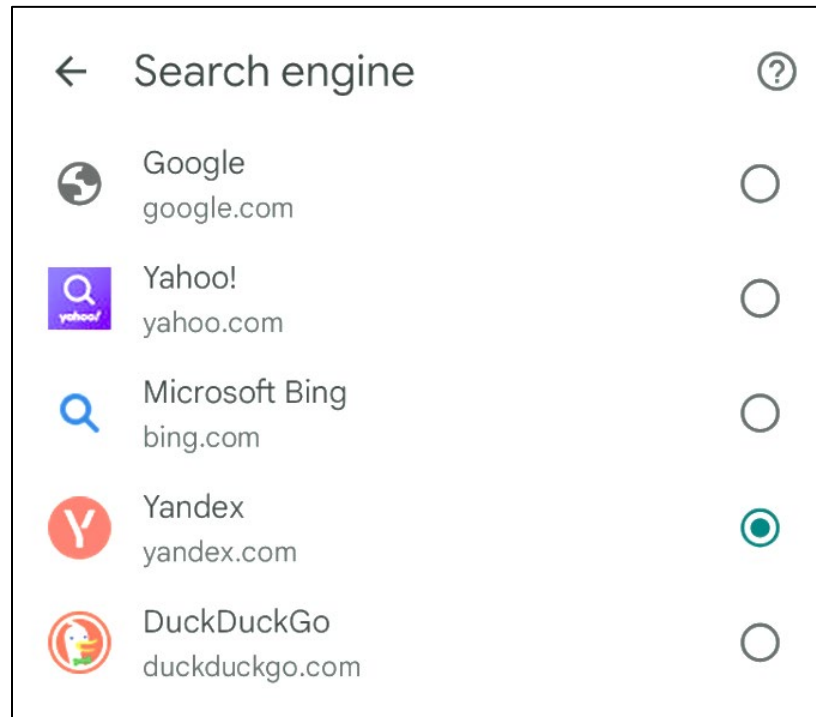
<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCODE-2011-title15/html/USCODE-2011-title15-chap91.htm>.

¹⁶¹ Google, “Google Families - Helping Make Technology Work for Your Family,” n.d., <https://families.google/>.

¹⁶² Canadian Centre for Child Protection, “Reviewing the Enforcement of App Age Ratings,” 2022.

¹⁶³ Chris McKenna, “How to Protect Kids from Porn,” Afterbabel.com (After Babel, July 17, 2025), <https://www.afterbabel.com/p/how-protect-kids-from-porn>.

Parents who lack a technical background or whose first language isn't English often have even less ability to protect their children online.¹⁶⁴ Their challenges are compounded by the fact that there are numerous workarounds to Google's parental controls system. For example, by merely changing the default search engine to "Yandex," minors can bypass Android's parental controls and readily access pornographic images through the browser.



By switching the default search engine to Yandex, children can easily access obscene images, even when all parental controls are enabled.

In conclusion, it's worth mentioning that for as long as we have been advocating for child and family safety in the digital age, we have seen companies promote "digital literacy" programs, not as genuine safety measures, but as a way to offload an impossible burden onto families, which can make parents feel personally responsible and even guilty when their children are harmed.

Google is no exception. Its portfolio of "Digital Wellbeing" initiatives and family guides urges families to have conversations or set faulty parental controls while leaving intact the manipulative design features, unsafe app ecosystem, and business incentives that create the risks

¹⁶⁴ Xiaohan Shi, Jing He, and Gengfeng Niu, "The Association between Family Socioeconomic Status and Children's Digital Literacy: The Explanatory Role of Parental Mediation," *Adolescents* 4, no. 3 (August 27, 2024): 386–95, <https://doi.org/10.3390/adolescents4030027>.

in the first place.¹⁶⁵ The company also partners with digital literacy organizations that later echo and advance Google’s own policy agenda.¹⁶⁶

This strategy improperly shifts responsibility to families while permitting Google to portray itself as compliant and responsible, notwithstanding its vast resources and capacity to implement meaningful safeguards. By imposing obligations on parents that cannot reasonably be fulfilled at the household level, and by simultaneously misrepresenting both the accuracy of its app age ratings and the efficacy of its parental controls, Google engages in conduct that constitutes an unfair and deceptive practice within the meaning of Section 5 of the Federal Trade Commission Act.



Google partners with organizations such as the Family Online Safety Institute (FOSI) and Common Sense Media to promote its digital literacy initiatives.¹⁶⁷ Both educational groups have also promoted Google’s policy agenda.¹⁶⁸

C. Google’s Unfair Trade Practices Involving Exploitative Contracting With Minors

Section 5 of the FTC Act forbids unfair trade practices. A practice is considered “unfair” if it “causes or is likely to cause substantial injury to consumers which is not reasonably avoidable by consumers themselves and not outweighed by countervailing benefits to consumers or to

¹⁶⁵ Google, “Digital Wellbeing Family Guide,” n.d., <https://services.google.com/fh/files/misc/digitalwellbeingfamilyguide.pdf>.

¹⁶⁶ Assemblymember Buffy Wicks, “Google, Meta among Tech Leaders and Child Advocates Voicing Support for Wicks’ Digital Age Assurance Act,” September 9, 2025, <https://a14.asmdc.org/press-releases/20250909-google-meta-among-tech-leaders-and-child-advocates-voicing-support-wicks>.

¹⁶⁷ Google, “Google Families | Explore the Experts That Guide Everything We Do,” Google Families, 2025, https://families.google/intl/en_us/family-partners/.

¹⁶⁸ Assemblymember Buffy Wicks, “Google, Meta among Tech Leaders and Child Advocates Voicing Support.”

competition.”¹⁶⁹ Google facilitates digital contracts through hidden clickwrap agreements (lengthy terms of service that a user must accept), often at the point of download. Minors do not have the legal capacity to enter into complex, binding agreements.

Google knows which of its users are minors. Yet Google routinely allows minors to accept binding terms of service with app developers without parental involvement and without informing the developer that the user is underage. These contracts are immediately processed as valid, granting access to the app, transmitting the child’s data to the developer, and allowing Google to take a substantial cut of any in-app purchases. Developers, unaware that the user is a minor, cannot activate safety defaults, comply with COPPA, or enforce their own age-based restrictions.

No title company or bank would treat a contract signed by a child as valid without parental consent, yet Google does exactly that at scale. It facilitates binding agreements between children and third-party developers, knowing the user is underage, while withholding that fact from the developer. In any other industry, this would be recognized as legally and ethically indefensible.

These contracts often contain deeply one-sided provisions. Common terms include:

- Mandatory arbitration clauses that prevent families from pursuing legal remedies for injury to a child in court.
- Class action waivers that isolate victims and shield platforms from accountability.
- Broad licenses granting developers permanent rights to any photos, videos, or content the child uploads.
- Data collection provisions that permit indefinite retention and third-party sharing of a minor’s sensitive information.

These contract terms matter. For example, children have been sexually exploited, trafficked, and harassed on apps Google rated as safe for young users.¹⁷⁰ Studies show that 68 percent of the top 150 apps transmit a child’s location, and nearly 60 percent seek access to photos, contacts, and other sensitive information stored on the device.¹⁷¹ When families sue to hold developers

¹⁶⁹ Federal Trade Commission, “A Brief Overview of the Federal Trade Commission’s Investigative, Law Enforcement, and Rulemaking Authority,” May 2021, <https://www.ftc.gov/about-ftc/mission/enforcement-authority>.

¹⁷⁰ Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, “Apple, Google & Live Streaming Apps Allegedly Facilitate Child Sexual Exploitation - Business & Human Rights Resource Centre,” 2025, <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/apple-google-livestream-apps-allegedly-facilitate-child-sexual-exploitation/>.

¹⁷¹ Maynak Sharma, “Your Children Are Likely Being Tracked by Some of Their Favorite Apps,” Lifewire, August 22, 2022, <https://www.lifewire.com/your-children-are-likely-being-tracked-by-some-of-their-favorite-apps-6501791>.

accountable, the developers use the arbitration clauses buried in lengthy legalese to try to avoid or minimize liability.¹⁷²

Clickwrap agreements are online contracts that require users to click a button such as “I agree” to accept terms before proceeding, commonly seen when downloading apps or creating a new app store account. Such agreements historically have only been considered valid when users have a reasonable opportunity to review the terms. In *Specht v. Netscape Communications Corp.*, the Second Circuit held that a digital contract was unenforceable because the terms were not sufficiently visible at the time of assent.¹⁷³ The Court emphasized that meaningful consent requires clear, upfront notice.¹⁷⁴ This standard is especially critical for minors, who lack the developmental capacity to understand complex legal agreements and, even more than adults, need clear, plain, upfront notice of what they are accepting. For complex contracts with lengthy legalese, minors need a parent to consent for them.

But Google makes that impossible or impracticable. Once a child turns 13, Google allows the kid to cut their parent out of the app selection process. A 13-year-old is not prepared to enter binding adult contracts, yet Google treats this as a milestone. As the company puts it, “When your child turns 13 (or the applicable age in your country), they have the option to graduate to an unsupervised Google Account... so you can no longer manage their account.”¹⁷⁵ In effect, Google shifts control from parent to child at the very moment oversight is most needed.

When your child turns 13 (or the [applicable age in your country](#)), they have the option to graduate to an unsupervised Google Account. Before a child turns 13, parents will get an email letting them know their child will be eligible to take charge of their account on their birthday, so you can no longer manage their account. On the day they turn 13, children can choose whether they want to manage their own Google Account or continue to have their parent manage it for them. As a parent, you can also choose to remove supervision at any time when the child is over the age of 13.

Google’s Family Link FAQ (“What happens when my child turns 13?”) tells parents their child can “graduate to an unsupervised Google Account... so you can no longer manage their account.”

A 2017 study in BMC Pediatrics concluded that although adolescents may demonstrate the basic capacities for decision-making, the early maturation of brain reward systems combined with the late maturation of prefrontal control systems “diminishes decision-making competence in

¹⁷² Kayne McGladrey, “Character Technologies Case Tests Enforceability of Arbitration Clauses for Minors Using AI Platforms. Court Reserves Key Legal Questions during Arbitration.” LinkedIn, April 28, 2025, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/ai-arbitration-case-tests-minors-contract-rights-kayne-mcgladrey-1d0ee/>.

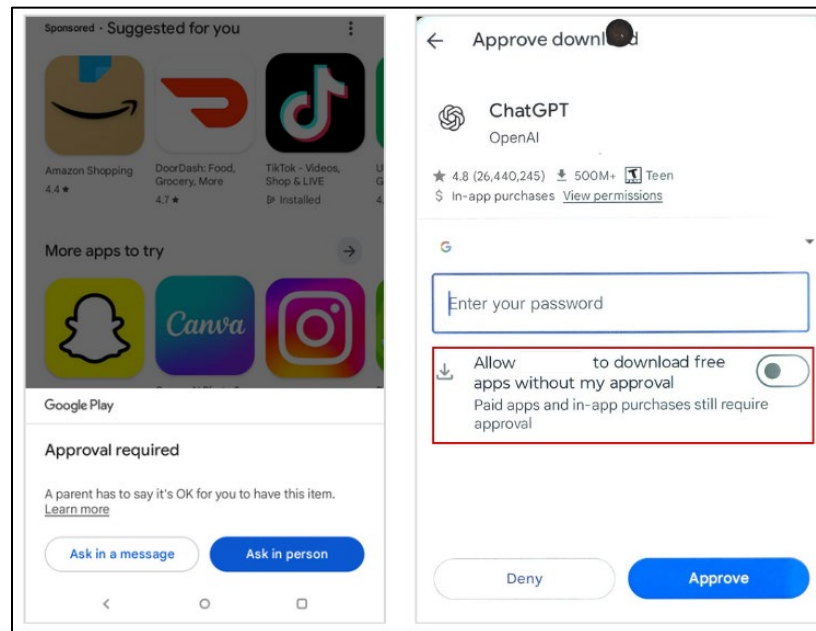
¹⁷³ J. Sotomayor, *Specht v. Netscape Communications* (United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit 2002). <https://opencasebook.org/casebooks/3665-contracts/resources/3.10-the-problem-of-online-click-to-submit-contracting-specht-v-netscape-communications-corp-306-f-3d-17-2002/>.

¹⁷⁴ J. Sotomayor, *Specht v. Netscape Communications* (2002).

¹⁷⁵ Google, “Family Link from Google - Family Safety & Parental Control Tools,” n.d., <https://families.google/familylink/faq/>.

adolescents in specific contexts,”¹⁷⁶ meaning that even capable teenagers require supportive structures and protections to avoid exploitation.

Additionally, in Google Family Link, children requesting an app can choose to “Ask in a message” or “Ask in person.” Choosing “Ask in person” prompts parents to give blanket approval for all free apps. This design undermines parental controls and steers even the parents of very young children away from supervision.



Each time parents are asked to approve an app in person, they are prompted to grant permanent permission for all free downloads.

Google’s conduct clearly qualifies as unfair under the FTC’s three-part test:

1. **Substantial Injury:** Children and families suffer serious legal, financial, reputational, and emotional harm. These include the loss of legal remedies, exposure to commercial exploitation, and permanent loss of control over personal content and data.
2. **Not Reasonably Avoidable:** Minors lack the legal and developmental capacity to consent to complex terms. Google’s design often excludes parents or gives them no real chance to review or reject the agreement.

¹⁷⁶ Petronella Grootens-Wiegers et al., “Medical Decision-Making in Children and Adolescents: Developmental and Neuroscientific Aspects,” *BMC Pediatrics* 17, no. 120 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12887-017-0869-x>.

3. **No Countervailing Benefits:** There is no lawful or defensible justification for allowing a child to enter a binding legal contract without parental consent. Google has the data and technical capacity to fairly allow parents to approve their child’s online contracts.

In short, Google knows the user is a child, knows the developer is unaware, knows the developer will behave as if the contract is binding, and yet brokers the transaction anyway. That business decision meets every standard of unfairness under Section 5.

D. Google Violates COPPA

COPPA prohibits tech companies from conditioning “a child's participation in a game, the offering of a prize, or another activity on the child disclosing more personal information than is reasonably necessary to participate in such activity.”¹⁷⁷ COPPA also requires that tech companies provide “a reasonable means for a parent to review the personal information collected from a child and to refuse to permit its further use or maintenance.”¹⁷⁸ COPPA violations are considered unfair or deceptive acts or practices under 16 CFR §312.9.

Google violates both provisions. First, Google entices children to give up extreme amounts of data (far more than is necessary to run the game) in return for access to free games (that often later additionally monetize the child through in-app purchases). Google thus violates COPPA by conditioning the collection of data from vulnerable children on the child’s participation in the free game.

COPPA additionally prohibits the collection, use, or disclosure of personal information from children under 13 without first obtaining verifiable parental consent. Google's practices facilitate this COPPA violation. COPPA applies to app developers and online services that either (1) target children or (2) have actual knowledge that a user is under 13. Because “actual knowledge” has a high legal threshold,¹⁷⁹ most developers can avoid liability for collecting large quantities of a child’s data without a parent’s consent by claiming they did not know the user’s true age. This is especially true where a minor lies about their true age to obtain an app, something that many minors do.¹⁸⁰

Google, however, has the necessary age information and unlawfully assists developers in evading COPPA’s prohibitions. Google delivers these children to developers without disclosing

¹⁷⁷ “Regulation of unfair or deceptive acts or practices in connection with the collection, use, and/or disclosure of personal information from and about children on the internet,” Code of Federal Regulations, § 312.2 (2025). <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-16/chapter-I/subchapter-C/part-312/section-312.3>.

¹⁷⁸ “Regulation of unfair or deceptive acts,” Code of Federal Regulations (2025).

¹⁷⁹ *Intel Corp. Investment Policy Committee v. Sulyma*, 140 S.Ct. 768 (2020).

¹⁸⁰ Ofcom, “A Third of Children Have False Social Media Age of 18+,” Ofcom, January 5, 2024, <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/online-safety/protecting-children/a-third-of-children-have-false-social-media-age-of-18>; GuardChild, “Internet Statistics | GuardChild,” GuardChild, 2015, <https://www.guardchild.com/statistics/>; Mark Sweney, “More than 80% of Children Lie about Their Age to Use Sites like Facebook” The Guardian, December 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2013/jul/26/children-lie-age-facebook-asa>.

their age. This enables developers to collect data, serve targeted ads, and monetize underage users with impunity, all with Google’s knowledge and assistance. Google is helping defeat the goals of COPPA.

Entities can be held liable for assisting civil wrongdoing if they encourage or provide substantial assistance to the violation, have knowledge of the wrongdoing, and their conduct is a substantial factor in causing the harm.¹⁸¹ In *A&M Records v. Napster*, the Ninth Circuit held that a platform with actual knowledge of infringement that materially contributed to it could not escape responsibility.¹⁸² Therefore, Google cannot shield itself by claiming it is merely a conduit when its intentional design choices knowingly enable and materially contribute to systemic violations of federal child-privacy law.

Google’s conduct meets those conditions for liability. COPPA violations by app developers would dramatically decrease if Google communicated that they were dealing with a child. Google, therefore, encourages and assists in the continued violations by providing the developer with plausible deniability. Google acts as an intermediary that conceals the user’s age, protects developers from liability, and ensures uninterrupted access to the data of children. These are not passive design flaws. They are active choices that result in ongoing violations of federal law, from which Google profits.

By knowingly facilitating unlawful data collection and shielding developers from accountability, Google meets the legal threshold for substantial assistance in civil wrongdoing. COPPA violations would be significantly reduced if Google simply disclosed the user’s age to the developer. Instead, Google provides the infrastructure and legal cover that allow these violations to continue at scale.

E. Google Violates Its 2014 Consent Decree On In-App Purchases

In 2014, the FTC sued Google for unfair practices because it allowed children to make in-app purchases without their parents’ authorization.¹⁸³ Google settled with the FTC, agreeing to a consent decree effective until 2034. The decree enjoined Google from “billing an account for any In-App Charge without having obtained Express, Informed Consent to Google’s billing that account for the In-App Charge.”¹⁸⁴ Google is supposed to take reasonable efforts “to ensure that the person providing consent is the account holder (as opposed to the child).”¹⁸⁵ The “Account

¹⁸¹ Judicial Council of California, “CACI No. 3610. Aiding and Abetting Tort,” 2025, <https://www.justia.com/trials-litigation/docs/caci/3600/3610/>.

¹⁸² *A&M Records, Inc. v. Napster, Inc.*, 239 F.3d 1004 (9th Cir. 2001). <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/F3/239/1004/636120/>

¹⁸³ Compl., *FTC v. Apple Inc.*, FTC Docket No. C-112-3108 <https://www.ftc.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cases/140115applecmpt.pdf>.

¹⁸⁴ Decision and Order, *FTC v. Apple Inc.*, FTC Docket No. C-112-3108 <https://www.ftc.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cases/140115appleagree.pdf>

¹⁸⁵ Analysis of Proposed Consent Order, *FTC v. Google Inc.*, FTC Docket No C-122-3237 <https://www.ftc.gov/system/files/documents/cases/140904googleplayanalysis.pdf>

Holder,” must provide the “Express, Informed Consent,” which was defined to require “an affirmative act communicating informed authorization of In-App Charges. . . .”¹⁸⁶

Google violates the 2014 FTC consent decree on in-app purchases. Minors cannot give “Express, Informed Consent” on their own, without their parents’ (the account holder’s) knowledge. That was the basis of the original lawsuit. One survey found that since the decree, 12 percent of teens have accidentally made an in-app purchase, with most of them saying it resulted in a “big” bill. Many of the survey respondents indicated that they mistakenly thought the product was free.¹⁸⁷ This underlines the importance of a parent providing “Express, Informed Consent.”

Since children over 13 are not required to link their accounts to a parent, and fewer than half of minors have any parental controls in place,¹⁸⁸ it is no surprise that 80 percent of parents report never being notified when their child makes an in-app purchase.¹⁸⁹ Google’s policy makes it impossible for it to fully comply with the consent decree. The FTC should enforce the terms of its settlement and consider holding Google in civil contempt of a court order.

III. Google’s Aggressive Lobbying to Block App-Store Accountability Laws

Google, like most large tech companies, has been deeply involved in efforts to negatively influence, reshape, or block legislation that could threaten its business model. In October 2023, the company released a blog post unveiling its proposed *Legislative Framework to Protect Children and Teens Online*.¹⁹⁰ Shrouded in the language of “best interests,” “flexibility,” and “teen autonomy,” the framework promotes loopholes, preserving targeted engagement practices and suggesting teens are sufficiently independent and mature to manage their own safety.

As child advocates, we’ve encountered Google in every state where we’ve advocated for our App Store Accountability Act. Google has even gone so far as to facilitate the introduction of a standalone competing app store bill in Ohio.¹⁹¹ It is carefully crafted to give the appearance of child safety while stripping away the very provisions that would hold platforms accountable.

¹⁸⁶ Decision and Order, *FTC v. Apple Inc.*

¹⁸⁷ Childnet International, “Young People’s Experiences with In-App Purchases Accidental Spending on In-App Purchases,” n.d., <https://www.childnet.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Young-peoples-experiences-of-in-app-purchases.pdf>.

¹⁸⁸ Family Online Safety Institute, “Parental Controls for Online Safety Are Underutilized, New Study Finds,” Family Online Safety Institute, May 28, 2025, <https://fosi.org/parental-controls-for-online-safety-are-underutilized-new-study-finds/>.

¹⁸⁹ Ofcom, “Children’s Online Spending and Potential Financial Harm: Quantitative Research,” 2025, <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/online-safety/research-statistics-and-data/online-services-research/childrens-online-spending-and-potential-financial-harm-quantitative-research.pdf?v=400633>.

¹⁹⁰ Kent Walker, “A Policy Framework to Protect Children and Teens Online,” Google, October 16, 2023, <https://blog.google/outreach-initiatives/public-policy/google-legislation-framework-children-teens-safety/?>.

¹⁹¹ Establish age verification, parental consent for apps, developers, OH S.B.175, 136th General Assembly (2025).

There is no clearer window into a company's true priorities than the legislation it drafts and advances through its lobbyists. Every regulator and lawmaker in the country should find these proposals alarming.

Google's alternative policy solutions are designed to codify app store *unaccountability*, imposing no real penalties on developers who fail to classify themselves as "covered." Instead of requiring verification, the bills call only for age estimation or even stated age. Both are deliberately weak standards, while also providing liability shields for faulty age signals and developer misclassification. The result is a framework that absolves platforms from responsibility and pushes the burden of compliance onto developers, who themselves face no meaningful consequences for ignoring the rules. Children are left unprotected, families are denied recourse, and Google can still claim credit for advancing so-called safety legislation.

Google recently expressed strong public support for California's so-called "Digital Age Assurance Act,"¹⁹² which has now passed.¹⁹³ The Act establishes a stated-age framework under which a user "indicates their age" and that declaration "constitutes actual knowledge"¹⁹⁴ of the user's age. In doing so, the statute effectively rewrites the meaning of "actual knowledge," lowering the legal standard to a level unprecedented in U.S. law.

The Digital Age Assurance Act affords broad safe harbors by indemnifying covered entities from liability for any erroneous signal or for the conduct of developers who rely on such signals.¹⁹⁵ This legislation is also supported by Meta,¹⁹⁶ OpenAI,¹⁹⁷ and proxies for Pornhub.¹⁹⁸ Parent consent for app downloads was removed from the legislation, and the bill always lacked critical provisions to ensure app age ratings were accurate.¹⁹⁹

Four of the ten largest companies in the world by market capitalization, Apple, Google, Meta, and Microsoft, will be directly affected by legislation regulating app stores. These firms devote enormous financial resources to lobbying, which can overwhelm child safety advocates whose only goal is to secure the strongest protections for children. This makes it even more important

¹⁹² Assemblymember Buffy Wicks, "Google, Meta among Tech Leaders and Child Advocates Voicing Support."

¹⁹³ Tyler Katzenberger, "California Age Verification Bill Backed by Google, Meta, OpenAI Heads to Newsom," POLITICO, September 13, 2025, <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/09/13/california-advances-effort-to-check-kids-ages-online-amid-safety-concerns-00563005>.

¹⁹⁴ Assemblymember Buffy Wicks, "Age Verification Signals: Software Applications and Online Services.," Pub. L. No. AB 1043 (2025), https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202520260AB1043#94AMD

¹⁹⁵ Assemblymember Buffy Wicks, "Age Verification Signals."

¹⁹⁶ Assemblymember Buffy Wicks, "Google, Meta among Tech Leaders and Child Advocates Voicing Support."

¹⁹⁷ Tyler Katzenberger, "POLITICO Pro: OpenAI Joins Google, Meta in Backing California's Online Age-Checking Bill," POLITICO Pro, 2025, <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/2025/09/openai-joins-google-meta-in-backing-californias-online-age-checking-bill-00561440>.

¹⁹⁸ John Carr, "'Destigmatising' Porn?," Desiderata (Substack, March 31, 2025), <https://john1912.substack.com/p/destigmatising-porn>.

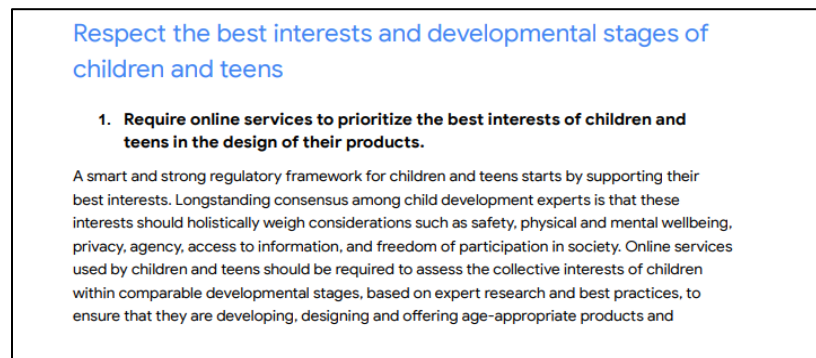
¹⁹⁹ Assemblymember Buffy Wicks, "Age Verification Signals."

for the Federal Trade Commission to step in with clear guidance to ensure that consumer protection and child safety are not subordinated to corporate interests.

Google now publicly supports COPPA 2.0,²⁰⁰ an endorsement that became public only after the App Store Accountability Act began gaining traction. While the proposed bill clarifies the “actual knowledge” standard, it retains the outdated framework in which verifiable parental consent is required only for children under 13 and goes further by codifying that adolescents 13 and older may provide their own consent to data collection and use.

This structure, which has already drawn criticism from child safety advocates, effectively equates teenagers with adults in the online marketplace.²⁰¹ The result is to provide Google and similar companies with legal cover to continue harvesting and monetizing adolescent data rather than imposing stronger, developmentally appropriate protections.

Additionally, Google has advocated for amendments to the App Store Accountability Act to allow biometric age verification for adults, rather than more robust methods, such as a verified credit card in a digital wallet. In our testing, a 15-year-old boy with a longstanding Google account was able to be “verified” as an adult by briefly scanning his mother’s face, demonstrating how easily biometric systems can be gamed.²⁰²



Google’s published marketing material claims that their #1 priority is to “Require online services to prioritize the best interests of children and teens in the design of their products.”²⁰³

²⁰⁰ “Markey, Cassidy Statement on Google Endorsement of Children and Teens’ Online Privacy Bill | U.S. Senator Ed Markey of Massachusetts,” Senate.gov (Edward Markey, June 24, 2025), <https://www.markey.senate.gov/news/press-releases/markey-cassidy-statement-on-google-endorsement-of-children-and-teens-online-privacy-bill>.

²⁰¹ Sen. Edward J. Markey, “Children and Teens’ Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA 2.0)” (2025), https://www.markey.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/coppa_20.pdf.

²⁰² Melissa McKay (@Melissa_M818), “@Google just added “selfie” age verification. I tested it on my son’s account (stated as a teen boy for years) using my middle-aged woman face. In 5 seconds he was “verified” as an adult,” X/Twitter, September 15, 2025. https://x.com/melissa_m818/status/1967439064065585200?s=46

²⁰³ Google, “Legislative Framework to Protect Children.”

IV. Conclusion

Google knowingly markets harmful apps as safe for minors. It approves platforms that host pornography, exploitation, and predatory content, while assigning misleading age ratings that downplay the risks. Google falsely claims its parental controls will make children safer while designing a system that excludes parents from app purchases. Google conditions a child's access to so-called "freemium" games on the collection of the child's data. Google facilitates contracts between children and developers without parental involvement, allows unlawful data collection from users under thirteen, and continues to bill families for in-app purchases without obtaining valid consent.

The well-documented harms that have befallen children on apps, including exposure to sexual content, grooming, harassment, and serious psychological harm, have reached them through an app store, like Google Play. Google has the knowledge, the tools, and the legal responsibility to prevent these harms. Instead, it has chosen to profit from them, leaving children and families exposed to avoidable, ongoing harm.

We respectfully urge the Commission to investigate Google for unfair and deceptive trade practices, violations of COPPA, and ongoing noncompliance with the 2014 consent decree.

V. Appendix

A. *Google's App Store and Developer Age Assurance Responsibility Act*

App Store and Developer Age Assurance Responsibility Act

SECTION 1.

1. This title shall be known, and may be cited as the [STATE] [NAME OF ACT].

SECTION 2. DEFINITIONS

"Adult" means an account holder who is 18 years of age or older.

"Age Signal" means a signal sent from a Covered Company to developers via a real-time application programming interface, on an ongoing basis, that indicates whether a Covered Application Store account holder is a Likely Adult.

"Connected Device" means a computer, smartphone, tablet, gaming console, virtual reality device, or any other personal computing device that enables users to connect to the Internet and download software applications.

"Covered Application" means a software application that is not another Covered Application Store, and that a Developer represents to the Covered Application Store provides, whether legally required or not, a different experience for adults than for non-adults. This includes but is not limited to Developers that provide different account types depending on a user's age.

"Covered Application Store" means a publicly available website, software application, electronic service, or platform that distributes or facilitates access to applications from third-party developers to users of a Connected Device.

"Covered Company" means an entity, company, or organization that owns, operates, or controls a Covered Application Store.

"Developer" means any person, entity, company, or organization that creates, owns, or controls an application and makes it available to end users through a Covered Application Store.

"Likely Adult" means an account holder that a Covered Company knows or has verified is an Adult or has estimated to be an Adult based on commercially reasonable efforts.

“Minor” means an account holder that the Covered Company has received an age signal or has estimated the age of the user with a reasonable level of certainty that the individual is under the age of eighteen.

SECTION 3. OBLIGATIONS

A. A Covered Company must:

- (1) Estimate the age of account holders with a reasonable level of certainty proportionate to the risks [that arise from distributing a Covered Application Store];
- (2) Provide the Developer of a Covered Application with the ability to prevent account holders who are not Adults or Likely Adults from acquiring the Developer’s Covered Application from the Covered Application Store;
- (3) Upon request from the Developer of a Covered Application, provide the Developer with an Age Signal; and
- (4) Provide Covered Application Store account holders who are deemed not to be Likely Adults the opportunity to verify that they are an Adult.

B. A Developer of a Covered Application that chooses to receive an Age Signal must:

- (1) Prevent account holders who are not Adults or Likely Adults from accessing features and content that is intended for account holders 18 years and above, unless the Developer obtains verifiable parental or guardian consent to permit account holders access to that content;
- (2) Prevent account holders who are not Adults or Likely Adults from accessing features that permit account holders to directly interact or communicate with people outside the account holder’s family or who are not already connected to the account holder, unless the Developer obtains verifiable parental or guardian consent to permit account holders access to those features;
- (3) Not use Age Signal information for any purpose other than compliance with this chapter or with another applicable law, or to ensure that an account holder who is not an Adult or Likely Adult is provided a safer and more appropriate experience; and
- (4) Not share the Age Signal information with third parties.

C. A Developer of a Covered Application that chooses not to receive an Age Signal must:

- (1) Determine whether the account holder is a Likely Adult by estimating the age of account holders with a reasonable level of certainty proportionate to the risks that arise from access to and use of the Covered Application; and
- (2) Meet the requirements of sections (C)(2)-(4) for all account holders that are not Likely Adults.

D. Reporting Requirements. A Developer of a Covered Application with more than 50 million global active account holders must publish an annual report documenting:

- (1) The product features, technical restrictions, operational processes, and other efforts the Developer undertook to comply with Sections C and D of this statute; and
- (2) The name of a single individual at the Developer who is responsible for compliance with this statute, provided that the named individual must be the chief compliance officer, a controlling equity holder, or a direct report of the chief executive officer.

E. A Covered Company must:

- (1) Impose at least the same restrictions and obligations on its own applications and application distribution as it does on those from third-party applications or application distributors.
- (2) Not use data collected from third parties in the course of compliance with this Chapter to give the Covered Company's services preference relative to those of third parties, or to otherwise use this data in an anti-competitive manner.

Section 4. TECHNOLOGICAL LIMITS ON AGE ESTIMATION

A. If a Covered Company makes a reasonable effort, taking into consideration available technology, to develop and provide an Age Signal to Developers of Covered Applications or to prevent users it deems not to be Likely Adults from acquiring Covered Applications, the Covered Company will not be liable for any erroneous Age Signal, erroneously preventing an account holder who it deems not to be a Likely Adult from acquiring Covered Applications, for any conduct by a Developer of a Covered Application, or for failing to provide an Age Signal due to any reasonable technical limitations or outages that prevent the Covered Application Store from providing of the Age Signal upon request.

B. Developers are solely responsible for correctly identifying whether their applications are Covered Applications under this statute. No Covered Company is required to proactively identify Covered Applications, and a Covered Company will not be held liable under this statute in cases where a Developer provides inaccurate information about its application.

Section 5. EFFECTIVE DATE

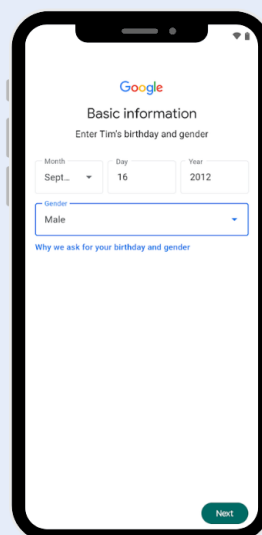
A Covered Company must comply with this statute no later than 24 months after it is enacted into law.

B. Google's Noncompliance with Utah's Children's Device Protection Act

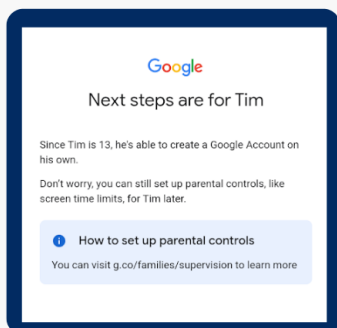
GOOGLE IS NONCOMPLIANT WITH UTAH'S CHILDREN'S DEVICE PROTECTION ACT

Google is currently noncompliant with Utah's Children's Device Protection Act (CDPA). The law requires that any smartphone or tablet manufactured on or after January 1, 2025, and activated in Utah must include a filter that prevents the accessing or displaying of obscene material through any Internet browser or search engine owned or controlled by the device manufacturer. The filter must be enabled by default when the user is a minor, and it may be deactivated only by a non-minor using a password.

For users over 13, Google does not require parental linkage, nor does it enable an obscene-content filter secured by a passcode, despite having clear knowledge that the user is underage. Large-scale studies confirm that a substantial share of minors are exposed to pornography through search engines, making this risk not hypothetical but reasonably foreseeable.



NO PASSCODE-LOCKED FILTER IS ENABLED BY DEFAULT FOR CHILDREN OVER 13.



During setup of a teen account, parents are merely informed that parental controls may be established "later." Once the device is provided to the child, the minor is able to access the internet without any passcode-locked filters for obscene images or websites.

This practice constitutes a violation of Utah's Children's Device Protection Act.

30%

30% OF CHILDREN ARE EXPOSED TO OBSCENE CONTENT THROUGH A SEARCH ENGINE

Children's Commissioner for England, 2023

