

Children Are Online; Parents Are Locked Out

How the push for federal legislation is giving families across America a fighting chance to reclaim their voice in their children's online world

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Demaune A. Millard is the President and CEO of Family League of Baltimore, where since 2018 he has directed more than \$140 million in grantmaking toward the city's children and families. His leadership has earned national recognition from the National Academies, the Wallace Foundation, and the Baltimore Community Foundation for best practices in child wellbeing and family systems. A Baltimore native and father, Millard has dedicated his career to ensuring families have the tools, resources, and voice they deserve.



OPINION

Imagine your 12-year old comes home from school, disappears into his or her room and, within 20 minutes, has downloaded an app that collects his or her location, messages and behavioral patterns — all without you, the parent, ever knowing or being asked. No notification arrives on your phone. No consent is requested. The platform simply decides that your child's data is its business and that you are not part of that decision.

This is not hypothetical. This is any day across America and around the world.

At Family League of Baltimore, our mission is to support children, families and communities by dismantling systemic barriers that limit their possibilities. For decades, we have worked alongside Baltimore's families to ensure that they have the resources they need to thrive. I hear this from the families we serve, and I feel it myself — as a father. My daughter, like your children, is growing up in a world where some of the brightest minds on the planet have engineered apps specifically designed to be irresistible. And yet, for all that sophistication, parents like me are left on the outside looking in, with almost no meaningful say in what our kids encounter or who has access to them.

Parents know their children best. They understand their children's maturity, their vulnerabilities, their readiness. Yet the platforms where children spend many of their waking hours operate as if parents simply do not exist. Children download apps, agree to terms of service and share personal information in a vacuum — no parental awareness required and no consent sought. By the time parents realize what is happening, decisions have already been made for their children digitally.

The good news is that lawmakers at both the state and federal levels have begun to take this seriously. In 2025, Utah became the first state to pass an App Store Accountability Act, requiring app stores to verify users' ages and obtain verifiable parental consent before allowing minors to download apps or make in-app purchases. Texas and Louisiana followed suit, and

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California enacted its own Digital Age Assurance Act. More than a dozen additional states are now considering measures. This moment and momentum are real. The political will is growing across party lines.

At the federal level, the App Store Accountability Act — introduced in the 119th Congress by Rep. John James, R-Mich., and championed in the Senate by Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah — would establish a national standard: App stores must verify user ages, link minors' accounts to parental accounts and obtain verifiable consent before any download or purchase. Parents would be notified. Parents would decide. That authority would sit where it belongs.

That is the approach we support, and the reason why matters. This legislation centralizes accountability where it can be most effective: at the app store level. Apple and Google control the two dominant app stores. They already have account infrastructure. They can verify age upon linking a child's account to a parent's or legal guardian's account and then communicate consent status to developers. Families verify once. Individual developers receive confirmation without collecting additional sensitive data. Less information is shared. Fewer points of exposure. Stronger protection.

Some in Congress have proposed alternative legislation — including the Parents Over Platforms Act — that would instead require age verification on an app-by-app basis. I oppose this approach, and I do so for the sake of the children it claims to protect. Asking parents to submit their child's personal information to every individual app is not protection. It is proliferation of risk. Every app that collects verification data becomes another potential breach and another company storing sensitive details about minors. The App Store Accountability Act avoids this trap entirely. Centralizing the verification. Minimizing the data. Protecting our children.

I am aware that some have pointed to the legal turbulence around state-level laws as cause for hesitation. In December 2025, a federal judge in Texas issued a preliminary injunction blocking that state's App Store Accountability Act from taking effect, citing First Amendment concerns. The ruling is under appeal. Utah's version — substantively similar — took effect in May 2025 and faces no reported legal challenge. Courts remain unsettled on these questions, and the uncertainty is precisely why federal action is so important. A carefully drafted federal law, built on clear constitutional footing and guided by the least restrictive means necessary to achieve its goals, is the durable and sustainable solution. Patchwork state laws invite legal challenges. Congress can do better.

What I want people to understand — what I want Congress to understand — is that this is not a debate about restricting the internet. It is a debate about whether parents should be partners in their own children's digital lives. The answer to that question should not be difficult. The platforms have had years to act voluntarily, yet they have not. The innovation market has not solved this. Parental controls buried in settings menus have not solved this. Legislative action is not a last resort; at this point, it is simply the responsible one.

At Family League, we see every day what happens when families are stripped of their agency and voice. When systems — whether bureaucratic, economic or algorithmic — make decisions for people rather than with them, the results are predictably harmful. Children are not small adults. Their developing brains are uniquely vulnerable and attracted to the persuasive design features these platforms deploy deliberately. We would not hand a 12-year-old the keys to a car because we recognize that maturity and readiness matter. We should extend the same logic to the digital world.

Here is what I am advocating for: Congress should pass the App Store Accountability Act, establishing a uniform national framework that places verification responsibility with the app stores themselves — not with individual developers, not with overwhelmed parents and certainly not with children. Meantime, states should continue building their own legislation, learning from Utah's early implementation and designing laws that will survive constitutional scrutiny. And app store operators should not wait for mandates. Apple and Google have the technical capacity to implement strong age verification and parental notification today. The question is whether they have the will to do so.

The families I work alongside in Baltimore are not asking for perfection. They are asking for a fighting chance. A notification on their phone. An opportunity to say yes or no. A necessary seat at a table that currently has no room for them. That is not too much to ask. Congress should make it happen.