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, and adolescents who spend an hour a day chatting on social networks report less satisfaction with nearly every aspect of their lives. 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. 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

3 Ibid.
about their bodies, and to have dieted. Teen social media use is also linked to unhealthy sleep habits.

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. Almost half of parents say that regulating their child’s screen time is a constant battle. 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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In the past year, Facebook has come under increased scrutiny for helping to spread false information,\(^8\) preparing research for an advertising client on how to target teens when they are emotionally vulnerable,\(^9\) and allowing advertisers to discriminate based on age\(^10\) and ethnicity\(^11\) and target messages to racists and anti-Semites.\(^12\) In response to some of these scandals, you have personally vowed to “do better.”\(^13\)

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.)

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Public Citizen
Story of Stuff
TRUCE (Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Childhood Entertainment)
United Opt Out National

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Criscillia Benford, PhD, co-author of Sensory Metrics of Neuromechanical Trust

Barbara Biggins OAM; Honorary CEO, Australian Council on Children and the Media; author of Television and young children. Quality, choice and the role of parents: what the experts and parents say; Editor, small screen

Dr. Barbara Brock, Professor Emeritus, Eastern Washington University; author of Living Outside the Box: TV Free Families Share Their Secrets

Jacques Brodeur, Peace and Media Educator, creator of Edupax's 10 Day Screen-Free Challenge

Michael Brody MD; Former Chair of the Media Committee of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry; Institute of Digital Media and Child Development, University of Maryland; author of Seductive Screens: Children's Media Past, Present and Future

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Raffi Cavoukian, singer, author, founder of Child Honouring

Jean Ciborowski Fahey, PhD, author of *Make Time for Reading: a story guide for parents of babies and young children*

Kathleen M. Clarke-Pearson, MD FAAP; Committee on Federal Government Affairs and Council on Media and Communications, American Academy of Pediatrics; Board Member, NC Child, the Voice for North Carolina’s Children

Joe Clement, author of *Screen Schooled: Two Veteran Teachers Expose How Technology Overuse Is Making Our Kids Dumber*

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Tracy Cutchlow, author of *Zero to Five: 70 Essential Parenting Tips Based on Science*; editor of *The Brain Rules* series

Gloria DeGaetano, Founder/Director Parent Coaching Institute; author of *Parenting Well In a Media Age: Keeping Our Kids Human*

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Richard Freed, PhD, author of *Wired Child: Reclaiming Childhood in a Digital Age*

Douglas Gerwin, PhD; Executive Director, Research Institute for Waldorf Education

Baroness Susan Greenfield CBE, Founder and CEO Neuro-Bio Ltd

Lynne Reeves Griffin RN, Med; Executive Director of Proactive Parenting; author of *Negotiation Generation: Take Back Your Parental Authority Without Punishment*; Former faculty member, Wheelock College

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