



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Andrew Gounardes

Sen. Gounardes Introduces New Bill to Protect Kids from Abuse Online

ANDREW GOUNARDES November 21, 2024

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The New York Children's Online Safety Act requires platforms to turn off open chats by default for young users, and requires parents to approve children's financial transactions on gaming and social media sites

Read the bill text and sponsor memo [here](#).

Brooklyn, NY – New York State Senator Andrew Gounardes introduced new legislation today to protect children from rampant sexual abuse and solicitation on gaming and social media platforms.

The New York Children's Online Safety Act ([S.9953](#)) requires online gaming and social media platforms to turn off open chat functions by default for users under 18, unless a parent switches them back on. Children's profiles will be set to private by default, so strangers can't view them without a friend request, and adult users would only be able to message child users if their friend request has been accepted which, for users under 13, would require parental approval.

The law would also require parents to approve financial transactions connected to a child's account and, for users under 13, would allow parents to view the account's list of approved friends.

The legislation comes in response to multiple [disturbing investigations](#) that find rampant pedophilia and child abuse on Roblox, a site where over 40% of users are preteens. In 2023, Roblox [reported](#) over 13,000 instances of child exploitation to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, and responded to 1,300 requests for information from law enforcement.

For years, Roblox has had an open chat function where users of any age can post anything in a game chat and privately message other users. Last year, Roblox [launched](#) Roblox Connect, which allows users as young as 13 to initiate avatar voice calls, with facial motion tracking tech, with other users—despite 13-year-olds being a prime target demographic for online predators. This tool was [criticized](#) by the National Center on Sexual Exploitation, which said such voice chats allow online predators to groom victims and called Roblox “a tool for sexual predators” and “a threat for children's safety.”

One study found researchers were unable to create a test account with the name “Jeffrey Epstein” because it, along with 900+ variations, was already taken. Usernames were also taken for Earl Brian Bradley, who was indicted on 471 charges of molesting, raping and exploiting children. Researchers were able to access games like “Escape to Epstein Island” and over 600 games with the term “Diddy” (e.g., “Run From Diddy Simulator,” “Diddy Party”), despite having registered as a child under 13. Hindenburg research described the site as “an X-rated pedophile hellscape, exposing children to grooming, pornography, violent content and extremely abusive speech.”

Other online gaming and social media platforms—including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok and X, where adults can collect troves of information about child users and lure them into private chats—have also become a major target for pedophiles. More than 300 million children worldwide are victims of some type of online sexual exploitation and abuse, research suggests, and reports of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) reached a record high last year of more than 36 million.

While Roblox and other platforms like Instagram have taken some steps to create certain “privacy by default” settings for young users, such initiatives are inconsistent across the industry and insufficient to protect children, particularly in their lax approach to age verification. Such platforms have also repeatedly prioritized profits and growth over user safety, making regulatory action all the more important.

“Social media and online gaming platforms have become hotbeds of child abuse and exploitation, and it’s past time we update our laws to address this new threat,” said **State Senator Andrew Gounardes**. “My New York Children’s Online Safety Act creates commonsense guardrails to ensure predatory adults don’t have unfettered access to kids online. That way, kids can enjoy the internet without fear, and parents can rest easier knowing their children are safe.”

“The New York Children's Online Safety Act is the kind of common sense solution we need to protect kids on gaming and social media platforms. Parents cannot possibly bear the entire responsibility of keeping kids safe online because the problems are baked into the design of the products. Requiring open chat functions to be turned off by default takes the onus off of parents and puts it where it should be – on tech product designers,” said **Julie Scelfo, founder of Mothers Against Media Addiction (MAMA)**, a grassroots movement of parents and allies fighting back against media addiction. “From toys to food to cars, we regulate products to keep children safe, and social media and gaming products shouldn’t be any different.”

Violations would be enforced by the Office of the New York State Attorney General, which can investigate misconduct allegations through its Bureau of Internet and Technology. The Attorney General would be empowered to pursue damages of \$5,000 per violation.

This legislation represents the latest step in an ongoing effort by Senator Gounardes to protect kids online; earlier this year, he passed the SAFE for Kids Act and the New York Child Data Protection Act, [first-in-the-nation laws](#) designed to protect children from addictive algorithms and predatory data collection on social media platforms.

Press Contact:

Billy Richling

Communications Director

State Senator Andrew Gounardes

billy@senatorgounardes.nyc

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Do you support this bill?