Common Sense is the nation’s leading nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of all kids and families by providing the trustworthy information, education, and independent voice they need to thrive in the 21st century.
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Dear Friends,

In 2021, research from UCLA’s Center for Scholars and Storytellers and the Creative Artists Agency Foundation’s Full Story Initiative found that major motion pictures lost tens of millions of dollars in ticket sales when they lacked authentically inclusive representation. The lack of representation in movies and television isn’t just a monumental business failure on the part of Hollywood, it’s a moral failing that comes at the detriment of our children.

Common Sense’s 2021 report, “The Inclusion Imperative: Why Media Representation Matters for Kids’ Ethnic-Racial Development,” released in October, found that an overwhelming majority of parents want their children to be exposed to media that represents them respectfully on-screen and teaches them about cultures, religions, and lifestyles that are different from their own. This underscores the importance of narratives and storylines that represent the diversity of a multicultural America. As a result, in 2021 Common Sense Media updated our rubric with a new rating for diverse representations that can help parents and caregivers identify high-quality media that includes and elevates accurate portrayals of characters of color.

This new rating is one example of how Common Sense is evolving to meet the needs of new generations in our audience—younger, more diverse, with different expectations than when we started this organization in 2003, before the iPhone, YouTube, and social media changed the world forever. In addition to updating our ratings, we introduced new resources to our educator and family audiences to help them navigate extraordinarily complex situations at home and in school resulting from the pandemic. Throughout 2021 and into 2022, we have also finally (finally!) made considerable progress on closing the digital divide, and we continue to lead the effort to enact critical tech reforms that put kids and families first.

I remain incredibly grateful to our staff for their dedication to the kids, families, and educators we serve, and of course to you, our partners and supporters, whose generosity enables us to do this important work.

James P. Steyer, founder and CEO
Examining How Media & Technology Are Reshaping Our Lives
Throughout 2021, Common Sense conducted several research studies on how kids use media to provide insights for parents, caregivers, educators, policymakers, and the media and technology industries. We produced comprehensive data across several critical areas: the role of media in kids’ social lives and mental health during the pandemic, the privacy practices of apps and services intended for kids, the impact of diverse media representation on kids’ ethnic-racial development, and the inequities of the dramatic gap between students with high-speed internet and adequate devices and those without.

While these findings aren’t the whole story, they remind us why it’s so important to point kids toward the very best of media, and of the responsibility we have to ensure that kids have safe, healthy digital spaces free of hate speech and misinformation.

Here is a summary of our key 2021 research findings:

- **The digital divide for kids and families is massive.** Roughly 30% of K–12 public school students in the U.S. are experiencing the digital divide. Of those, 9 million are fully disconnected, 5–6 million have insufficient internet, and 1 million don’t have adequate devices. (“Closing the K–12 Digital Divide in the Age of Distance Learning,” with Boston Consulting Group)

- **Kids and parents prefer diversity in their media.** Almost three in four parents (74%) say their children enjoy media content with diverse characters, higher than those who say their child favors content that features characters that mirror their own lives (48%). (“The Inclusion Imperative: Why Media Representation Matters for Kids’ Ethnic-Racial Development”)

- **Stereotypes in media persist, according to the perspectives of parents in underrepresented groups.** The majority of Asian (52%), Black (64%), and Hispanic/Latino (54%) parents feel that representation of their own ethnic-racial group in media is stereotypical, while only 32% of White parents do. (“The Inclusion Imperative”)

- **Young women, LGBTQ+ youth, and young people of color experience harmful content on social media.** The frequency of encountering hate speech on social media has increased significantly since 2018. Three in 10 young women are “often” exposed to sexist comments, more than a third of young Black people are “often” exposed to racist comments, and more than four in 10 LGBTQ+ young people “often” encounter homophobic posts online. (“Coping with COVID-19: How Young People Use Digital Media to Manage Their Mental Health”)
During the pandemic, kids proactively turned to media to keep learning and expressing their creativity, even when outside of school. Tweens and teens used media to learn something they were interested in (78%), to create (53%), or to share something with others (39%). And this online learning and creativity was not related to work they were doing for school. ("The Common Sense Census – The Role of Media During the Pandemic: Connection, Creativity, and Learning for Tweens and Teens")

Apps used by children and students feature unhealthy practices that put their privacy at risk. Two out of three products used by young people have privacy practices that track them on the app and across the internet for advertising purposes. ("State of Kids’ Privacy Report 2021")

Almost all of the top 10 streaming apps and top five devices are not prioritizing the privacy of their youngest viewers. Apple TV+ is the only product that received a Pass rating. Netflix received a Warning rating and the lowest overall score because they display targeted ads and don’t talk about how they protect kids. ("Privacy of Streaming Apps and Devices: Watching TV That Watches Us")
Providing Ratings & Reviews That Champion Quality Media

Stands out for diverse representations, positive messages, and positive role models.

Positive Messages

Positive Role Models

Diverse Representations
The media we consume plays a critical role in shaping how we make sense of ourselves, our identities, and the world around us. It can perpetuate stereotypes and bias, exacerbating injustice and inequities. But it also presents an opportunity to reduce bias, end division, and be a gateway to a more inclusive future.

At Common Sense, our role has always been to help families decide what’s best for themselves. When we provide all the information, they can make informed decisions. And we’re committed to ensuring that our media ratings and advice for families reflect, resonate with, and serve diverse audiences. But beyond pointing families to what we always call “the good stuff,” we’re also here to add to the conversation: providing resources for media literacy, and talking critically about what is and isn’t happening in the media landscape.

TV shows, movies, and other media continue to fall short when it comes to representing diverse races and ethnicities by featuring too many White faces and too many stereotypical depictions of people of color. And that matters—parents and caregivers believe media can help shape their kids’ worldview, and they see media as a tool to help their kids’ ethnic-racial development. They’re looking for media that shows them non-stereotypical representations of their own culture, teaching acceptance and inclusion.

In the fall of 2021, Common Sense Media introduced a new diverse representations rubric to bring deeper nuance to our ratings. Our team examines whether characters are realistic and relatable, or shallow and stereotypical, whether they have agency or simply support a dominant character, and whether there are any problematic viewpoints or stereotypes that need to be called out.

Beyond our ratings, we have also worked to broaden our DEI lens by rebuilding our Editorial Advisory Council, evaluating our hiring practices to increase reviewer diversity, creating a position on the team for a content lead to oversee this work going forward, and providing implicit-bias workshops for all our reviewers and editors to ensure our reviews are reflective of and accessible to everyone who reads them.

Common Sense was founded nearly 20 years ago on the principle that media, at its best, can entertain, educate, and inspire. The new rating for diverse representations continues our founding mission to harness media’s potential for good. With these ratings, we hope to set an example for recognizing diversity and inclusion in media, not just to support parents, caregivers, and educators as they look for opportunities to support their kids’ ethnic-racial development, but also to encourage content creators to step up and ensure that kids everywhere feel included and celebrated.
Helping Students, Educators & Families Navigate Year 2 of the COVID-19 Pandemic
After more than a year of lockdowns and remote schooling, by 2021 many teens and young adults were reporting growing levels of depression, stress, and anxiety, especially among those who have had coronavirus infections in their homes. At the same time, teachers were returning to radically different classrooms, where they were faced with students’ dramatic learning loss and tense school climate issues. After months of listening and learning how we could be most helpful, the Common Sense Education, Outreach, and Family Engagement teams went to work to compile a suite of content and resources to support teachers and families during these challenging times.

Supporting Students’ Social and Emotional Well-Being in the Digital World

Technology is changing the social and emotional learning (SEL) landscape that students navigate every day, including how they express themselves, develop their identity, collaborate with others, and develop meaningful relationships within their communities. The ability to stay connected through the pandemic was a lifeline for many students. According to our research, 53% of 14- to 22-year-olds say social media has been “very” important for staying connected with family and friends during the pandemic. Students have been through a lot. In some cases, they’ve had family members get sick, get hospitalized, or die from COVID-19. Family members have lost jobs, or been unable to pay rent or the mortgage—and that’s in addition to the stress of distance learning and being isolated.

Teachers needed resources to help students through this tough time. In August, we launched our new SEL in Digital Life Resource Center to help teachers support their students’ social and emotional learning in the digital world, with new lessons, interactives, and resources on how students develop self-awareness, relationships, and identity online. Social and emotional learning is essential for helping students manage their emotions, make responsible decisions, and build healthy relationships, and it’s also vital for academic success.

Finding New Digital Tools and Strategies to Facilitate the Best Learning Experiences for Students

Distance learning gave teachers a chance to broaden their skill sets by learning new digital tools to support learning. The tech tools that proved the most effective and successful during the pandemic will certainly be used again, and teachers are taking their learnings from the past year and continuing to incorporate technology to enhance student learning. Pointing them in the right direction, content like our edtech reviews and top picks helps teachers discover the most promising learning resources they can adapt to meet all their students’ diverse needs. In our end-of-year educator survey, 86% of educators said our reviews have helped them identify a new edtech tool or resource that they’ve since used in their teaching.

Among 14- to 22-year-old social media users:

- 53% say social media has been “very” important for staying connected to family and friends.
- 43% say social media makes them feel better when they’re depressed, stressed, or anxious.
- 17% say it makes them feel worse.
Maintaining Privacy in the Classroom

The Common Sense Privacy Program evaluates tech privacy policies so teachers can make smart, safe choices about the learning tools they use with their students, and so that schools and districts can participate in improving the technology used in K–12 classrooms.

When school moved entirely online, it was more important than ever for teachers and districts to recommend and use edtech tools that safeguarded student data privacy. The Common Sense Privacy Ratings were indispensable, providing evaluations of more than 1,000 of the most popular edtech tools used in classrooms every day. Schools, districts, educators, and parents and caregivers tell us that our ratings empower them to make better privacy-protecting decisions that impact tens of millions of students in classrooms across the country. Many of the largest edtech companies have benefited from our consultations and framework in making this possible. We’re also increasing our ability to take on more edtech privacy policies by using machine learning to scale our efforts and impact more dramatically in the coming years.

Teaching News Literacy in a World of Misinformation and Disinformation

Over the last school year, we saw a rising demand from teachers who were hungry for resources to help students think deeply about the increasing complexity and polarization of the news and media landscape. In our annual survey of our 1.2 million member educators, more than half of educators (57%) who responded said they want more resources on news and media literacy.

In response, Common Sense expanded our news literacy offerings and created new resources to help young people gain the skills and dispositions they need to be critical thinkers and creators, to value diverse, credible perspectives, and to be curious, empathetic, and civically engaged.

Our news literacy lessons tackle challenging current-event topics and provide teachers with talking points and step-by-step guides for leading classroom discussion with confidence.

After reviewing our conversation guides, 88% of these teachers said they would use them in their classrooms, and 87% reported that our work greatly increased their confidence. Students are also benefiting. Over the last school year, 94% of students who completed our news literacy assessments reported that they felt confident they could enact the main objectives of the lesson, such as confidence in being able to determine the credibility of something they read online (sixth grade), or confidence in identifying ways to challenge their confirmation bias (10th grade).
Advocating for Tech Reforms That Prioritize Kids & Families

Ariel Fox Johnson
Senior Counsel, Global Policy
Common Sense Media

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY & COMMERCE
VIRTUAL HEARING
In the wake of a tumultuous election and the pandemic dragging into a second full year, in 2021 congressional leaders examined with renewed focus the role technology plays in our society. In March, Common Sense was part of an important hearing before the House Energy and Commerce subcommittee on Consumer Protection and Commerce, examining the risks kids face from increased time online during the coronavirus pandemic, and offering policy solutions to improve the digital landscape for kids and families.

It might once have been debatable whether kids “needed” to be online, but it’s now clear there’s no choice: Online access is necessary to connect with family, to learn, and to play. Common Sense research shows device ownership was already the norm for young children pre-pandemic, and screen time had multiplied in recent years, with children in lower-income homes spending nearly two hours more daily with screens. Plus, parents are increasingly concerned about the time their kids are spending on screens. Recent surveys found that White and Hispanic parents’ top child health concerns in 2020 were overuse of social media, bullying/cyberbullying, and internet safety. Black parents named overuse of social media in their top three, after racism and COVID.

Kids are on the front lines of our online world and are uniquely vulnerable to digital harms. While the impact of social media and screen time on kids continues to be extremely nuanced—and it is critical that we fund independent research to find out more—we already know we need to act. We know that:

- Kids have been spending even more time online during the pandemic.
- Research shows that the percentage of teens who say they “often” see racist content in social media has nearly doubled in the past two years.
- Many young people are impulsive and prone to oversharing.
- Many young people don’t understand that data shared on an app doesn’t remain on their device, let alone grasp online data ecosystems.
- Young people are uniquely susceptible to advertising and other online persuasion.

The reality is that kids are no match for tech companies, which have grown unchecked and remain unaccountable—too many are manipulating children, misusing their personal information, and exposing kids to harm.

The pandemic exacerbated these risks; it did not create them. And these risks and harms will persist after the pandemic is over, unless Congress moves to hold tech companies accountable, and until these companies act to take concrete and verifiable steps to protect kids and our democracy.

Common Sense has been tracking legislation before Congress and will continue to champion tech policy solutions that put kids front and center. We support a comprehensive privacy law with special protections for children and teens, including prohibition of behavioral marketing to kids. There are many opportunities to update and expand online protections for kids. And establishing more safeguards that would encourage kid-healthy content and design—like banning autoplay and amplification of harmful content—could have a profound impact on the ability of families to harness the enormous benefits of media and technology without exposing kids to as much harm.

Kids deserve better online protections. With our ongoing efforts, we are hopeful congressional leaders—with or without proactive solutions from tech companies—will make that happen.
The 2021 Common Sense Tech Agenda: Healthy and Equitable Tech for America’s Kids, Families, and Democracy

Hold Social Media Platforms Accountable to Protect Kids and Our Democracy

- **Section 230 Reform**: At the federal level, reform Section 230 to require stronger content moderation to protect children, families, and our democracy.

- **Curb Harmful Experiences and Inappropriate Content**: Limit kids’ exposure to racism, hatred, harassment, violence, and inappropriate ads.

- **Healthy and Safe Internet**: Establish guardrails to ensure high-quality online content and safe experiences that support kids’ emotional well-being.

Protect Privacy for Children, Families, and All Consumers

- **Comprehensive Privacy Law**: Establish strong and clear privacy protections for children, families, and consumers, with a comprehensive national privacy law that guarantees special protections for vulnerable children and teens.

- **Student Privacy**: Protect student privacy and ensure that school zones are privacy zones, wherever young people are learning.

- **Enforcement**: Significantly strengthen federal enforcement powers and resources, and establish a new federal privacy enforcement agency.

Ensure Market Competition and Diverse Choices for Kids and Families

- **Antitrust**: Address the unchecked power of social media giants by applying and enforcing antitrust laws, including breaking up companies when necessary.

Promote Tech Equity: Close the Digital Divide for Good

- **Broadband Infrastructure**: Fund major infrastructure investment to ensure universal deployment of broadband networks able to meet the needs of distance learning and other basic family needs and services, including jobs and health care.

- **Affordable Access and Devices**: Fund a sustained commitment to broadband service and devices capable of distance learning for students and teachers.

- **Digital Citizenship and Inclusion**: Comprehensive digital literacy and inclusion support for students, teachers, and parents.
2021 Focus Area: Closing the Digital Divide for Good

Common Sense’s track record of advocating for tech equity long predates the pandemic. We fought for and won over $9.2 billion in federal funding to get every classroom connected to the internet, and we made the digital divide at home an issue. It’s a fundamental matter of equity: economic, educational, and social.

Then the pandemic struck, and it shined an even brighter light on racial and economic inequality in our country, especially in education and the digital divide. The truth is, high-speed internet at home is as important as running water and electricity, and every home and business in the U.S. ought to have an affordable connection. That was true before the pandemic, and it will be true when the crisis is over.

At the start of the pandemic, we launched a coalition of businesses, education organizations, and others to urge lawmakers to connect all students and close the digital divide, now and for good. Educators, parents and caregivers, and students across the country shared their experiences with us about the challenges of navigating distance learning.

We ran into resistance to making the digital divide a priority in Washington, but we pushed ahead, working with a large coalition of partners. Thanks to support from the Walton Family Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, we published three research reports in a period of seven months with Boston Consulting Group and broke through the gridlock. Our new data and analysis were used in negotiations by congressional leaders with the Trump and Biden administrations; were cited by the Federal Communications Commission; and were used by dozens of industry and advocacy coalition partners. First, we established that, before the pandemic, 15 to 16 million students and almost 400,000 teachers lacked adequate connectivity and/or devices at home. We showed that this problem existed in all 50 states but disproportionately affected communities of color and rural communities. Second, we looked at what states were doing to plug the gap during the pandemic. And finally, we concluded that despite recent short-term efforts, 12 million kids were still stuck in the homework gap.

It took too long, as policy changes often do, but we finally got Congress to respond—and in a big way. The American Rescue Plan dedicated $7.17 billion to connect students and teachers at home and to purchase the devices they need, like laptops and notebooks. And then in November, President Biden signed into law the historic and long overdue $1.2 trillion Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, the largest investment in generations in America’s roads, bridges, ports, and water and energy systems. Included in this new bipartisan law is $65 billion to help ensure that everyone in America is connected to high-speed internet.
We appreciate Congress and the Biden administration working together to pass this important law, and we hope that this extraordinary investment in broadband and digital equity will be the latest—but not the last—step in addressing the disparities between connected and under-connected kids and communities. In the meantime, the work begins to use this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to close the digital divide once and for all.

2021 Focus Area: Protecting Kids’ Privacy at Home and in School

2021 saw a sea change in the fight to rein in Big Tech, from the revelations of Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen, to data breaches impacting hundreds of millions of users, and misinformation and surveillance on social media platforms. As the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic continues to push education online, parents and caregivers became justifiably concerned that more data is being collected from their kids at home and in the classroom than ever before. All along, consumers have increasingly pressured Congress to better protect their privacy. The good news is that we now have incredible momentum from national policy leaders to change the privacy landscape for the better.

We hear from families and educators that they want better privacy protections for their children and students, but what is the actual state of their privacy? How do the most popular products get privacy right, and how do they get it wrong? Common Sense’s “2021 State of Kids’ Privacy” report examined the privacy policies and practices of hundreds of the most popular apps and services intended for kids and students over the past four years and found that these companies are slowly beginning to respond to pressure from families, educators, and consumers by improving and clarifying their policies and practices. But the steps are small and the industry still has a long way to go. In order to really protect kids and families, we need faster progress on the industry’s part, and real intervention from legislators.

All technology-enabled apps and services that kids use, from entertainment to learning, need to step up and better protect the privacy of kids and families. The onus should be on businesses to protect their users’ privacy, not on parents or teachers to read lengthy and confusing privacy policies. By pressuring companies to use privacy-by-design principles and more clarity about whether children are intended users, we can better protect the privacy of all children using those products.

But more importantly, it’s clear that without a robust and comprehensive federal privacy law, progress toward protecting our kids’ data will continue to move slowly. Congress should pass a strong privacy law that does not let companies turn a blind eye to young people using their services. Let’s keep up the pressure and the momentum in 2022 and pass a privacy law that protects everyone.
Congress has a historic opportunity to lift children out of poverty
The Hill, February 26, 2021

New study spotlights teen use of digital media during pandemic
TODAY Show, NBC, March 17, 2021

A Thumbs Down for Streaming Privacy
The New York Times, August 24, 2021

“No es suficiente”: analizamos la campaña de Instagram para que los jóvenes no pasen tanto tiempo en la app ("It’s not enough": analyzing Instagram’s campaign encouraging young users to not spend so much time on the app)
Edición Digital, Univision, December 8, 2021

Kids need to see themselves reflected in media. Here are some recommendations
NPR, December 26, 2021
To continue making kids our nation’s top priority, Common Sense has several efforts underway that will continue in 2022:

- Maintain and build diversified revenue streams, particularly through new initiatives and programs.
- Build a more sustainable infrastructure to keep administrative costs down.
- Fund an operating reserve to ensure stability in downtimes.
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