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,1 and adolescents who spend an hour a day chatting on social networks report less satisfaction with nearly every aspect of their lives.2 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.3 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.\textsuperscript{4} Teen social media use is also linked to unhealthy sleep habits.\textsuperscript{5}

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.\textsuperscript{6} Almost half of parents say that regulating their child’s screen time is a constant battle.\textsuperscript{7} 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.

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

INDIVIDUALS:  
(affiliations listed for identification purposes only)

Nusheen Ameenuddin, MD, MPH, FAAP Pediatrician

Marilyn Augustyn MD; Professor of Pediatrics, Boston University School of Medicine; Division Director Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics, Boston Medical Center

Sarah Baldwin, MSEd; Early Childhood Educator; author of Nurturing Children and Families; owner, Bella Luna Toys

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

Cori Brownell; The Research Institute at Western Oregon University, Early Childhood Project Specialist

Blakely Bundy, Med, Co-Director of Defending the Early Years

Natasha Burgert, MD, FAAP, Member of AAP Council on Communications and Media, Voice for Wait Until 8th

Mary G. Burke, MD, Sutter Pacific Medical Center

Dana Burnett, Director, Kids in Common

Beryl Burns, MD
Angela Campbell, Professor, Georgetown Law; Member, Board of Directors, Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood

Patricia Cantor, EdD; Professor of Early Childhood Education, Plymouth State University; co-author of *Techwise Infant and Toddler Teachers: Making Sense of Screen Media for Children Under 3.*

Nancy Carlsson-Paige, Professor Emerita Early Childhood Education, Lesley University; Senior Advisor, Defending the Early Years

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*

Mary Cornish, PhD, Professor of Early Childhood Education, Plymouth State University; Co-author of *Techwise Infant and Toddler Teachers: Making Sense of Screen Media for Children Under 3.*

Andy Crouch, speaker, author of *The Tech-Wise Family*

Dr C. Glenn Cupit, Head & Senior Lecturer in Child Development, deLissa Institute for Early Childhood and Family Studies, University of South Australia (ret); author of: *Play and quality in early childhood: Educating superheroes and fairy princesses; Child development and education; and The child audience: A guide to the developing child for television writers and producers*

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*

Tom Drummond, Instructor Emeritus, Early Childhood Education, North Seattle College

Victoria Dunckley, MD; integrative child & adolescent psychiatrist at Centre for Life; screen-time expert and author of *Reset Your Child’s Brain;* board member, Physicians for Safe Technology and Families Managing Media
Nathan Dungan, CEO and Founder, Share Save Spend LLC; Chair, Board of Directors, Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood

Dr. Marjorie Fields, Professor Emerita, Early Childhood Education, University of Alaska; author of *Let’s Begin Reading Right and Constructive, Guidance and Discipline*

Julie Frechette, Professor and Chair, Department of Communication, Worcester State University; Co-President, Action Coalition for Media Education; co-author of *Media Education for a Digital Generation*

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

Rachel Grob, PhD; Associate Clinical Professor, University of Wisconsin-Madison; Former Director, Child Development Institute, Sarah Lawrence College

Nancy Gruver, Founder, New Moon Girls

Holly Gore Groh, MD

Sydney Gurewitz Clemens, former faculty member at Pacific Oaks College; author of *The Sun’s Not Broken, A Cloud’s Just in the Way: On Child-Centered Teaching*; Exchange Leadership Master Leader

Leonie Haimson, Executive Director, Class Size Matters; Co-chair, Parent Coalition for Student Privacy

Edward Hallowell, MD, child psychiatrist, author, and parent

Elizabeth Handsley, Professor of Law, Flinders University, Australia; Co-editor of Children’s Wellbeing in the Media Age: Multidisciplinary Perspectives from the Harvard-Australia Symposium.

Tristan Harris, former Design Ethicist at Google, co-founder of Time Well Spent

Melanie Hempe RN, Founder President of Families Managing Media

Petra Hesse, PhD; Associate Professor of Psychology and Human Development, Wheelock College
Carla M. Horwitz, EdD; Lecturer, Yale Child Study Center, Department of Psychology & Education Studies; Program Director Emerita, Calvin Hill Day Care Center

Richard House, PhD; Chartered Psychologist; former senior university lecturer in Early Childhood; founder of Early Childhood Action; editor of *Too Much, Too Soon?* and *Childhood, Well-being and a Therapeutic Ethos*

Dr. Pam Hurst-Della Pietra; Founder and President, Children AND Screens: Institute of Digital Media and Child Development; Clinical Assistant Professor, Health Care Policy and Management, School of Health Technology and Management, Stony Brook Medicine

Dr. Sut Jhally, Professor of Communication, University of Massachusetts at Amherst; Executive Director, Media Education Foundation

Denisha Jones, PhD; Assistant Professor, Trinity Washington University

Allen D. Kanner, PhD; Editor, *Psychology and Consumer Culture*

Tim Kasser, PhD; Professor and Chair of Psychology, Knox College, Galesburg, IL; author of *The High Price of Materialism and Hypercapitalism*; Member, Board of Directors, Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood

Jean Kilbourne, EdD; Wellesley Centers for Women, co-author of *So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood* and *What Parents Can Do to Protect Their Kids*

Debbie Kruenegel-Farr, PhD; Professor of Psychology, New England College; owner of Flourishing Families; parent consultant, coach, and educator

Dr. Dale Kunkel, Professor Emeritus, University of Arizona

Velma LaPoint, PhD; Professor, Child Development, Department of Human Development and Psychoeducational Studies, School of Education, Howard University

Dafna Lemish, PhD; Associate Dean, School of Communication and Information, Rutgers University; founding editor, *Journal of Children and Media*; author of *Children and Media: A Global Perspective*

Diane Levin, PhD; Professor of Education, Wheelock College; co-founder, Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment (TRUCE) and Defending the Early Years; author of *Beyond Remote-Controlled Childhood*

Susan Linn, EDD; author of *The Case for Make Believe: Saving play in a commercialized world*; Founder, Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood

Dr. Robert MacDougall, Professor of Communication and Media Studies, Curry College
Roxana Marachi, PhD; Associate Professor of Education, San José State University; Education Chair, San José Silicon Valley NAACP; EduResearcher

Kathleen S. Masarie, MD; Pediatrician; Founder, Family Empowerment Network; co-author of *Face to Face: Cultivating Kids’ Social Lives in Today's Digital World*

Sharon Maxwell, PhD; author of *The Talk: A Breakthrough Guide to Raising Healthy Kids in an Oversexualized, Online, In-your-face World*

Patrice Maynard, MEd; Director of Publications and Development, Research Institute for Waldorf Education/Waldorf Publications

Geralyn Bywater McLaughlin, Co-Director, Defending the Early Years

Jim Metrock, President, Obligation, Inc.

Alan Meyers, MD,MPH; Emeritus Professor of Pediatrics, Boston University School of Medicine.

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

Nell Minow, The Movie Mom

Joel M. Moskowitz, PhD; Director, Center for Family and Community Health, School of Public Health, University of California, Berkeley; editor of *Electromagnetic Radiation Safety*; advisor to the International EMF Scientist Appeal and Physicians for Safe Technology

Dipesh Navsaria, MPH, MSLIS, MD; Associate Professor of Pediatrics, University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health; Board Member, Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood

Meghan Ownenz, PhD; Assistant Teaching Professor, Penn State University, Berks; author of *Screen-Free Parenting*

Sue Palmer, literacy specialist and author of *Toxic Childhood*

Rae Pica, author of *What If Everybody Understood Child Development?*

Alvin F. Poussaint, MD; Professor of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School

Jenny Radesky, MD; Developmental Behavioral Pediatrician and Media Researcher, University of Michigan

Kimberly Rathmann, MD; St. Paul, MN
Robert Root, MD; Medical Director, Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, California Pacific Medical Center; Member, International Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Allied Professionals

Mary Rothschild, Director, Healthy Media Choices; author of *From Day One: A Loving Lifeline For Your Super Busy Family in the Digital Age*

Cris Rowan, BScOT, BScBi, SIPT; CEO of Sunshine Coast Occupational Therapy Inc. and Zone’in Programs Inc.

Jean Rystrom, Founding Member, Screen Time Awareness and Reduction Coalition; retired, Kaiser Permanente Northwest

Barbara Schecter, PhD; Director, Graduate program in Child Development, Sarah Lawrence College

Candice Scott, BA, Elementary Education; MS, Counseling; The Research Institute, 21st CCLC Project Director

Brooke Shannon, founder of Wait Until 8th

Nikki Shearman, PhD; Chief of Network Strategy and Evaluation, Reach Out & Read

Joni Siani, MEd; author and filmmaker, No App for Life

William Softky, PhD, Co-author of *Sensory Metrics of Neuromechanical Trust*

Rachael Stickland, Co-chair, Parent Coalition for Student Privacy

Vic Strasburger, MD; Distinguished Professor of Pediatrics Emeritus, Unit of New Mexico School of Medicine

Jim Taylor, PhD; author of *Raising Generation Tech: Preparing Your Children for a Mediafueled World*

Marika Tiggemann, PhD; Matthew Flinders Distinguished Professor in Psychology, Flinders University, Australia; researcher

Sherry Turkle, PhD, Abby Rockefeller Mauzé Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology, MIT

Jean M. Twenge; author of *iGen;* Professor of Psychology, San Diego State University
Michael N. Valan, MD, F.A.P.M.; Medical Director, Recruitment, Sutter West Bay Medical Group

Angelica Velazquez, parent; Director of the Informal Family Child Care Project, City University of New York; Member, Board of Directors, Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood

Laurel Parker West, PhD; GOOD+ Foundation; Member, Board of Directors, Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood

Tim Winter, President, Parents Television Council