

Google's New App Approval Process Doesn't Help Families. Here's Why Kids are Still at Risk.

#FixAppRatings

Summary: The #FixAppRatings movement states that the app ratings process is broken and that parental controls are overly complex. The result is that kids are being exploited through mature content and features on major social platforms, and even well-intentioned parents are overwhelmed. Google has released a new app approval process that doesn't provide solutions to either of these issues. **Google continues to believe that the age of digital adulthood is 13, which means all major social media apps aren't even subject to most of the policy's provisions.** Under this new Google policy, kids will continue to be exploited in apps rated 12+ or Teen, and good parents will still be overwhelmed.

Full Text:

On May 29, Google told its Android Developers' Community that it was "Building a Safer Google Play for Kids" in a blog post (1). The post goes on to ask every developer to self-assess whether or not **children** are part of the app's target environment, and if so, to follow new policy requirements related to app content, ads, and interactions (2).

For years, big tech companies have proven inept at self-regulating. Why would this most recent move by Google produce different results?

The Fix App Ratings Team supports all genuine efforts to protect children and empower parents to make better, more informed digital decisions. But we do not believe that these new Google requirements will fix the problems we currently face with dishonest app ratings, overly-generic app descriptions, and the lack of parental control defaults on smart devices. It's a smokescreen that will not create a sustainable, long-term, protective barrier between children and exploitive and dangerous online situations often facilitated by apps.

The timing of Google's post is dubious and follows a predictable, reactive pattern. Several major news agencies have recently called out Apple and Google for dishonest app ratings (3). Louisiana passed a Resolution in May calling for the creation of an independent board with other states considering their participation (4). Bipartisan momentum is building for regulation of big tech (5).

Remember, Android only accounts for 17% of teen devices (6). Apple's App Store follows a completely different set of app ratings requirements (7). Apple uses age 12 and

Google uses age 13 as the magic line when it suddenly becomes acceptable to serve children and teens dangerous (8) and addictive features (9), sexually exploitive content (10), and themes related to self-harm (11), drugs (12), and alcohol (13). Both Apple and Google profit directly from the success of apps, taking up to 30% of subscriptions and in-app purchases (14) (15).

Google’s suggestion that it’s creating a safer Google Play for kids doesn’t change any of those realities. At best, it prevents mature ads from showing up in kid gaming apps, which is great. But it doesn’t address the primary problems of inaccurate and disjointed ratings, and the lack of intuitive and default parental controls. (Appendix A)

Without an **independent**, third-party organization that establishes a **unified app ratings framework**, we will continue to lack **accountability** in the app ratings process.

Independent. Unified. Accountable. From the beginning, these three words have formed the foundation for the Fix App Ratings movement (16). And, this is ground that has already been covered by the video game and movies industries with the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB) and Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) (17) (18). Long ago, we decided that an unbiased rating system was necessary to help parents determine what entertainment would be appropriate for their children.

It’s time for apps to follow suit. It’s time to stop proposing disjointed, band-aid fixes. By implementing the two provisions laid out by the Fix App Ratings Team to create an Independent Board and greatly simplify defaults on smart devices, **we can start down a path toward increased accountability and protection.** This is not a new path. It’s time to hold big tech accountable for their ratings, descriptions, content, and controls.

And the need for an Independent Ratings Board will increase if recent anti-trust activity creates space for additional app stores to emerge.

This attempt by Google doesn’t go far enough. **It’s time to #FixAppRatings.**



APPENDIX A

The new Google policy obviously wants apps to rate themselves accurately. **The risk therefore becomes that an app would overstate their Target Age Group on the Google Play Console.** If Google concludes that an app has overstated its Target Age Group, then the offending app can do one of four things:

1. Nothing. The penalty is that they can't update their app in Google Play.
2. Carry a Google Play Store label of "Not designed for children"
3. Tweak marketing elements that appeal to children.
4. Reclassify themselves in Google Play Console and begin to comply with Families Policies, including content restrictions, ad restrictions, and age verification.

We believe that most major apps, like Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube will simply say that they target older users and wait for Google to disagree. The worst that can happen is that Google disagrees, causing the apps to carry a warning label or tweak their marketing.

That's it.

The above explanation further proves why this policy does nothing to address the two, primary problems of inaccurate and disjointed ratings, and the lack of intuitive and default parental controls. At best, it prevents mature ads from showing up in kid's gaming apps or encourages the creation of a neutral age-gate around mature content that any kid bypass by lying about his/her age.

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