

OPINION EXCHANGE

Children's welfare is on the line — online

The internet is here to stay so we need to help kids thrive — and stay safe.

By Nathan T. Chomilo | MARCH 2, 2023 — 5:45PM

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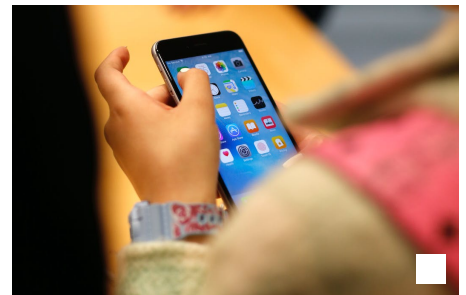
It may seem like a small amount, \$64.80. But for my family, the price tag has become a cautionary tale that we can't help but laugh about.

I never thought leaving my 4-year-old unattended for just a few minutes with my PlayStation 5 running could lead to the child inadvertently purchasing a yearlong PlayStation Plus subscription. As a pediatrician who has given talks on screen time and young children, a board member of the Minnesota Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics and an adjunct assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Minnesota Medical School, I should have known better.

But it's being a father that has taught me that ensuring our children thrive goes beyond just regulating screen time. We need to be vigilant about what our children are exposed to on those screens.

In today's digital age, the unregulated online world poses one of the most significant threats to our children's well-being. I have grown deeply concerned about the impact of social media on children's mental health. The statistics are staggering.

Instagram's own research found that a third of teen girls reported that the platform made them feel worse about their bodies. With filters that significantly alter one's appearance to create unachievable beauty standards and TikTok's algorithms recommending eating disorder and self-harm content to 13-year-olds within 30 minutes of their joining the platform — it should not be a surprise.



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There are risks and benefits associated with screen time in children.

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And it's not only body image. Young people — particularly children and teens of color — are often the targets of bullying, harassment and discrimination online. Racist hate groups are targeting boys and young men through these same platforms leading to radicalization with catastrophic impacts.

The data companies collect on our kids — their race, gender identity, location, religious preferences, their seemingly private search history — are all put up to the highest data broker bidder and shoved into algorithms that discriminate and put kids in harms' way.

Many are now starting to see that children are facing a mental health crisis: 23.1% of Minnesota ninth-graders reported a long-term mental health, behavioral or emotional problem in 2019, a concerning increase compared with 12.5% facing the same problem in 2013. Anxiety and depression in Minnesotans aged 3 to 17 increased 14.8% between 2016 and 2020. It's well past time for us adults to do something more to protect our children online.

The introduction of Minnesota's Age Appropriate Design Code ([HF 2257](https://www.revisor.mn.gov/bills/bill.php?b=House&f=HF2257&ssn=0&y=2023&keyword_type=all&keyword=age+appropriate+design)) (https://www.revisor.mn.gov/bills/bill.php?b=House&f=HF2257&ssn=0&y=2023&keyword_type=all&keyword=age+appropriate+design) is an important step as we seek to help young people safely navigate the online world. This first-of-its-kind legislation aims to protect children's privacy and online safety by requiring platforms to design their products according to the developmentally appropriate needs of kids at every age, from infancy to the teens. This means restricting the data collection and profiling of child users to feed them content that is harmful, turning off geolocation for children, prohibiting strangers from messaging kids if they are not mutual followers, and being transparent in showing young users how they can control what shows up in their feeds.

Whether we are prepared to admit it or not, protecting our children's physical and mental health now includes having guardrails in place for their online experiences. The internet has become an integral part of our daily lives, and as such, we must do all we can to ensure that children are protected while using it. This includes our legislators taking steps to prioritize our children's mental health and ensure their protection in the digital space.

As I've learned firsthand, even well-informed, well-intentioned parents won't always be on top of where the threats are. We owe it to the next generation to create a world where they can flourish without the threat of preventable harm or exploitation. Our children's mental health and development are on the line, and we must act now to ensure that they can thrive in a digital age that is designed with their best interests in mind.

Nathan T. Chomilo, of Minneapolis, is a pediatrician.

