

## United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary

### Testimony of Stephen Balkam, CEO and Founder Family Online Safety Institute

July 9, 2019

- Minors, particularly young children, must be protected from the worst of the web
- We need a Culture of Responsibility where government, industry, law enforcement, parents, teachers and children work together to make the Internet safer for all
- Parents, in particular, need help to understand the technology and how best to set rules for their children
- Ultimately, we must instill resiliency in our children and move from protection to empowerment, from blocking to monitoring and from restrictions to responsibility

Good morning Chairman Graham, Ranking Member Feinstein, and distinguished members of the committee.

My name is Stephen Balkam and I am the CEO and Founder of the Family Online Safety Institute (FOSI). FOSI is an international, non-profit, membership organization working to make the online world safer for children and their families.<sup>1</sup> We achieve this by identifying and promoting the best practices, tools and methods in the field of online safety that also respect free speech. FOSI convenes leaders from industry, government and non-profits to collaborate and innovate new solutions and policies in the field of online safety. Through the development of research, resources, events and special projects, FOSI promotes a culture of responsibility online and encourages a sense of digital citizenship for all.

In over a decade of working in online safety we have seen the challenges change and the concerns of parents and lawmakers evolve, but throughout this time the one thing that we have seen most likely to ensure the safety of children is instilling a sense of resilience in them. This guides their reactions when they see something inappropriate, leads them to be upstanders not bystanders in the face of bullying, and makes the Internet safer for all children.

The Internet enhances the educational and social lives of children. Their use of this media allows them to gain knowledge in a variety of new and engaging ways, in and out of the classroom. Children are able to

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<sup>1</sup> FOSI members include Amazon, AT&T, Comcast, Crisp, CTIA, Disney, ESA, Facebook, Google, GSMA, Mattel, The Meet Group, Microsoft, MPAA, NCTA, Netflix, Roblox, Snap, T Mobile USA, Tencent, Toy Association, Telstra Foundation, TikTok, Twitter, Verizon, VIPKid.

create and share their own content and express their ideas, thoughts and experiences on a worldwide platform. Being online creates opportunities that take them far beyond their homes and communities; they are able to instantaneously explore the world, and immerse themselves in different cultures, geographies and periods in history. The skills children learn through their online exploration in early life prepare them for their future by providing knowledge, resilience, and the digital skills that are vital for functioning in a modern, technology-driven era.

While the many benefits of the Internet are undeniable, the accompanying risks and challenges cannot be discounted. Often, the skills and knowledge that children have about new media far exceeds that of their parents. There is illegal activity online, just as there is offline. There is the possibility that children will be exposed to content and interactions that are harmful to their development and well-being. At FOSI, we do not seek to diminish the existence of risks on the Internet, but rather to focus on the constructive ways that they can be managed, and balanced, against the benefits and opportunities of being online.

We believe the key to ensuring safe, productive, and positive experiences on the Internet for all children is to build a culture of responsibility online. This can only be accomplished if six separate entities work together to create a safer Internet. The essential components are: 1) government; 2) industry; 3) law enforcement; 4) parents; 5) teachers; and 6) children.

### **Culture of Responsibility**

Hearings like the one today are an important part of the oversight and support role that government needs to play in order to create a safer Internet for all. The bully-pulpit afforded to those in office is invaluable in this work and we encourage you all to think carefully about your contribution to ensuring the online safety of children in your state. A good example of this work is the BeBest initiative<sup>2</sup> spearheaded by First Lady Melania Trump. FOSI has been pleased to engage with Mrs. Trump at her roundtable discussions on technology and cyber safety, as well as the BeBest launch in May of 2018. Furthermore, we were honored to have her speak at our Annual Conference last November, highlighting the important work of students from Microsoft's Council for Digital Good. When those with a substantial platform use it to bring awareness to the broad spectrum of issues that children face while growing up online, the better equipped parents, teachers, and other trusted adults can be to help them mitigate those issues.

As a membership organization, we work closely with the companies producing the ground-breaking services that are used by us all. We support effective oversight of industry self-regulation, believing that this allows for maximum innovation and the development of creative solutions. We push executives and engineers to think carefully about safety and privacy from inception until release, and well beyond the launch.

In recent years we have been heartened by the commitment shown to safety by many of the top companies. Industry has responded to concerns about screen time by developing tools to allow parents to impose time limits and giving consumers more information about their usage. Privacy for younger children is

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/bebest/>

increasingly one of the first things that companies consider when developing a new connected toy, protecting children online is no longer an afterthought, nor can it afford to be.

As part of the culture of responsibility, we believe that law enforcement must be fully resourced and given the tools and training to combat the rise in cybercrime. The ever-evolving nature of criminal activity via the Internet, and the increase in the reporting of online criminal behavior, means that providing law enforcement with proper support is essential for the success of their efforts.

It is vital that parents be engaged and knowledgeable about what their children are doing on the Internet. Proper guidance and oversight by parents and caregivers is necessary to ensuring that children have safe online experiences, and develop the resiliency they need to navigate their digital lives with confidence. Anecdotally, we know that parents are worried about the amount of time their children are spending on devices, as well as the content that they are accessing. Where possible we seek to allay these concerns by empowering parents to safely navigate the online world with their children. We encourage them to talk to their kids frequently about online safety, to play games and explore educational and creative content online together.

When necessary, it is also important for parents to understand how to employ technology to curate what is appropriate for their child to see. Many companies provide parental control tools or settings for their services, but unfortunately uptake remains low. FOSI's 2018 research report entitled 'Online Safety Across the Generations' found that while 91% of parents had household rules about when or where their child could use certain devices, only 63% reported actually using at least one of a list of parental control tools, programs or apps to control their child's Internet use.<sup>3</sup>

This is an unfortunate drop off rate, as companies work hard to equip parents with technical resources that can be tailored for their unique family situations. Phone carriers provide products to help parents with their child's first smartphone, while online services allow for curated search and on many platforms parents can monitor usage and block inappropriate content.

Providing and encouraging the use of online safety tools is a community-wide effort and we should all work hard to help parents learn about, and embrace, the tools available to them. At FOSI we do this through our Good Digital Parenting portal, which includes videos, free practical resources, and an experts blog with guidance on a vast number of digital parenting topics.<sup>4</sup> This content is all developed and cultivated with the aim of empowering parents, and benefiting their families.

Kids spend a vast amount of time online at school, in the classroom and completing homework. For many children and parents, schools are one of the first places they begin to seek help and information on digital challenges. Therefore, first-rate technology training must be provided to all teachers. This will enable them to incorporate digital citizenship and media literacy teaching across the curriculum, teaching children to become informed citizens with the skills necessary to safely and competently navigate the online world, as well as helping families integrate technology into their lives in healthy ways.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.fosi.org/policy-research/online-safety-across-generations/>

<sup>4</sup> [www.fosi.org/parenting](http://www.fosi.org/parenting)

## **Resiliency and Empowerment**

Children must be educated on how to operate as good digital citizens; to know about the rights and responsibilities that come with being online, to understand the consequences of sharing personal information, and to empower them to make the right decisions when they see upsetting content or inappropriate behavior. Through teaching children to make good decisions, they can be better protected from the potential risks that exist online.

Ideally, resilient children would be taught to make wise personal choices about the content they access and post online, the people they choose to engage with, and how they conduct themselves overall on the Internet.

They would understand that their actions create a ‘digital footprint’, and that this online reputation can impact their future both for better or worse. In order to instill this resiliency, it is vital to educate children on how to critically analyze content online, and to prioritize a strong foundation in both media and digital literacy.

There is no way that the Internet and all digital media can be made 100% safe, and while it is vital that we do everything we can to protect children we must also empower them to take charge of their digital lives and reputation. The steps that we as parents, government, law enforcement, or teachers take to protect a 7-year-old will not be the same for a 17-year-old. We must move from protection to empowerment, from blocking to monitoring, and from restrictions to responsibility.

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Let me conclude by urging you to not underestimate the benefits and opportunities that enrich the lives of so many American children. Their access to information, the freedom to express themselves, and the cultivation of skills that will equip them to compete and thrive in a connected world must be ensured. We must protect them as they grow, expand their horizons and prepare for their future digital lives in the most effective way possible. Through our extensive experience, we believe the best way to do this is to engage the whole technology eco-system to innovate, apply existing laws, raise awareness, and empower parents.

It is only through working together that we can ensure that we acknowledge the risks, mitigate the harms, and allow all children to reap the benefits of their online lives.

Thank you for your time this morning and I look forward to your questions