

Facebook Messenger for six-year-olds

What do You Think?

Facebook went to great lengths in rolling out the app to assure parents that its latest shiny object was developed “with parents” and “parenting experts” to keep kids “safe.” This was even used as a rationale for developing the app, as [Facebook](#) said in a blog post on the day of the launch, the alleged “need” for a messaging app for young children that gives parents a “level of control”.

But “level” is the operative word here.

While Facebook has designed Messenger Kids so that only parents can approve contacts, and can closely monitor their children’s messaging, this doesn’t mean that kids won’t figure out ways around these controls, as they have with Facebook’s existing platform, on which countless kids who are not yet 13 have lied about their ages and created accounts. It also doesn’t mean that parents, who are often overwhelmed with other concerns, or simply trusting of what their kids tell them about their online “friends,” will actually remain consistently involved in the monitoring of every contact or message.

Facebook promises that the collection of children’s data on Messenger Kids will be limited. But limited to what, and to what end? The company owes parents a much more detailed explanation of what type of data it will be collecting on this app, and how it will be used. Not to generate ads, the company promises (at least for now). OK, but then what kind of data, exactly, will a six-year-old be providing Facebook that it needs to gather?

The issue of data pales in comparison with the more troubling concern of screen time.

In 2016, the American Academy of Paediatrics released [policy recommendations](#) setting strict limits on screen time, particularly at younger ages. Excessive screen time has been linked, in studies, to delayed speech, loss of sleep, and other ills ranging from anxiety to depression to impaired concentration.

What do children really need? They need to play. They need to learn to socialize and communicate face to face. And while Facebook suggests that the purpose of its new app is to allow children who are separated from their parents and grandparents throughout the day to be able to communicate with them, there are already ways for them to do this – there are phones and there is texting, ideally regulated by the person in whose care the children are left.

Messenger Kids will be used by children mostly to talk to each other. They will lose more language skills in favour of sending videos and gifs. They will be communicating more and more through screens, behind which, studies tell us, we are all likely to be more aggressive. Is this really how we want children to grow up, what do you think?