

APP STORE ACCOUNTABILITY ACT

App Stores are the Brokers of Digital Harm and Exploitation



App stores broker potentially harmful content to young users. They control access to millions of apps and digital services but make little meaningful effort to keep minors from accessing age- inappropriate material. Additionally, young teens are currently allowed to enter into exploitative contracts with powerful corporations without parental oversight.

App stores have been exempted entirely from regulations for child safety, unlike practically every other American company that markets products to children and teens. It is time to end app store exceptionalism and enact common-sense legislation to protect children.

The App Store Accountability Act addresses three significant gaps in current efforts to protect children. These measures will ensure that app stores broker content responsibly to create safer digital environments for our children while also safeguarding privacy.

1. PARENTAL CONSENT FOR USERS UNDER 18

If individuals must be 18 to enter binding contracts independently, they should also be 18 when agreeing to terms of service with multi-million-dollar companies in an app store, unless they have parental consent.

The Act **raises the age for having an unsupervised app store ID to 18** (currently 13) and requires app stores to obtain verifiable parental consent before any user under 18 can download apps or make in-app purchases. This could be achieved by requiring the "Ask to Buy" feature to be enabled by default for children under 18.

Raising the age for an unsupervised app store ID to 18 would also ensure parents receive necessary device-led walkthroughs to engage critical parental controls, such as limiting screen time and restricting access to adult content.

91% OF 14-YEAR-OLDS OWN A SMARTPHONE.

Common Sense Media, 2021





2. APP STORE “TRUTH IN ADVERTISING”

App age ratings are currently misleading, generic, and lack accountability. Apple and Google use different rating systems, confusing parents. When age ratings or content descriptors are blatantly misleading, apps are rarely penalized or removed.

The Act mandates that app stores disclose the age-appropriateness of apps clearly and accurately as a pre-condition for obtaining parental consent. It **establishes an objective age-rating standard** to prevent developers from misrepresenting their apps, ensuring parents are fully informed about the content and suitability of the apps their children use, allowing them to provide informed consent.

3. APP STORES VERIFY AGE

State and federal law require brick-and-mortar stores to check ID for the purchase of cigarettes, alcohol and other products deemed age-inappropriate for children. This requirement is guided by a clear principle: even if a business does not produce a harmful product, it is immoral to profit from its sale to minors. App stores should be responsible for age verification for the apps they sell, too. App stores must determine whether users are children or adults, as they broker app downloads and terms of service agreements.

Apple and Google already ask for birthdates during sign-up. It would be technically simple to require that these ages be verified. Adults could verify their age by adding a credit card to their digital wallet, while children under 18 could have their ages validated by a parent or guardian.

The Act requires app stores to use this verified age information to create anonymous, encrypted age "signals" for developers, similar to their existing "verify with wallet" systems. This ensures secure and seamless age verification without providing extra identifiable data to apps, protecting Americans' privacy while ensuring that adults can use apps without encumbering their access.