



Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood

CENTER FOR  
DIGITAL  
DEMOCRACY

May 19, 2015

Donald Clark, Secretary  
Federal Trade Commission  
600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW  
Washington, D.C. 20580

Re: Request for Investigation into Google's Unfair and Deceptive Practices in Connection with its YouTube Kids App

Dear Mr. Clark:

On April 7, a coalition of children's and consumer groups<sup>1</sup> urged the Commission to investigate whether Google's YouTube Kids app was unfair and deceptive toward children and parents in violation of Section 5 of the FTC Act.<sup>2</sup> In subsequent research of YouTube Kids conducted by the Campaign for Commercial Free Childhood (CCFC) and the Center for Digital Democracy (CDD), we have discovered that Google's deceptive practices toward parents are even more widespread and pervasive than we documented in our initial request for investigation. CDD and CCFC are writing to share our new findings as additional evidence supporting our complaint that Google's YouTube Kids app is unfair and deceptive.

CDD and CCFC's further review of YouTube Kids demonstrates that the app is rife with videos that would not meet anyone's definition of "family friendly." In fact, YouTube Kids contains many videos that would not only be disturbing for young children to view, but potentially harmful. Over the course of our review of YouTube Kids, we found:

- Explicit sexual language presented amidst cartoon animation
- A profanity-laced parody of the film *Casino* featuring Bert and Ernie from Sesame Street
- Graphic adult discussions about family violence, pornography and child suicide
- Jokes about pedophilia and drug use
- Modeling of unsafe behaviors such as playing with lit matches
- Advertising for alcohol products

We have attached a video compilation that includes examples of many of the above.<sup>3</sup> It is important to note, however, that the clips we have included are a tiny fraction of the

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<sup>1</sup> The Center for Digital Democracy, Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Center for Science in the Public Interest, Children Now, Consumer Federation of America, Consumer Watchdog, Public Citizen and Corporate Accountability International.

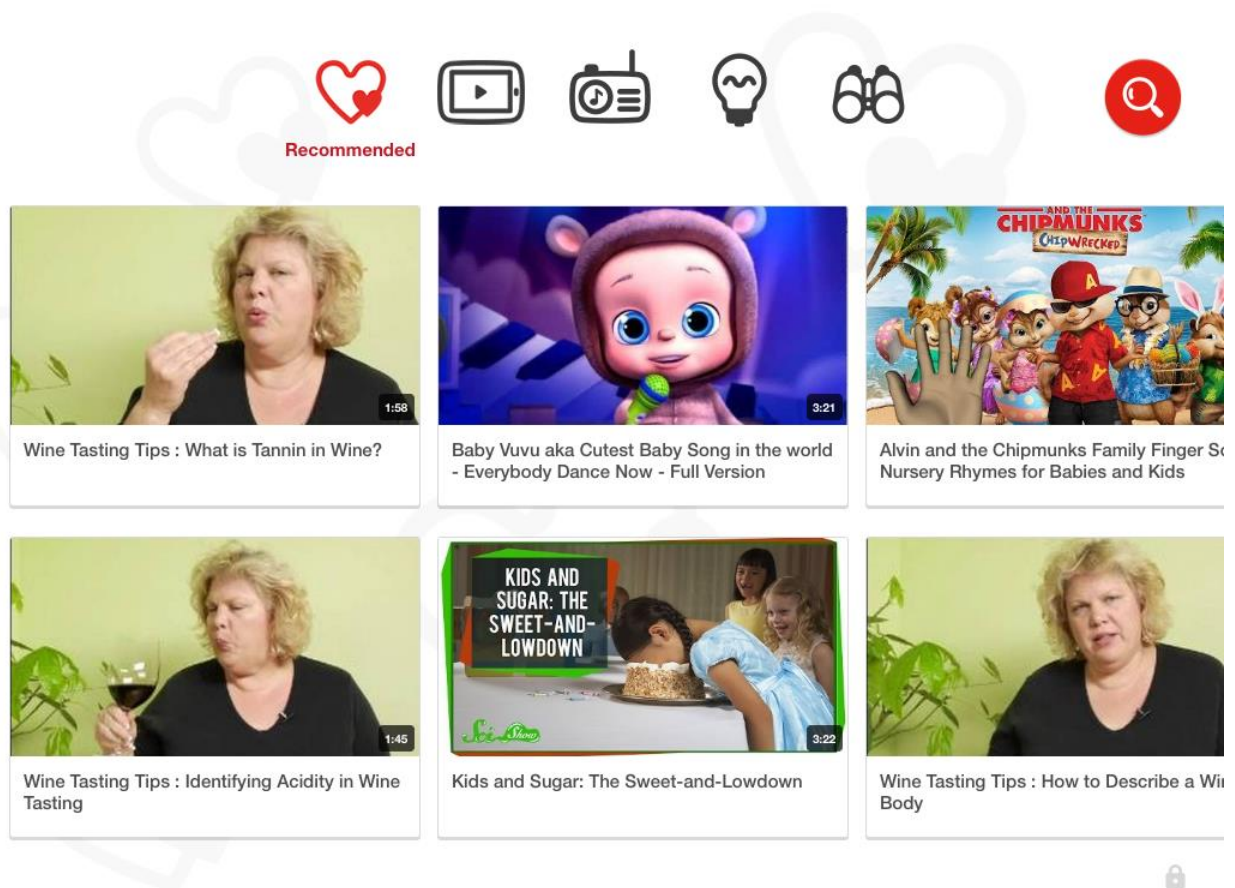
<sup>2</sup> Request for Investigation into Google's Unfair and Deceptive Practices in Connection with its YouTube Kids App. (2015, April 7). Retrieved from

<http://commercialfreechildhood.org/sites/default/files/youtubekidsletttert.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> A complete list of the videos included in our compilation and the search terms we used to find them are included in Exhibit C. The compilation video can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/127837914>. Additional videos cited in this letter were discovered by Marco Acevedo who has launched a petition to Google to recall YouTube Kids at <https://www.change.org/p/google-inc-demand-google-recall-youtube-kids-app>

inappropriate content on YouTube Kids. For instance, we have included a clip of one Budweiser commercial; as of May 11, 2015, there were at least thirteen Budweiser commercials available on YouTube Kids, and there are many other videos that promote alcohol consumption on the app. Given the inadequacies of the screening process and the constant addition of new videos to YouTube Kids,<sup>4</sup> it would be virtually impossible for anyone to catalog all of the inappropriate content that is accessible on the app.

Making matters worse, the design of the app appears to facilitate access to videos that are inappropriate for children. As users of YouTube Kids search for material, the app begins to recommend similar videos, as the “Recommended” function on YouTube Kids is apparently based on “Search” history. When we were conducting our review, YouTube Kids actually began *recommending* videos about wine tasting on its app for preschoolers, as the screen shot below indicates. Thus, the more inappropriate videos children search for, the more inappropriate videos they will be shown via the app’s “Recommended” function.



### YouTube Kids Recommends Wine Tasting Videos

The breadth of the inappropriate material available on the app is deceptive in light of Google’s public claims to parents that YouTube Kids is a safe place for children under five to explore. Google’s representations that the app is safe for children have been an integral part of

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[due-to-content-unsuitable-for-children](#). Mr. Acevedo made videos of himself accessing inappropriate content on YouTube Kids. A list of Mr. Acevedo’s videos can be found in Exhibit D.

<sup>4</sup> “[N]ew content is added all the time, much like on YouTube itself.” Quoted in Perez, S. (2015, February 23). Hands On With “YouTube Kids,” Google’s Newly Launched, Child-Friendly YouTube App. *Tech Crunch*. Retrieved from <http://techcrunch.com/2015/02/23/hands-on-with-youtube-kids-googles-newly-launched-child-friendly-youtube-app/>

Google's promotion of YouTube Kids to parents. When the app was first launched, Shimrit Ben-Yair, YouTube Kids Group Product Manager, wrote on the YouTube Official Blog, "Today, we're introducing the YouTube Kids app, the first Google product built from the ground up with little ones in mind."<sup>5</sup> She later added, "For years, families have come to YouTube, watching countless hours of videos on all kinds of topics. Now, parents can rest a little easier knowing that videos in the YouTube Kids app are narrowed down to content appropriate for kids." On iTunes, the app is listed as "Made for Ages 5 and Under" and "packed full of age-appropriate videos."<sup>6</sup>

While YouTube Kids has curated channels, Google also claims the "app makes it safer and easier for children to find videos on topics they want to explore" by using the search function.<sup>7</sup> The search function is explicitly designed to be used by pre-literate children: "[W]e've built in voice search so that even if your child can't spell or type, they can still find videos of things they're curious about."

When kids search on YouTube Kids, they search a smaller pool of videos than are available on the primary YouTube platform, and ostensibly limited to those videos that Google has deemed appropriate for a young audience. On the YouTube Kids iTunes page, Google claims, "When families search in the app, we use a mix of input from our users and automated analysis to categorize and screen out the videos that make parents nervous."<sup>8</sup>

Elsewhere, Ben-Yair has described the filtering process from YouTube to YouTube Kids in greater detail:

The content in the app is first algorithmically filtered for its child-friendliness, Ben-Yair explains. Then YouTube takes a second step towards curation, using a team who manually samples the videos for quality control. This two-step process means there may be a slight delay between when content appears on YouTube initially and when it becomes available in the app, she says. But new content is added all the time, much like on YouTube itself.<sup>9</sup>

Google's claims that they have designed a safe product that children can use without supervision do not hold up in light of CCFC and CDD's recent findings. The fact that children can find the very content that would make many parents nervous demonstrates that Google's promise to screen out certain content is a hollow one.

The same problems described above have been noted by parents who were shocked by the content they discovered on YouTube Kids. In reviews on Google Play and iTunes, parents report finding pornographic cartoons, videos laced with profanity, and videos featuring graphic

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<sup>5</sup> What's happening on YouTube: Introducing the newest member of our family, the YouTube Kids app--available on Google Play and the App Store. (2015, February 23). Retrieved from <http://youtube-global.blogspot.com/2015/02/youtube-kids.html>

<sup>6</sup> YouTube Kids. (2015, May 1) Retrieved from <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/youtube-kids/id936971630?mt=8v>

<sup>7</sup> What's happening on YouTube: Introducing the newest member of our family, the YouTube Kids app--available on Google Play and the App Store. (2015, February 23). Retrieved from <http://youtube-global.blogspot.com/2015/02/youtube-kids.html>

<sup>8</sup> YouTube Kids. (2015, May 1) Retrieved from <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/youtube-kids/id936971630?mt=8v>

<sup>9</sup> Perez, S. (2015, February 23). Hands On With "YouTube Kids," Google's Newly Launched, Child-Friendly YouTube App. *Tech Crunch*. Retrieved from <http://techcrunch.com/2015/02/23/hands-on-with-youtube-kids-googles-newly-launched-child-friendly-youtube-app/>

violence.<sup>10</sup> Another parent launched an online petition to Google after discovering YouTube Kids “includes videos filled with profanity, sexually explicit material, alcohol, smoking and drug references.”<sup>11</sup> Google is therefore deceiving parents who undoubtedly rely on the company’s representations that it has created a product that is appropriate for young children.

Additionally, Google is engaging in deceptive practices because many of the inappropriate ads we identified violate their own policies. The YouTube Kids Advertising Policy states that ads for “Illegal or Regulated Products” such as alcohol are prohibited on the app.<sup>12</sup> As described above, CCFC and CDD found multiple videos for alcohol that appeared to be ads that previously aired on television. Google’s ad policy reinforces the company’s public statements that the app is safe for young children – representations that parents rely upon when downloading the app for their children. But with a simple search, YouTube Kids users can find alcohol ads that Google expressly promised would not be in the app.

In sum, Google does not, in fact, “screen out the videos that make parents nervous” and its representations of YouTube Kids as a safe, child-friendly version of YouTube are deceptive. Parents who download the app are likely to expose their children to the very content they believed they would avoid by using the preschool version of YouTube. In addition to the unfair and deceptive marketing practices we identified in our initial request for an investigation, it is clear that Google is deceiving parents about the effectiveness of their screening processes and the content on YouTube Kids. We urge the Commission to expand its investigation to include the concerns documented here and take decisive action to stop Google from deceiving parents and exposing children to harmful content.

Respectfully submitted,

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<sup>10</sup> See Exhibit D

<sup>11</sup> Petition to “Demand Google recall YouTube Kids app due to content unsuitable for children,” <https://www.change.org/p/google-inc-demand-google-recall-youtube-kids-app-due-to-content-unsuitable-for-children>

<sup>12</sup> Advertising on YouTube Kids. (2015). Retrieved from <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/6168681?hl=en>.

EXHIBIT A  
Launch of YouTube Kids on Official YouTube Blog



## Introducing the newest member of our family, the YouTube Kids app--available on Google Play and the App Store

Posted: Monday, February 23, 2015

[g+](#) 6.7k [Tweet](#) 2,043 [Like](#) 5.7k

Like most parents, I love helping my kids learn more about something they're interested in. For example, right now, I spend a lot of time on YouTube with my 3-year-old son, who loves watching videos of car washes, Super Simple Songs, and about the universe. We're not the only ones: Families worldwide are watching millions of videos on YouTube. And lately, those of us at YouTube have been working on a new way for our kids--and yours--to discover and explore videos on every topic in, well, the universe.

Today, we're introducing the YouTube Kids app, the first Google product built from the ground up with little ones in mind. The app makes it safer and easier for children to find videos on topics they want to explore, and is available for free on Google Play and the App Store in the U.S.



Introducing the new YouTube Kids app

A YouTube Spotlight sidebar widget. It features a search bar at the top, followed by the YouTube Spotlight logo and a "YouTube" button with "22M" next to it. Below this are sections for "Labels", "Archive", and "Feed". At the bottom, it says "YouTube on" with a logo, a "Follow @youtube" button, and a "Like" button with "80m" next to it. A link to the "YouTube Help Center" is also present.

### Bright and playful design

Your 4-year-old may already be a swiping expert, but the app's design makes it even easier to find Pocoyo or the latest episode of *See-ee Street's The Furchester Hotel*. With larger images, bold icons and more, it's fast and simple for little thumbs to navigate. And we've built in voice search so that even if your child can't spell or type, they can still find videos of things they're curious about.

### Family-focused content

For years, families have come to YouTube, watching countless hours of videos on all kinds of topics. Now, parents can rest a little easier knowing that videos in the YouTube Kids app are narrowed down to content appropriate for kids. You can browse channels and playlists in four categories: Shows, Music, Learning and Explore. Or search for videos of particular interest to your family, like how to build a model volcano, math tutorials, the amazing (and endless) world of trains—and everything in between.

Along with favorites from DreamWorksTV, Jim Henson TV, Mother Goose Club, Talking Tom and Friends and more, your kids can watch new series from YouTube channels they already like. Discover new facts about dinosaurs from National Geographic Kids; learn about technology from Reading Rainbow; or watch Thomas the Tank Engine leave the world of Sodor for the first time in 70 years to travel the globe. Plus, more new videos are coming soon from beloved YouTubers like John and Hank Green of the Vlogbrothers and Stampylonghead.

### Parental controls

We realize every family is different, so we've built options into the app that help you control the experience for your kids:

- **Timer:** Let the app be the bad guy with a built-in timer that lets you limit kids' screen time. The app alerts your child when the session is over, so you don't have to. (You're welcome. :))
- **Sound settings:** Sometimes you need a little peace and quiet! You have an option to turn off background music and sound effects, so your kids can keep watching while you catch a breather.
- **Search settings:** If you'd rather limit your children to just the pre-selected videos available on the home screen, you can turn off search.
- **Product feedback:** Our goal is to improve YouTube Kids all the time, so we've included a space for you to give us your feedback.



YouTube Kids is available for free starting today in the U.S. on Google Play and the App Store, and will soon be available on Kurio and nabi kids' tablets.

This is the first step toward reimagining YouTube for families, but with your help, the app will continue to get better over time. We're excited to start this chapter with you—so from our family to yours, enjoy!

*Shimrit Ben-Yair, mother of two and YouTube Kids Group Product Manager, recently watched "How Big is the Universe" with her kids, along with countless "car wash" videos.*

## EXHIBIT B

### YouTube Kids Description on iTunes

By Google, Inc.

Open iTunes to buy and download apps.



[View in iTunes](#)

⊕ This app is designed for both iPhone and iPad

**Free**

Category: [Entertainment](#)

Updated: May 01, 2015

Version: 1.12

Size: 47.8 MB

Language: English

Seller: Google, Inc.

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**Rated 4+**

Made for Ages 5 and Under

**Compatibility:** Requires iOS 7.0 or later. Compatible with iPhone, iPad, and iPod touch. This app is optimized for iPhone 5 and iPhone 6.

#### Description

The official YouTube Kids app is designed for curious little minds to dive into a world of discovery, learning, and entertainment. This free app is delightfully simple and packed full of age-appropriate videos, channels and playlists. YouTube Kids features popular children's programming, plus kid-friendly content from filmmakers, teachers, and creators all around the world.

#### DESIGNED FOR KIDS

We've taken out the complicated stuff and made an app even little ones can navigate — that means big buttons, easy scrolling, and instant full-screen.

#### VIDEOS KIDS WILL LOVE

Kids can enjoy favorites like Sesame Street, Thomas & Friends, and Dreamworks, online hits like Mother Goose Club, TuTiTu, and Super Simple Songs, plus anything else they're into — music, gaming, science, crafts, and more.

#### VIDEOS PARENTS CAN FEEL GOOD ABOUT

We're as focused on kids' safety as you are, so we've built the YouTube Kids app to be a family-friendly place to explore.

When your child browses the app's home screen, they'll find a vast selection of kid-appropriate channels and playlists. When families search in the app, we use a mix of input from our users and automated analysis to categorize and screen out the videos that make parents nervous.

And for added peace of mind, parents can quickly notify YouTube if they see anything questionable directly from the app.

#### SETTINGS FOR PARENTS

You can turn off search for an even more contained experience. Or set the built-in timer to let your kids know when it's time to stop watching (so you don't have to). The app puts these settings behind a grown-ups-only lock, out of kids' reach.

YouTube Kids. Made for curious little minds.

## EXHIBIT C

### Video Segments in CCFC/CDD YouTube Kids Compilation

All searches conducted and recording completed on May 5, 2015.

Search term used: FCC

Video title: Yakko, Wakko, and Dot sing The Freaking FCC

Run Time: 1:21

Search term used: MJ dancing

Video title: How to Do the Crotch Grab / MJ Dancing

Run Time: 1:46

Search term used: dog ad

Video title: Budweiser Dog Commercial

Run Time: 1:01

Search term used: why choose

Video title: Why we choose suicide / Mark Henick / TEDx Toronto

Run Time: 15:27

Search term used: Barack Obama

Video title: President Barack Obama on Tweeting and Smartphones

Run Time: 3:11

Search term used: FCC

Video title: Yakko, Wakko, and Dot sing The Freaking FCC\*

Run Time: 1:21

Search term used: MJ dancing

Video title: How to Do the Crotch Grab / MJ Dancing\*

Run Time: 1:46

Search term used: red wine

Video title: Types of Red Wine: What is Red Wine?

Run Time: 2:23

Search term used: acid

Video title: One Huge Acid Trip? Regular Show Theory; Cartoon Conspiracy

Run Time: 3:05

Search term used: matches

Video title: ASMR lighting matches. Playing with matches and a matchbox.

Run Time: 8:41

Search term used: Sarah Jessica Parker

Video title: Covet Sarah Jessica Parker Commercial

Run time: 0:46

Search term used: MJ dancing

Video title: How to Do the Crotch Grab / MJ Dancing\*



Run Time: 1:46

Search term used: family tradition

Video title: Violence: A Family Tradition/Robbyn Peters Bennett/TEDx Bellingham

Run Time: 13:26

Search term used: FCC

Video title: Yakko, Wakko, and Dot sing The Freaking FCC\*

Run Time: 1:21

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\* indicates additional clip from previously listed video

## EXHIBIT D

### Videos from YouTube Kids Listed on Marco Acevedo's Change.org petition

<https://www.change.org/p/google-inc-demand-google-recall-youtube-kids-app-due-to-content-unsuitable-for-children>

A lecture discussing hardcore pornography by Cindy Gallop

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EgtcEq7jpAk>

A "Sesame Street" episode dubbed with long strings of expletives

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kVkqzE-iiEY>

References to pedophilia in a homemade video reviewing a "My Little Pony" episode

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7K9uH4d-HnU>

A DIY video on conducting illegal piracy, featuring pictures of marijuana leaves

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZDF5uqORA0>

A how-to on getting a dark tan in a tanning bed

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kBP-2kD-iNs>

An ad for Puma featuring scantily clad women

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t0HNhrh29k0>

A tour of London pubs, featuring plenty of drinking

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZrEcljFiE8U>

A how-to on using a circular saw

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A\\_3EumBS2qc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_3EumBS2qc)

**EXHIBIT E**  
**Reviews from YouTube Kids from Google Play and iTunes**  
Accessed May 11, 2015

**iTunes**

<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/youtube-kids/id936971630?mt=8>

**NEEDS MORE FILTERS!! [One star] by Arsloan – May 8, 2015**

We recently removed this app, after my 4 year old daughter came across very inappropriate videos popping up in her feed. We always supervise her while watching. And while we at first loved this app,...she would watch playdoh videos and baking videos. It quickly started suggesting videos that were scary to her. Kids using foul language, making toys stab each other, etc. The kicker was when she “thought” she was playing a FROZEN game with Elsa, and it turned out to be a pregnant Elsa, and the video asked you to grab a scalpel and give Elsa a cesarean. What the???? Until this app improves, and allows for more than simply “reporting” a video....we have removed it. There was no way to filter out certain users. DO NOT LET YOUR KIDS USE UNSUPERVISED. ( my kiddo isn’t old enough to search...these were just popping up on her feed)

**5 and under? [Two stars] by MalenaJackson – May 10, 2015**

I don’t understand why an app intended for five and under would have videos concerning a game made for 9 and over. My kids going on night 3 of nightmares after watching one clip of five nights at Freddy’s. It’s a shame cause other than that we thought this app was great. Now I have to delete it.

**PORNOGRAPHIC VIDEOS SHOW UP AS RECOMMENDATIONS!! [One star] by Chunky punky – May 4, 2015**

Do NOT allow your children to use this app unsupervised (or just don’t download it at all) My 4 year old was just watching Peppa Pig and the video that popped up next under “recommended videos” was a pornographic cartoon called “Peppa Penis.” I am FURIOUS. The only reason I gave this one star is because no stars isn’t an option.

**Inappropriate Language found [One star] by Cdefgabc12 – May 2, 2015**

Video just popped up with F word in title. Who is filtering these videos? Also watched on that said “crap” and “what the hell”? I don’t remember any of these words as being kid appropriate. Very disappointed!

**Racist cartoons and smut! [One star] by Rwh88pissed – May 6, 2015**

DO NOT LET YOUR KIDS USE THIS APP!! Some of these videos play kids music while actually showing porn cartoons or one racist little skit I found about a black guy that goes around robbing white people. Parents be warned!

**Google Play**

<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.google.android.apps.youtube.kids&hl=enb>

**[Three stars] by [cynthia browne](#) – May 3, 2015**

Help please, love it except.... Normally I really like this app for my young kids, but today my son found a cartoon (runaway cartoon) where the characters where taking their clothes off and covering their naked bodies with their hands. I think this is absolutely inappropriate to be on a children's app and I would like to know if videos can be flagged for removal.

**[Two stars] by [Todd Brenfoerder](#) – May 1, 2015**

Needs more control and filters Thought it would be cool for my five year old, but he has found videos on the main page with explicit language in it. There is no way to remove those videos or restrict them.