



Children Are Not a Monolith:

The U.S. Debate on Online Safety

U.S. Parents
Supporting Social
Media Bans

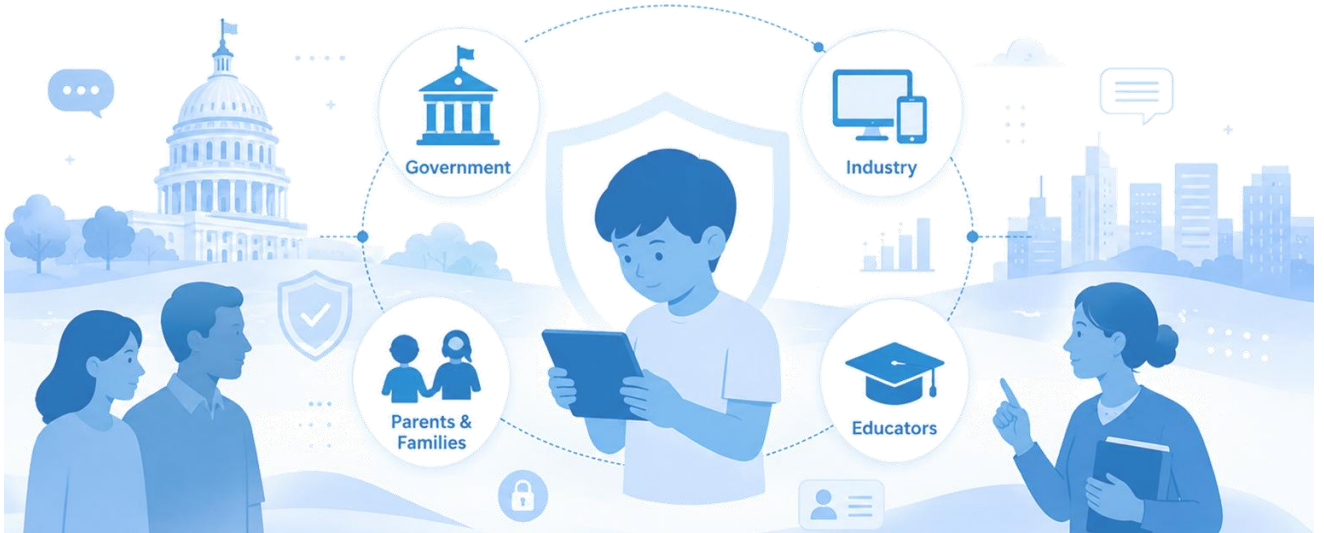
50+%

Children Support a
Total Ban on
Social Media

<40%

KOSA Default Safety
& Privacy Settings

Under 17



Countries around the world are moving forward with efforts to establish rules to protect children from online dangers. In the U.S., the “Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA)¹,” which calls on social media companies to take action, is currently under consideration in the U.S. House of Representatives.

In an interview with Washington CORE, Andrew Zack, Policy Director at the Family Online Safety Institute (FOSI), a nonprofit organization dedicated to safe internet use, discussed how policymakers should determine the appropriate age boundaries for online safety regulations and what types of online harms such measures should seek to address.

A Culture of Responsibility

Protecting children’s safety online requires collaboration among all stakeholders: the tech industry, government, law enforcement, educators, parents, and the children themselves. FOSI calls this a “culture of responsibility.”

Governments

can fund research to identify problems and establish minimum safety standards to prevent specific harms.

The industry

can act in accordance with these standards and take even more proactive measures by establishing its own safety rules.

Educators

can help equip children with the skills to navigate the online world through digital literacy education.

Parents and Families

can establish rules and expectations for online behavior at home.

What Data Shows

When it comes to policy, FOSI believes that the right solutions should be grounded in data and evidence. According to a survey conducted by the organization, while more than half of U.S. parents support banning social media, fewer than 40% of children support a total ban². Results show that children are more positive and optimistic about their online lives than their parents.

Children use the internet to:



Learn new skills



Pursue hobbies

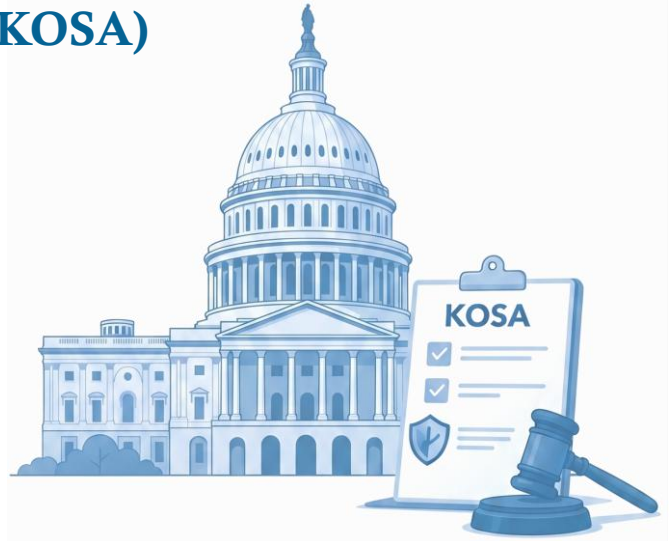


Deepen their connections with friends

While negative stories tend to attract the most attention, there are also many positive experiences. These concerns are particularly relevant in the ongoing debate surrounding the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA).

The Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA)

KOSA is a bill that includes provisions requiring social media companies to strengthen protections for minors. It mandates that the highest level of safety and privacy settings be enabled by default for users under 17 and requires action against harmful content that could lead to self-harm, suicide, or sexual exploitation and abuse. The bill passed the U.S. Senate in 2024 and is currently under debate in the House¹.



Risks and Open Questions

The Risk of Over-Moderation

If the bill remains in its current form, it is likely that platform operators will tighten content moderation to avoid litigation. This could result in the removal of content and information that is otherwise legal and potentially beneficial. A prime example is online communities for young people from social minorities, such as the LGBT community. For young people who are isolated at home or in their communities, the online environment can sometimes be safer than face-to-face interactions. There is a concern that platform operators, out of excessive fear of litigation, might target content related to such communities for removal.

Who Defines "Harm to Children"?

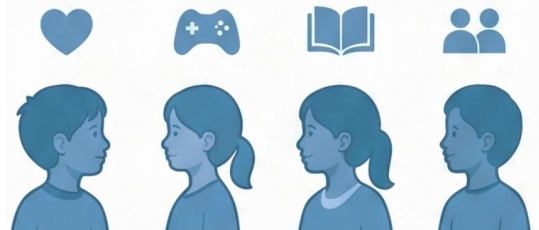
“ The core issue with legislation like KOSA is who defines what is "harmful to children.”

Andrew Zack · FOSI

” The United States has not ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and lacks clear academic consensus or understanding regarding what constitutes harm to children³. The First Amendment to the Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, making it a country where content is well-protected. Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act grants platform operators immunity from liability for third-party content they host⁴.

One Size Doesn't Fit All

The development of adolescents and the growth of teenagers are also not linear. Young people are not a monolithic group. In that sense, rather than broad, sweeping legislation.



FOSI supports targeted laws addressing specific harms



"TAKE IT DOWN Act" (2025)⁵

Requires platform operators to remove sexual deepfakes, serves as a useful reference in that it minimizes the risk of unintended consequences.

Lessons from Age Restrictions Abroad

Australia's social media restrictions also provide an example of the challenges associated with broad online safety regulations. A law completely banning social media use for those under 16 came into effect in December 2025⁶, and there are similar movements in Europe. Critics of the law have argued that teenagers can circumvent the rules by using VPNs or the accounts of parents and older siblings, raising questions about whether such restrictions meaningfully improve online safety.

Age Verification Is Not a Silver Bullet

FOSI believes that strict age verification alone does not necessarily improve online safety. Even if a platform can determine that a user is 14 years old, meaningful safety improvements require measures that create safer online experiences.

Privacy and Data Security Concerns

There are also privacy concerns. Many of the procedures used to verify age—such as photos of ID cards or bank accounts—raise concerns about privacy infringement. Companies that implement age verification must have robust privacy policies and expertise in data security. FOSI does not believe age verification should be required for every app, platform, or service. For high-risk services, age verification may be necessary in exchange for privacy protections. Ultimately, it should be implemented based on the level of risk.

Toward Safety by Design

Going forward, there will likely be greater emphasis on designing services and platforms that reduce harm. There will be growing demand for building services with safety in mind from the planning stage—what might be called "by design." While Europe and other regions tend to hold platform companies accountable for children's safety, this alone cannot eliminate societal ills. In that sense, rather than demanding that platform operators crack down on harmful content, a more effective approach may be to require safe product design.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 01** Online child safety depends on a shared “culture of responsibility” across industry, government, educators, and families — not any single actor.
- 02** Survey data shows children are more optimistic about their online lives than parents fear; policy should follow evidence, not anxiety.
- 03** Broad bans risk silencing legal, beneficial communities; targeted laws like the TAKE IT DOWN Act limit unintended harm.
- 04** Age verification carries real privacy costs and should scale with risk — the future lies in safety “by design.”

Andrew Zack

Policy Director for the Family Online Safety Institute

FOSI supports global policy and research work relating to online safety issues, laws, and regulations. He works with federal and state legislatures, relevant federal agencies, international regulators, and industry leaders to develop and advance policies that promote safe and positive online experience for families. Andrew joins FOSI after five years in Senator Ed Markey's office, where he worked primarily on education, child welfare, and disability policies. Andrew studied Government and Psychology at the College of William and Mary.



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