

## **Testimony of Heidi Olson, MSN, RN, CPN, SANE-P**

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I am a pediatric sexual assault nurse examiner , meaning I provide medical care and collect evidence from children who have experienced sexual assault, exploitation and sex trafficking. Over the last decade, I have cared for hundreds of children and teens who have experienced sexual harm and have collected data on real time trends of how our children are impacted online.

As technology is rapidly changing, so are the ways that children are being preyed on. The vast majority of grooming, sexual abuse, and exploitation have moved online to apps where children are spending their time. <sup>1,2</sup>

Unfortunately, most parents are unaware of the potential harm that can happen when they hand their child a device. One in four children report that an adult has attempted to engage them in sexual activity online. <sup>3</sup> These solicitations are occurring on apps like Instagram, TikTok, Roblox, and Snapchat, where parents assume it is safe for their kids to be. These apps—and many others—are anything but safe. They are inundated with predators and traffickers who are looking for vulnerable and unsuspecting kids.

I took care of a 12-year-old who disclosed nearly 20 sexual assaults in one year. She had met all of her abusers on Snapchat, with her caregivers being completely unaware that she was being groomed by strangers online who then talked her into meeting in person. Her story is not an outlier. Many teenagers I've taken care of over the last few years have met their abusers on social media.

Apps are also contributing to exploitation. Recently, Grok, an AI chatbot, was embroiled in scandal when it added a feature that allows users to create deepfake pornography. All that is required is uploading a fully clothed photo of someone, and the tool can generate extremely realistic pornography of that person. One in ten children say they have used AI to generate nude images of their classmates. <sup>4</sup>

Grok was rated for children 13 and up when this nudity feature was added, so essentially the app developers are saying it's okay for children to use an app that can easily create pornography of any kind, including child sexual abuse materials and facilitate exploitation. This is why age verification and protection for kids online is so important.

Not only are children experiencing bullying, and numerous mental health harms from social media, but they are being exposed to violent pornography in unprecedented numbers. <sup>5</sup> This phenomenon is contributing to the skyrocketing rates of child-on-child sexual assault across the country, as children are imitating what they are seeing online. <sup>9-12</sup>

I recently talked to a therapist who was working with a teenage boy who downloaded an AI chatbot that was teaching him how to rape young girl. I have spoken with numerous teens whose

sexual abuse has been filmed and shared on social media and viewed by their peers.

Unfortunately, without better regulation, many “child-friendly” apps are not child-friendly at all and it’s our responsibility as adults to ensure our children are safe.

I commend the committee for considering protections for children, as it’s desperately needed. It’s powerful when we come together to mitigate and stop the abuses happening to our kids online, instead of prioritizing big tech that does not care who it traumatizes or harms as long as there is profit to be made.

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