

The Problem Is Design, Not Screen Time

What Meta's Settlement Gets Right and What It Misses

Meta settlement with U.S. states (up to)	Default daily usage limit for users under 18	Overnight access blocked
$17.1B	**2 hours**	**12 AM to 6 AM**

WASHINGTON | CORE

An interview with Dr. Mitch Prinstein, Co-Director of the Winston Center on Technology and Brain Development, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill



On August 26, 2026, Meta agreed to pay up to $17.1 billion over ten years to settle claims brought by 51 U.S. states and territories over the effects of its social media platforms, Instagram and Facebook, on young users[1]. Under the settlement, usage of those networks for users under 18 will be restricted with a default two-hour daily usage limit, a block on access between midnight and 6 AM, a ban on notifications overnight and during school hours, and hidden like counts[2].

Japan is weighing its own approach to social media access restrictions, but some officials say they have found little clear evidence that social media harms children's mental health. Washington CORE spoke with Dr. Mitch Prinstein, Co-Director of the Winston Center on Technology and Brain Development at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and former Chief Science Officer of the American Psychological Association (APA), about the research, the settlement's likely effects, and what it leaves out. Prinstein was scheduled to testify for the states at the trial before Meta settled.

From Screen Time to Specific Features

Early research on social media usage focused on how much time children spent on screens. That proved to be an inaccurate measure: screen time can mean reading the news, messaging a friend, or scrolling a feed, and each affects children differently. The field has since shifted to specific design features. An APA expert panel co-chaired by Prinstein identified several features that make it harder for children to log off from social media[3]:



Notifications | Infinite scroll | Like counts

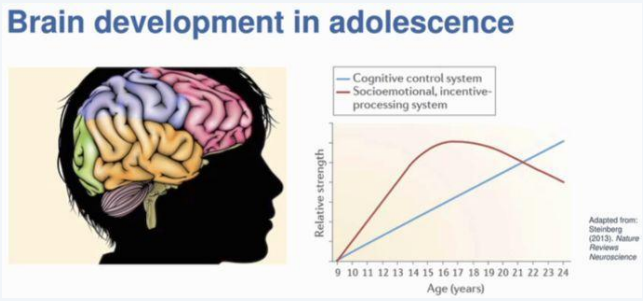
The Like Button and the Brain

One brain-imaging study, using a simulated Instagram feed to allow for experimentation, found that teenagers who viewed a photo with many "likes" were more likely to click "like," and seeing many likes activated the brain's reward circuitry[4,5]. In related research, teenagers shown images of dangerous or illegal behavior showed activity in the prefrontal cortex, a sign of healthy inhibition. When the same images appeared with likes, activity in this inhibition center dropped significantly, suggesting that likes may lower teenagers' inhibitions toward risky and illegal behavior[6].

> Many likes activated reward circuitry, and likes on risky images reduced activity in the brain's inhibition center.

Why Early Adolescence Matters

At around age 10 or 11, before puberty is visible, the brain develops more receptors for oxytocin and dopamine, chemicals linked to social reward. Children become intensely focused on peer approval and status, a sensitivity that rises sharply and plateaus at around 16 to 18. The prefrontal cortex, which governs impulse control, does not fully mature until the mid-20s. Between roughly ages 10 and 20, young people are strongly driven to seek social feedback but less able to regulate that drive. Peer feedback was once largely confined to the school day; smartphones make it constant.



From age 9 the brain's socioemotional, incentive processing system develops at a much faster rate than the cognitive control system, and peaks around age 16–18. Source: Dr. Mitch Prinstein, adapted from Steinberg (2013), Nature Reviews Neuroscience.

Signs of Dependency

How It Is Measured

There is no clinical diagnosis of social media dependency in children, so researchers adapt the diagnostic criteria for substance dependency. They assess whether use is excessive and uncontrolled, whether children experience tolerance and withdrawal, and whether use impairs daily functioning. Scientists describe this as "problematic social media use."

What Studies Find

Prinstein said that across studies in Europe and North America, about half of children report at least one symptom of clinical dependency on social media.

> "We have a misfit between our biology and the environment."
>
> Dr. Mitch Prinstein · UNC Chapel Hill

Late-Night Use Is the Biggest Concern

Whether the settlement's changes will work remains an open research question. The greatest concern, Prinstein said, is nighttime use. When phone use cuts into the recommended eight hours of sleep, it can affect the growth of white matter, which allows the brain to transmit signals more quickly. Prinstein hopes the overnight block, the notification limits, and the two-hour cap will together help children keep their devices out of the bedroom.

A Teenager in Crisis at 2 AM?

Some critics argue that an overnight block could cut off a teenager seeking urgent support. Prinstein acknowledged that some children find help online, but said that in the United States, most encounter more misinformation than useful information, and that even useful information cannot replace a trained mental health provider. He pointed to the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline as a better option.

Age-Informed Design Rather Than Bans

Prinstein sits on the academic advisory group evaluating Australia's ban on social media for children under 16[7]. In his view, a blanket ban removes the benefits of social media along with the harm, and the cutoff age is somewhat arbitrary. He thinks age-informed design, which restricts specific features that are inappropriate for younger users, is probably the better long-term approach. The European Commission's proposed EU Kids Act pairs a minimum age of 13 with limits on addictive features such as infinite scroll[8]. The United States has no federal law setting design rules for children's social media, and the settlement applies only to Meta.

> "There's no real scientific reason why 16 is okay, and why that's any better or worse than 15 or 17."
>
> Dr. Mitch Prinstein · UNC Chapel Hill

	Blanket Age Ban	Age-Informed Design
Example	Australia, under 16	Parts of the EU proposal and the Meta settlement
Restricts	All access below the age line	Specific features, by age and time of day
Age checks	Required	Required
Results	Children are in principle shielded from the harms of social media, but also cut off from its benefits.	Children are protected from harms according to risk considerations, and still have moderated access to benefits.

Keeping Support for Those Who Need It

Children from religious, cultural, and other identity groups can find valuable support online, which a ban would take away until 16. In Prinstein's view, two hours a day is plenty of time to find it without staying online late at the expense of sleep and homework.

The Age Verification Problem

Both approaches depend on knowing a user's age. Prinstein said there is still no good way to do that, as Australia is now finding, but believes companies would develop one if governments required it.

What the Settlement Leaves Out

Research Access

Prinstein understood the settlement to allow limited access for social media researchers, though how that would work was unclear. Meta has announced an independent research foundation that would receive data from users who provide consent[9], but has not disclosed how it will operate. The most valuable evidence, he noted, would come from experiments the companies have already run, such as hiding likes or silencing notifications. Settlement funds go to the states, and he expects few legislatures to direct them toward research.

Children's Data

Companies can still collect children's data and profit from it, although children cannot meaningfully consent. Many young people and adults do not realize their activity across apps, browsers, and payments is used commercially.

Looking Ahead: AI and a Displaced Adolescence

Prinstein warned that many children have experienced a "displaced adolescence," in which time on devices replaced face-to-face interaction. The effects on adult relationships and work may take years to emerge. He is even more concerned about AI chatbots, which form relationships with users and are treated as if they were people.

A Chatbot as a Friend

In a recent study of 2,000 middle school students aged 10 to 12, his team found that a remarkably high number called a chatbot a friend and preferred it to another child.

Short-Form Video

Short-form video appears to impair the development of sustained attention. With video embedded on most platforms, Prinstein has not seen recent research isolate text-based apps such as X.

Faster Action

Legislative and legal action on AI is moving faster than it did for social media, but with President Trump backing AI and his party controlling Congress, Prinstein does not expect federal legislation to pass anytime soon.



Dr. Mitch Prinstein

Co-Director, Winston Center on Technology and Brain Development, UNC Chapel Hill

Dr. Mitch Prinstein is a clinical psychologist who studies peer relationships and social influence in adolescence. He is Senior Science Advisor and former Chief Science Officer of the American Psychological Association and the author of *Popular*. He has testified before the U.S. Senate on social media and young people.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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As a Research Analyst at Washington CORE, Paolo conducts research across a broad range of areas, including economic and regulatory policy, international finance, and emerging technologies. His work focuses on the intersection of public policy, markets, and corporate strategy, with recent projects covering economic security, sustainability, international trade, and industrial and environmental policy in the United States and abroad. Prior to joining Washington CORE, he worked at the Institute of International Finance and the Group of Thirty conducting research on international finance, global economic policy, and financial markets. He holds a BA in International Affairs and a BS in Economics from American University.



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