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Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood

January 30, 2018

Mark Zuckerberg  
Chief Executive Officer  
Facebook, Inc.  
1601 Willow Road  
Menlo Park, CA 94025

Re: Facebook Messenger Kids

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg,

We are writing to urge you to discontinue Messenger Kids, Facebook's first social media app designed specifically for children under the age of 13. Given Facebook's enormous reach and marketing prowess, Messenger Kids will likely be the first social media platform widely used by elementary school children. But a growing body of research demonstrates that excessive use of digital devices and social media is harmful to children and teens, making it very likely this new app will undermine children's healthy development.

Younger children are simply not ready to have social media accounts. They are not old enough to navigate the complexities of online relationships, which often lead to misunderstandings and conflicts even among more mature users. They also do not have a fully developed understanding of privacy, including what's appropriate to share with others and who has access to their conversations, pictures, and videos.

At a time when there is mounting concern about how social media use affects adolescents' wellbeing, it is particularly irresponsible to encourage children as young as preschoolers to start using a Facebook product. Social media use by teens is linked to significantly higher rates of depression,<sup>1</sup> and adolescents who spend an hour a day chatting on social networks report less satisfaction with nearly every aspect of their lives.<sup>2</sup> Eighth graders who use social media for 6-9 hours per week are 47% more likely to report they are unhappy than their peers who use social media less often.<sup>3</sup> A study of girls between the ages of 10 and 12 found the more they used social networking sites like Facebook, the more likely they were to idealize thinness, have concerns

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<sup>1</sup> Twenge, J. M., Joiner, T. E., Rogers, M. L., & Martin, G. N. (2018). Increases in depressive symptoms, suicide-related outcomes, and suicide rates among U.S. adolescents after 2010 and links to increased new media screen time. *Clinical Psychological Science*, 6, 3-17.

<sup>2</sup> McDool, E., Powell, P., Roberts, J., Taylor, K. (2016). Social media use and children's wellbeing. IZA Discussion Paper No. 10412, Bonn, Germany: Institute for the Study of Labor.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

about their bodies, and to have dieted.<sup>4</sup> Teen social media use is also linked to unhealthy sleep habits.<sup>5</sup>

Messenger Kids is likely to increase the amount of time pre-school and elementary age kids spend with digital devices. Already, adolescents report difficulty moderating their own social media use: 78% check their phones at least hourly, and 50% say they feel addicted to their phones.<sup>6</sup> Almost half of parents say that regulating their child's screen time is a constant battle.<sup>7</sup> Messenger Kids will exacerbate this problem, as the anticipation of friends' responses will be a powerful incentive for children to check – and stay on – a phone or tablet. Encouraging kids to move their friendships online will interfere with and displace the face-to-face interactions and play that are crucial for building healthy developmental skills, including the ability to read human emotion, delay gratification, and engage with the physical world.

We understand that not all relationships can be face-to-face. One of Facebook's stated rationales for creating Messenger Kids is to help kids connect with long-distance family members, including parents in the military. But talking to family and friends over long distances doesn't require a Messenger Kids account. Kids can use parents' Facebook, Skype, or other accounts to chat with relatives. They can also just pick up a phone.

Facebook claims that Messenger Kids will provide a safe alternative for the children who have lied their way onto social media platforms designed for teens and adults. But the 11- and 12-year-olds who currently use Snapchat, Instagram, or Facebook are unlikely to switch to an app that is clearly designed for younger children. Messenger Kids is not responding to a need – it is creating one. It appeals primarily to children who otherwise would not have their own social media accounts. It is disingenuous to use Facebook's failure to keep underage users off their platforms as a rationale for targeting younger children with a new product.

We understand that Messenger Kids will not have advertising and that Facebook has stated it will not use the wealth of data it collects from the new app for marketing purposes. We also appreciate that Facebook has taken steps to limit common social media problems such as cyberbullying on Messenger Kids. But even if these safeguards are effective, the app's overall impact on families and society is likely to be negative, normalizing social media use among young children and creating peer pressure for kids to sign up for their first account.

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<sup>4</sup> Tiggemann, M. & Slater, A. (2014). NetTweens: The Internet and body image concerns in preteenage girls. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 34 (5), 606-620

<sup>5</sup> Twenge, J. M., Krizan, Z., & Hisler, G. (2017). Decreases in self-reported sleep duration among U.S. adolescents 2009-2015 and links to new media screen time. *Sleep Medicine*, 39, 47-53.

<sup>6</sup> Common Sense Media. (2016). Technology Addiction: Concern, Controversy, and Finding Balance. Retrieved from <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/technology-addiction-concern-controversy-and-finding-balance>.

<sup>7</sup> American Psychological Association (2017). APA's Survey Finds Constantly Checking Electronic Devices Linked to Significant Stress for Most Americans. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2017/02/checking-devices.aspx>.

In the past year, Facebook has come under increased scrutiny for helping to spread false information,<sup>8</sup> preparing research for an advertising client on how to target teens when they are emotionally vulnerable,<sup>9</sup> and allowing advertisers to discriminate based on age<sup>10</sup> and ethnicity<sup>11</sup> and target messages to racists and anti-Semites.<sup>12</sup> In response to some of these scandals, you have personally vowed to “do better.”<sup>13</sup>

Doing better is leaving younger children alone and allowing them to develop without the pressures that come with social media use. Raising children in our new digital age is difficult enough. We ask that you do not use Facebook’s enormous reach and influence to make it even harder. Please make a strong statement that Facebook is committed to the wellbeing of children and society by pulling the plug on Messenger Kids.

Sincerely,

#### ORGANIZATIONS:

Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood  
ACLU of Massachusetts  
Badass Teachers Association, Inc.  
Centre for Child Honouring  
Common Sense Media  
Corporate Accountability  
Defending the Early Years  
EPIC Privacy  
Media Education Foundation  
New Dream  
New Moon Girls  
Parent Coalition for Student Privacy  
Parents Across America  
Parents Television Council  
Peace Educators Allied for Children Everywhere (P.E.A.C.E.)  
Public Citizen

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<sup>8</sup> Buchanan, M. (2018). Why fake news spreads like wildfire on Facebook. Chicago Tribune.

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/commentary/ct-perspec-fake-news-google-facebook-0904-story.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Levin, S. (2017). Facebook told advertisers it can identify teens feeling ‘insecure’ and ‘worthless.’ The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/01/facebook-advertising-data-insecure-teens>.

<sup>10</sup> Angwin, J., Tobin, A. and Scheiber, N. (2017). Dozens of Companies Are Using Facebook to Exclude Older Workers From Job Ads. ProPublica. <https://www.propublica.org/article/facebook-ads-age-discrimination-targeting>.

<sup>11</sup> Angwin, J., Varner, M. and Tobin, A. (2017). Facebook (Still) Letting Housing Advertisers Exclude Users by Race. ProPublica. <https://www.propublica.org/article/facebook-advertising-discrimination-housing-race-sex-national-origin>.

<sup>12</sup> Maheshwari, S. and Issac, M. (2017). Facebook, After ‘Fail’ Over Ads Targeting Racists, Makes Changes. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/20/business/media/facebook-racist-ads.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Abramson, A. (2017). Mark Zuckerberg Apologizes for Facebook’s Divisiveness. Fortune. <http://fortune.com/2017/10/01/mark-zuckerberg-facebook-yom-kippur/>.

Story of Stuff  
TRUCE (Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Childhood Entertainment)  
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