

# Child Safety Online: A Legislative Landscape

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## Children in an Online World

Digital technologies pervade almost every aspect of childhood in modern America. By age three, 85% of children spend time online,<sup>1</sup> and 88% of youth aged 10-17 have access to a smartphone.<sup>2</sup> This increased online presence has left children vulnerable to an increased risk of tech-facilitated exploitation and abuse.<sup>3</sup> Approximately one in eight children worldwide has experienced sexual solicitation or been exposed to non-consensual sexual interactions online.<sup>4</sup>

## Increasing Risks

Reports to child protection agencies demonstrate the rapid escalation of risks. In 2024, the U.S. CyberTipline received reports of 29 million separate incidents of child sexual exploitation, and reports of online enticement increased by 200%.<sup>5</sup> In the first half of 2025, reports of online enticement and child sex trafficking doubled, while reports involving AI-generated child sexual abuse material (“CSAM”) surged from fewer than 7,000 in early 2024 to more than 440,000 in early 2025.<sup>6,7</sup> Financial sextortion averages nearly 100 reports per day and has been linked to more than 30 documented suicides among adolescent victims in the U.S., underscoring the urgent and evolving nature of online threats to children.<sup>5,8,9</sup>

**Children are left vulnerable to an increased risk of tech-facilitated exploitation.**

## Emerging Policy Approaches to Promote Children's Online Safety

Policymakers across the U.S., as well as internationally, are working to create a legal framework to ensure child safety online. From 2000-2025, policies have changed and evolved.

Several of the top priorities emerging across jurisdictions include:

### Safety by Design

Like other consumer products (e.g., cars, food, drugs), policymakers are increasingly requiring tech companies to design digital products to reduce children's risk of online harm. These measures aim to 1) limit access and contacts to reduce predation (e.g., default privacy settings, restricting adult-to-child messaging); 2) reduce exposure to harmful or age-inappropriate content (e.g., limiting pornography, restricting targeted marketing); and 3) prevent manipulation of child behavior (e.g., banning dark patterns, restricting financial transactions and engagement-driven algorithms). Some jurisdictions, including California and Australia, have also implemented device-level protections, such as requiring content filters on children's smartphones.

### Age Verification and Parental Controls

Policies focused on age assurance and parental control regulate access to platforms and content by verifying users' ages and involving caregivers in children's digital engagement. These approaches 1) restrict child access to developmentally inappropriate or harmful content, 2) limit data collection and platform features for children (e.g., requiring parental consent for accounts or downloads; and 3) enhance parental oversight through mandatory parental controls and greater transparency about platform policies. In the U.S., several states mandate age verification for websites hosting adult content (e.g., South Carolina, Idaho), while others extend these requirements to social media platforms (e.g., Louisiana, Texas).

### Evidence-Based Policy Actions to Protect Children and Youth

The policy approaches below represent options for strategies to mitigate children's exposure to online harm, supported by the strongest available evidence.

### Digital Safety Education

Protecting children online requires coordinated efforts from families, schools, government, nonprofits, and tech companies to ensure that children are prepared to engage in digital spaces safely. These approaches provide education about risks (e.g., CSAM, sextortion, online predation) and improve detection and reporting systems (e.g., providing hotlines, school-based surveys). Educational and community institutions also reduce the risk of developmentally inappropriate exposure by restricting use of smartphones in schools and installing content filters on devices accessible to children in schools and libraries. Rather than regulating platforms directly, these policies aim to reduce harm through prevention, awareness, and early intervention.

### Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

Additional regulations focus on updating criminal laws to combat tech-facilitated child sexual abuse. These policies target both individual behavior and platform compliance to deter and respond to exploitation. Federal laws protect children by criminalizing the production, possession or access, and distribution of CSAM. Some U.S. states have expanded these protections by criminalizing AI-generated CSAM (e.g., Arkansas, West Virginia), establishing offenses for related crimes like sextortion (e.g., California, Mississippi), and increasing penalties for platform noncompliance (e.g., Mississippi, Louisiana).

### Other Forms of Child Protection Online

Other policies regulate app stores and platform content moderation to address risks not fully covered by existing frameworks. These approaches aim to protect children by requiring age verification, mandatory content ratings, and parental consent at the app store level (e.g., Texas, Utah), as well as mandating moderation and reporting requirements for harmful content beyond CSAM, such as cyberbullying or self-harm related material (e.g., California, Texas).

## Evidence-Based Policy Actions to Protect Children and Youth

The policy approaches below represent options for available evidence.



### Safety by Design

Default privacy settings, manipulative design restrictions.

Defaults strongly shape user behavior of minors, while algorithmic systems amplify harmful content exposure; children are particularly vulnerable to manipulative [BW1.1] design.<sup>10,11,12</sup>



### Digital Safety Education

School - and community-based digital literacy and safety programs.

Education programs improve risk recognition, reporting, and safe behaviors, with strongest effects when delivered early and developmentally tailored.<sup>17,18</sup>



### Age Assurance

Age estimation and/or verification to restrict access to high-risk content and features.

Can reduce minors' exposure to inappropriate content when robustly implemented, though effectiveness depends on accuracy, privacy protections, and enforcement.<sup>13,14</sup> Should exclude age attestation.



### Criminal Enforcement and Reporting

Strengthened laws, mandatory reporting, and enforcement against CSAM, sextortion, and exploitation.

Reporting mandates increase detection and intervention, and research shows certainty of detection is key to reducing offending.<sup>19,20,21</sup>



### Parental Controls and Oversight

Required parental controls, consent mechanisms, and transparency tools.

Active parental mediation reduces exposure to online harms, particularly with communication rather than restrictions alone.<sup>15,16</sup>



### Platform Accountability

Requirements to detect, remove, and report harmful content and manage systemic risk.

Regulatory oversight improves moderation practices; exposure to harmful content is linked to increased risk behaviors among youth.<sup>22,23</sup>

## Current Policy Actions: Sample U.S. State Legislation & Associated Court Rulings

Protection Level	Policy	Sample U.S. State Legislation [AR1.1][BW1.2]	Court Rulings & Settlements Upholding Laws
Design	Age-Appropriate Design	California (S.B. 976) (2024) Arkansas (S.B. 611) (2025) Nebraska (L.B. 504) (2025)	NetChoice, LLC v. Bonta (9th Cir. 2024); Anderson v. TikTok Inc. (3rd Cir. 2024)
	Safety By Design	California (A.B. 1043) (2025)	
Age Verification & Parental Controls	Age Verification for Social Media Sites	Louisiana (S.B. 162) (2023) Texas (H.B. 18) (2023) Florida (H.B. 3) (2024)	
	Age Verification for Pornography and Adult Sites	Texas (H.B. 1181) (2023) South Dakota (H.B. 1053) (2025) South Carolina (H.B. 3424) (2024)	Free Speech Coalition, Inc. v. Paxton, June 27, 2025
	Parental Consent	Virginia (S.B. 854) (2025) Mississippi (H.B. 1126) (2024)	OpenX Settlement with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) for violating COPPA (Dec. 15, 2021)
	Parental Controls & Information	Arkansas (S.B. 611) (2025) Louisiana (S.B. 162) (2023) Tennessee (H.B. 1891) (2024)	
Education	Digital Safety Education	West Virginia (S.B. 466) (2024) Virginia (S.B. 905) (2023)	
	Technology In Schools & Public Spaces	Colorado (H.B. 25-1135) (2025) Pennsylvania (S.B. 187) (2024) Texas (H.B. 1481) (2025)	Price v. New York City Board of Education (N.Y. Sup. Ct. App. Div., 2008)
Protection From Sexual Exploitation	CSAM	California (A.B. 1394) (2023) Arkansas (H.B. 1877) (2025) West Virginia (S.B. 198) (2025) California (A.B. 1831) (2024)	Doe 1 v. Twitter, Inc. (9th Cir. 2025); United States v. Mecham (5th Cir. 2020)
	Sextortion	Mississippi (H.B. 1196) (2024) South Carolina (H.B. 3583) (2023) Kentucky (S.B. 73) (2025) California (A.B. 2932) (2024)	
	Content Moderation	Mississippi (H.B. 1126) (2024) Louisiana (S.B. 162) (2023)	
Other	App Store Regulations	Texas (S.B. 2420) (2025) Utah (S.B. 142) (2025) Louisiana (H.B. 570) (2025)	
	Other Moderation Requirements	California (S.B. 1504 & A.B. 2481) Texas (H.B. 18) (2023)	

## Current Policy Actions: Sample U.S. Federal & International Legislation

Protection Level	U.S. Federal Legislation	Sample International Legislation
Design	Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) <sup>24</sup>	UK Age-Appropriate Design Code <sup>25</sup>
Age Verification & Parental Controls	Federal Alcohol Administration Act <sup>26</sup> Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act <sup>27</sup>	UK Online Safety Act <sup>28</sup>
Education	Children’s Internet Protection Act <sup>29</sup>	UK Education Act 2002 <sup>30</sup> & Statutory Guidance <sup>31</sup>
Protection From Sexual Exploitation	18 U.S.C. § 2422(b) (Enticement and Coercion); 18 U.S.C. § 2251, 18 U.S.C. §§ 2252 and 2252A (CSAM); 18 U.S.C. § 2256(8)(B)–(C) (Visual Depiction); 18 U.S.C. § 1466A (Obscene Visual Depictions of Minors); 18 U.S.C. § 2258A (Requires Reporting to NCMEC); REPORT Act (Public Law 118–59) amended § 2258A to expand the duty to report to include apparent violations of 18 U.S.C. § 1591 (minor sex trafficking) and § 2422(b) (coercion/enticement)	Lanzarote Convention <sup>32</sup> and EU Digital Services Act <sup>33</sup>
Other	None	UK Online Safety Act <sup>28</sup> , EU Digital Services Act <sup>33</sup> , and UK Age-Appropriate Design Code <sup>25</sup>



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