

Facebook's Messenger Kids: Parents grapple with social media decision

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A new AI tool created to help identify certain kinds of substance abuse based on a homeless youth's Facebook posts could provide homeless shelters with vital information to incorporate into each individual's case management plan. Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Torn between the benefits and drawbacks of social media, Leigh

Turberville Harrell hasn't decided yet whether to let her children use Facebook's new messaging app for kids.

On one hand, Messenger Kids allows parents to approve whom their [children](#) converse with on the app. But on the other, Harrell, a teacher, worries about cyberbullying and other dangers that lurk online.

"They don't realize that the stuff they're putting out there on the internet could haunt them for the rest of their lives," said Harrell, whose children are 4 and 13.

Nationwide, parents like Harrell are facing a familiar decision: At what age should they allow their kids to use [social media](#)?

Messenger Kids has also sparked concerns among some parents, pediatricians and consumer advocates who worry about the data Facebook will gather from children.

Facebook, like other social networks, requires users to be at least 13 years old to sign up for accounts. But last week, the company said it was rolling out a messaging app that will let children under that age send texts, photos and videos, and add stickers, frames and filters to their images.

"Whether it's using video chat to talk to grandparents, staying in touch with cousins who live far away, or sending mom a decorated photo while she's working late to say hi, Messenger Kids opens up a new world of online communication to families," wrote Loren Cheng, Facebook's product management director, in a blog post.

The company said it talked to thousands of parents and experts while it was building the ad-free app, which is designed for children ages 6 to 12. Parents who set up a Messenger Kids account won't be creating a

Facebook account for their children.

But some consumer advocacy groups question whether the app will remain free of ads in the future and whether Facebook will use the data to target parents with ads.

"Why should parents simply trust that Facebook is acting in the best interest of kids?" James Steyer, founder and CEO of Common Sense Media, a San Francisco nonprofit that promotes online safety for children, said in a statement.

The privacy policy for Messenger Kids says the app collects data such as registration information, content, activity, contacts and device information to improve the product and promote safety.

If a parent deletes a Messenger Kids account, Facebook will also erase the data they collect, but the company notes that messages and content sent to users before a deletion may remain visible.

And as parents struggle to get their children to stop staring at their tablets and smartphones, they're wondering if messaging apps are worth the convenience.

Dr. Jenny Radesky, assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Michigan, C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, said children under 12 years old are not ready to use social media without parental supervision.

"It's hard for them to grasp concepts like privacy, who is using their data, or insight into how they might be manipulated through persuasive design—and they are really just starting to build awareness about their identity, role in relationships, and morality," she said in an e-mail.

"Combine that immaturity with the problematic interactions that commonly occur over social media, and it could be messy."

It's important for parents to monitor whether social media is displacing other activities children need to do, like homework, and how children are treating others through the app, she said.

But some online safety experts say many kids under 13 are already on social networks. Messenger Kids, which is rolling out first in the United States in the Apple App Store, also has ways for parents to keep an eye on who their children are talking to online.

"Particularly for parents who have already tried to get their under 13s onto Facebook so they can communicate with grandma, this is a godsend," said Stephen Balkam, the founder and CEO of the Family Online Safety Institute. "For the significant minority of [parents](#) who are tech skeptics, they will probably want to steer clear."

Some question Facebook's intentions. San Diego resident Adam McLane said he sees the app as a way for Facebook to market the social network to younger users—like a McDonald's Happy Meal.

The father of three said he will not get Messenger Kids for his 6-year-old. His two teenagers also do not use Facebook.

Facebook CEO and co-founder Mark Zuckerberg, who is spending December on parental leave with his two daughters, hasn't spoken publicly yet about Messenger Kids.

"My advice: Until you see Zuckerberg's kids using it, stay away," McLane wrote in a public Facebook post.

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