

# Kidfluencers and the mainstreaming of child exploitation

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## Introduction

Collective Shout has led a joint, global, six-year long investigation and [campaign](#) calling on social media giant Meta to stop the sexualisation of children on its platforms. Alongside our partners National Center on Sexual Exploitation (*USA*) and Defend Dignity (*Canada*) we have called for a list of [measures](#) to protect children from predators. Despite our efforts, a list of changes to Meta's terms of service and teen safety tools, and persistent claims that child sexual exploitation has 'no place' on its platforms, Meta has failed to protect children. Instead, it has prioritised profit and allowed a global community of men with sexual interest in children to flourish. It has aided and facilitated them, providing algorithm-driven directories of underage girls' content to view and engage with.

Collective Shout supports a complete ban on 'adult managed' accounts featuring children under the age of 13 on Instagram, recognising that these accounts place children at serious risk of exploitation. We commend the Australian government's move to raise the minimum user age of social media platforms to 16 and recommend this children's rights-based approach as best practice for all States.

## Our research

We set up a 'teen user' research account which today follows 1,700 underage girls' accounts on Instagram. We have spent six years observing and documenting the nature of activity on the accounts: posts; engagement including likes and comments; 'follower' and 'following' lists; stories; livestreams; reels; connections to brands, photographers and page promoters; links to other platforms where more of the girls' content could be viewed and/or purchased; and financial grooming of the girls.

Most of the girls were pre-13 at the time we followed them. Some were toddlers. We traced one - a one-year-old 'mini-blogger' according to her account bio -

from a dedicated child sexual abuse material forum presenting as an appreciation page for rising 'starlets'.

The cohort we follow is primarily made up of self-described models, mini-influencers, mini-bloggers, mini-fashionistas; gymnasts, dancers and cheerleaders – from North and South America, Europe, Asia and Australia. In most cases, we did not have to look for these girls. Instagram's tools sent them straight to us.

Our unrelated daily work and personal time were often interrupted by Instagram notifications directing us to engage with young girls – those we followed, and those we didn't, but who – based on our activity – Instagram determined would match our detected 'interests'. We were pinged with messages directing us, for example, to more young girls to follow and to watch livestreamed videos broadcast by girls we already followed.

Following Instagram's recommendations revealed corporate failings beyond our expectations: a child exploitation enterprise of global proportions, sanitised and legitimised by the underpinning of a publicly listed mainstream social media giant. One which claimed - in response to our reports of child exploitation and related media enquiries – to have 'no place for child exploitation' on its platforms.

In contrast, our investigations led us to conclude and issue strong warnings that **there's no safe place for children on Instagram.**

### **What has Meta done to improve child safety?**

It wasn't that Meta lacked policies apparently designed to protect children. Its terms of use have long explicitly prohibited child sexual abuse material.

But our investigations revealed Meta [rarely enforced](#) its Community Guidelines – even when accounts appeared to engage in illegal activity (for example, advertising child sexual abuse material available for purchase, or sharing URLs and live links to web pages where child exploitation material could be accessed).

Meta maintained a focus on 'teen safety' and Parent guides, insisting even in US Senate Committee hearing testimonies that under-13's were 'not allowed' on its platforms. Meanwhile, we watched these girls exploited in real time, often under the caveat of 'parent-run' or 'mom-managed' accounts, which Meta *did* allow.

And we watched as perpetrators celebrated. They openly laughed at the parents posting content of their young daughters to Instagram and at the social media platforms for allowing it.

In the years since launching our joint, global #wakeupinstagram campaign, we also watched as Meta scrambled to redress (or at least appear to redress) the child sexual abuse on its platforms. In the early days of our campaign, we celebrated multiple wins as the company rolled out tools limiting sexualised comments on teen posts, restricting Direct Messages to teens from adult strangers, adding blurring and warnings on images sent via DM and defaulting teen accounts to maximum safety settings.

An enormous gap in child safety [persisted](#) though, as Meta continued to ignore under-13 users and mom-run 'kidfluencer' accounts.

Our [investigations](#) uncovered hordes of these men following and connecting with young girls on Instagram and interacting in an abusive way. The men financially groomed the girls as paid subscribers to their content.

Often, the men were [directed](#) to other platforms where they could pay to access more of the girl's content. One girl was the subject of multiple mom-run Instagram accounts. The girls' mother [used](#) the Instagram accounts to direct men to subscriber-platform Patreon where they could pay for more child sexual abuse material. She was one of hundreds of kidfluencer victims documented during our investigations.

We saw their content scraped and traded and discussed on forums and other social media platforms. The content – sourced and stolen from Instagram - was turned into new child sexual abuse material.

Disturbingly, we documented some girls' likenesses apparently stolen from Instagram and turned into child sexual abuse dolls designed for men's simulation of child sexual abuse.

We saw Instagram used as a meeting place for predators to connect, communicate and organise. They shared details of encrypted platforms where they could communicate more freely and posted instructions for viewing child sexual abuse material.

At last, this past July, Meta [announced](#) a suite of tools and actions intended to improve safety for children on parent-run (Meta refers to these accounts as 'Adult-managed') under-13 accounts:

- Default strictest message settings to prevent unwanted messages
- Turning on Hidden Words, which filters offensive comments
- Disruption to recommending them to potentially suspicious adults (adults who have been blocked and/or reported by teen accounts) and vice versa, making it harder for them to find each other in Search
- Hiding comments from potentially suspicious adults on their posts (Meta said that this feature 'builds on last year's update to stop allowing accounts primarily featuring children to offer subscriptions or receive gifts')
- Removal of 135,000 Instagram accounts for leaving sexualised comments or requesting sexual images from adult-managed accounts featuring children under 13, and 500,000 Facebook and Instagram accounts linked to those original accounts.

### **Persistent Gaps**

Despite these measures, we have ongoing, serious concerns that parent-run accounts are inherently risky to children and place them at serious risk of exploitation.

### **Predators adapt to new rules**

We know that predators are highly adaptive to new rules rolled out by social media platforms that make it harder for them to find and engage with children. Over our years of investigation, we've seen how men wanting to keep their access to children tailor their online behaviour to evade detection and blocking.

For example, Instagram might detect some emojis or explicit rape [comments](#), block the user and make it harder for them to find other children to follow and engage with. Knowing that, these men disguise their behaviour to maintain access to children and their content. Try scrolling through the viewer list on a parent-run account reel featuring a young girl some time - you'll see what we mean.

## **Surrender of control over children's content**

Instagram's new rules cannot ameliorate the risks a parent-run account poses to a child. Once a child's content is published, the publisher - even the most well-meaning, protective parent - [loses](#) control of it. In the hands of a predator, the content will be used to exploit the child.

## **Meta tools drive children's content to predators**

Six years into our investigations, we still have no need to look for new pre-teens to follow. Instagram continues to serve them up to our 'teen user' research account via a recommender system.

Meta's new tools to disrupt recommendations of children to 'potentially suspicious adults' relies on the honesty of the account holder. We hardly expect men intent on sexualising and exploiting children to be honest about their age when setting up their accounts.

## **Children free-ranging on 'parent-run' accounts**

We have documented the widespread and open grooming and exploitation of young girls by men on Instagram accounts claimed to be 'parent-run' or 'mom-managed'.

Girl can be often unsupervised. Mothers of 'kidfluencers', mini-models and mini-bloggers openly admit their daughters create and post their own content to social media platforms.

## **Parents aid, justify exploitation of their daughters**

Parents themselves are complicit in the exploitation of their own children on Instagram. We have [been exposing](#) this phenomenon for years. A [forensic investigation](#) by the New York Times backed up our discoveries, as did a 2025 Netflix [docuseries](#) about the dangers of kidfluencing. Parents wanting to maximise exposure, reach, engagement and monetisation on their children's content will simply work around the new rules.

## **Children have a right to privacy and protection**

Children have a right to privacy. They cannot consent to the use and abuse of their digital content. Adults who should be protecting these children do not have the right to consent on their behalf.

## **No safe place for kids on Meta platforms**

Despite Meta's new safety features, we maintain our position: there's no safe place for kids on Instagram.

In September 2025, former Meta user-experience researcher and whistleblower Cayce Savage [testified](#) before the United States Senate Judiciary Committee Subcommittee on Privacy, Technology and the Law. In her statement, Savage repeatedly highlighted Meta's efforts to ignore, minimise and even conceal research data exposing harms to children on its platforms, prioritising profit over child safety as a standard:

The reality is that if Meta were to acknowledge the presence of underage users, they would be required to kick those users off of their platform in order to remain COPPA compliant. This isn't happening because it would decrease the number of active users Meta is reporting to shareholders, as well as its engagement metrics. It is more profitable to pretend to have no way of better identifying the real ages of their users. At Meta, engagement is the priority above everything else.

Meta is aware that these children are being harmed... In my time on the (virtual reality user-experience) team, I quickly became aware that it was not uncommon for children in VR to experience [abuse].

Meta consistently demonstrates that it cares more about the bottom line than the emotional or physical safety of the children who use its products every day.

In February 2021, I participated in a Facebook safety research project. During the interview, I could not make sense of the researchers' repeated references to 'teens' and 'teen accounts' on Instagram. I finally interrupted to ask about the

refrain. Researchers responded to say that under 13s were not allowed on their platforms. I knew that was untrue: I followed hundreds of them. With urgency, I told them that if they failed to include a discussion of under 13s in their research they they would end up with an enormous gap in the picture of harm and exploitation happening to girls on Instagram.

At that point, it became clear to me that Meta does not carry out robust research. They carry out public relations exercises to give the appearance of caring about kids and doing the right thing, to satisfy shareholders and ward off criticism.

## **Conclusion**

A generation of children and young people are victims of profit-driven corporates who for years prioritised money over safety and in exchange, facilitated widespread child sexualisation, grooming and exploitation.

We predict the consequences will be dire – for the individual victims and for society more broadly. Already we are [seeing](#) former ‘kidfluencers’ funnelled through the social-media-to-child-sexual-abuse-material-pipeline: girls transitioning from Instagram and TikTok to OnlyFans to produce and sell content once they turn 18.

This trend – and the failings of the mainstream social media platforms contributing to it – must not be allowed to continue unchecked and unchallenged.

We are continuing to push for a Meta-wide ban on ‘adult-managed’ under-13 accounts. We also strongly [supported](#) the introduction of Australian legislation to raise the minimum social media user age to 16. While not a silver bullet, we believe this [measure](#) will help protect children from predators and other social media harms, and rein in irresponsible and unethical corporates who profit. We [recommend](#) this children’s rights-centred approach as best practice for adoption by all States.

Lyn Swanson Kennedy is a campaigner with Collective Shout - for a world free of exploitation ([collectiveshout.org](https://collectiveshout.org)), campaigning against the objectification of women and the sexualisation of girls in media, advertising and popular culture.