

# Protecting Kids, Empowering Innovation

Public policy should protect young people online by empowering innovation—not restraining it. The same creative forces that can create risks also create opportunity; the technologies that expose youth to new challenges are the ones that can also deliver better safety, education, and healthcare tools.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

### 01 Promote Usable and Effective Safety Tools

AI and social media providers should ensure that safety, privacy, and parental-control tools are not only available but intuitive, transparent, and effective. Bridging the gap between feature awareness and real-world usability is critical to meaningful protection.

### 03 Target Policy Narrowly and Proportionally

Lawmakers should craft AI and social media safety measures that address specific, evidence-based harms using the **least restrictive means** necessary. Policies should avoid sweeping definitions and restrictions that reach deep into computing infrastructure, limit innovation, or restrict general-purpose computing capabilities.

### 05 Minimize Data and Security Risks

Policies that require identity verification, biometric scans, or large-scale data collection for AI or social media access inherently heighten cybersecurity and privacy risks. Requirements to share personal data typically mean heightened user risk, especially for minors.

### 02 Protect Children and Empower Caregivers

Defending the safety and well-being of children and teens in both AI and social media environments must be a shared priority among companies and policymakers. However, parents and caregivers retain the primary right and responsibility to guide their teens' digital experiences, and policies must respect and protect that authority.

### 04 Uphold Constitutional and Privacy Protections

Efforts to regulate AI or social media must not compromise First Amendment rights or open the door to government surveillance, mass data collection, or coercive "jawboning." Preserving freedom of expression, inquiry, and association online is essential to a free society.

### 06 Focus on Education and Real-World Well-Being

Rather than prohibiting access to AI or social media tools, policymakers should emphasize education, digital literacy, and responsible use. Effective protection means preparing teens and their caregivers to navigate digital and AI systems safely, not shielding them entirely from participation.

# ISSUE AREAS AND RESOURCES

## I. Age Verification Risks

For all their benefits, social media platforms can expose minors to risks like sextortion schemes, the non-consensual sharing of explicit images, predatory contact, harmful or age-inappropriate material, and social comparison that shapes self-esteem. At the same time, emerging AI tools—from chatbots that simulate relationships to generative systems that can produce realistic images or deepfakes—create new vectors for risks. Given these realities, age-verification and age-gating policies at the platform, app store, and device level have become attractive solutions for policymakers. They offer legislators a visible safeguard: if younger users can be screened or excluded, the risks seem manageable. Yet these solutions, while politically and practically appealing, are likely ineffective while posing serious constitutional and privacy issues.

**Policy Recommendation:** Avoid mandated age verification at all levels.

### Abundance Institute Resources

- [The Coming Clash Over AI Companions, Kids, and Regulation](#) 05.06.25
- [HB 4901: Don't Saddle Texans with a Digital Bouncer](#) 04.11.25
- [Six considerations for the app store age verification model](#) 02.01.24
- [Comment on Utah's Minor Protection in Social Media Act Rule](#) 09.17.24

## II. Technology, Mental Health, and Youth Well-Being

Over the past few years, concern about social media's impact on young people has moved from niche research to national spotlight. High profile events like the Facebook File congressional hearings and post-pandemic spikes in teen anxiety and depression helped make social media a political target, with parents, lawmakers, and advocates linking social media use to those negative mental health trends. But the causal evidence remains contested with many researchers finding correlations rather than clear causation, and others point to broader cultural and economic pressures shaping adolescent well-being. Policymakers and advocates must balance healthy technology use with innovation, independence, and trust. Many are turning toward solutions that emphasize digital literacy, family-based tech norms, and the roles of schools, nonprofits, and civil society in guiding healthy technology use. These approaches aim to build resilience and responsibility while being flexible to the individual needs of each child or teen and the changing technology landscape.

**Policy Recommendation:** Build interventions on rigorous data, not moral panic. Equip parents and youth with tools and information rather than paternalistic restrictions.

## ISSUE AREAS AND RESOURCES CONT

### Abundance Institute Resources

- [Protecting Kids Requires Smart, National AI Policy—Not Local Crackdowns](#) 05.13.25
- [Initiative to Protect Youth Mental Health, Safety and Privacy Online NTIA Comment](#) 11.16.23
- [Thoughts on what the CDC YRBS data means for social media, teens, and mental health](#) 03.14.23
- [What Should Policymakers Do about Social Media and Minors?](#) 01.18.23

### III. AI and Youth Safety

As artificial intelligence tools become part of everyday life, policymakers are beginning to focus on how minors interact with them in classrooms, at home, and increasingly, in moments of emotional need. Specialized AI tools in education, therapy, and companionship are constantly being developed alongside general purpose chatbots which can be used by minors for many of those same purposes. Lawmakers and industry alike are still learning how to distinguish among the different uses, balancing concerns about content risks, privacy, and dependency with the opportunities for learning, creativity, and help these tools can offer. The most constructive path forward will be industry innovation that empowers youth and parents, enabling transparency, user control, and informed consent between caregivers and the youth in their care. Such an approach, instead of broad bans that could stifle valuable, age-appropriate uses of AI, will ensure the ecosystem remains vibrant and helpful to children and teens over the long term.

**Policy Recommendation:** Focus policy solutions on clear harms, such as ensuring state laws are updated to punish users possessing and creating AI-generated child sexual abuse material (CSAM); be incredibly specific about which AI tool and use case are implicated in order to avoid regulatory overreach.

### Abundance Institute Resources

- [California's AB 1064: A Well-Intentioned but Risky Step on AI Chatbots](#) 09.23.25
- [Teens, Chatbots, and Policy Overreach: Two Trends Worth Watching](#) 08.13.25
- [Should Policymakers Regulate Human-AI Relationships?](#) 06.11.25
- [What Utah's New AI Law Gets Right About Risk](#) 04.28.25
- [AI Could Help Keep Children Safe Online](#) 11.13.23