

YouTube's toddler app full of disturbing videos, say child advocates who want FTC to investigate

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Searching for videos on how to juggle knives while balancing a chain saw? Taste battery acid? Make chlorine gas? Tie a noose?

How about My Little Pony-themed pedophilia jokes, or watching Bert and Ernie dubbed with a profanity-laced quarrel from Martin Scorsese's mobster film "Casino"?

You can find all of this, and more, on YouTube Kids, the new smartphone application Google has marketed as safe for preschoolers, according to [consumer groups](#) who compiled a disturbing dossier of the [app](#)'s content.

Those groups on Tuesday were set to ask the Federal Trade Commission to investigate Google's app for unfair and deceptive business practices, the second such complaint filed since the kid-centric video service launched in February.

"The deeper you get into this, the scarier it is in placing children at risk," said Dale Kunkel, a communications professor at the University of Arizona. "I'm astonished at the volume of inappropriate material, much of which will be harmful for kids if they see it."

Google said in a written statement Monday that it works to make the app's videos "as family-friendly as possible" and takes feedback very

seriously, removing inappropriate videos flagged by users. In an interview shortly after introducing YouTube Kids, its product manager, Shimrit Ben-Yair, told the San Jose Mercury News that the [mobile app](#) uses a "two-step process" to select kid-friendly content from the 300 hours of video uploaded to YouTube each minute.

The first step is to "algorithmically narrow it down to family-friendly content," she said. The second involves Google employees doing a "manual sampling for quality control, to see if it's family-friendly."

But that filter is not working, according to advocates and some parents who wrote reviews on the Google Play and iTunes stores documenting how their children discovered violent, sexually explicit or other jaw-dropping content.

The complaint being filed with the FTC is just the latest headache for Google's attempted leap into the toddler tech market.

Kunkel was part of a coalition of prominent child advocacy and consumer groups that filed an April complaint with the FTC accusing YouTube Kids of being overly commercialized, inundating young children with ads and promotional content that would not be allowed on broadcast television.

The FTC said at the time it would look into the complaint.

Only later, however, did advocates begin to discover more troubling content on the app. While the app is geared toward young children who cannot yet spell or type search queries, they can easily find some of the videos by using their voice to tell the smartphone or tablet what they want to see. "For parents who want a more restricted experience, we recommend that they turn off search," Google said in its statement Monday.

Kunkel recently searched YouTube Kids for wine tasting tips, and found videos about detecting tannins and identifying acidity levels. He noticed after watching those videos that the app was keeping track of his viewing history and recommending even more videos on how to select fine wines.

"As soon as a child inadvertently discovers an inappropriate [video](#)," the app will suggest others like it, Kunkel said.

In addition to wine education, YouTube Kids is a repository of at least 13 Budweiser commercials, as well as drug references, pornographic cartoons, dangerous stunts and other content that show Google is "deceiving parents who undoubtedly rely on the company's representations that it has created a product that is appropriate for [young children](#)," according to the formal complaint letter to be submitted to the FTC on Tuesday by Jeff Chester of the Center for Digital Democracy and Josh Golin of Campaign for a Commercial-free Childhood.

While the letter escalates a mounting campaign against YouTube Kids, other child advocacy groups that Google invited to review and endorse its new app earlier this year are standing by the product.

So many kids are already watching YouTube that its kid-focused version is a relief for parents struggling to limit screen time and avoid objectionable content, said Marsali Hancock, founding president of iKeepSafe.org.

"It's a better experience. I wouldn't say it's perfect, but it's better," Hancock said. "Just by the nature of it being a user-generated site, there's always going to be some type of risk."

She didn't notice anything objectionable when she perused the app. Indeed, the app's most perverse content went largely unnoticed by

YouTube Kids supporters and critics until a company called KidKam began collecting the disturbing videos in April. The startup employs teachers and pediatricians to hand-pick and screen online videos for children.

Then, two weeks ago, a petition appeared on Change.org asking Google to recall the app. The petition's author, Marco Acevedo, could not be reached for comment. Many of the videos he identified as a problem appear to have been removed by Google, but other offensive videos get uploaded each day, said Zachary Corrigan, co-founder and CEO of KidKam.

"It's after-the-fact content moderation," he said. "We don't allow that for anything else involving children."

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