



**Senate Judiciary Committee  
Subcommittee on Privacy, Technology and the Law**

**Statement of Cayce Savage  
September 6, 2025**

To: Chair Blackburn, Ranking Member Klobuchar and Members of the Subcommittee.

I am a user experience researcher. It is my job to listen to and advocate for users. I have a graduate degree in experimental psychology and twelve years of experience working as a researcher, eight of which have been in my capacity as a user experience researcher. I do this work because, fundamentally, I care about people.

I worked at Meta from 2019 to 2023. In those four years, and most especially as I led research on youth safety in Virtual Reality, it became clear to me that Meta is uninterested in listening to their users or in prioritizing their safety.

While I write here about virtual reality, it is important to understand that the way Meta has approached safety for VR is emblematic of its negligent approach to safety for all of its products. The research on what we must do to ensure new technology is safe for children is very clear. Yet, across social media, messaging apps, and now wearable technology Meta has failed to prioritize child safety until they are scrutinized by outside regulators. Then, they scramble to develop features they know are insufficient and largely unused, and advertise this as proof of their responsibility.

For example, research, both within and outside of Meta, has well established that parent awareness and education of what occurs within social media is critical to ensuring the safety of young users. Despite this, parent education has only become a priority for Instagram within the past few years, following Frances Haugen's disclosure in 2021.

This knowledge from the social media space should have been used to identify child safety priorities early in Meta's VR development process. Meta should have conducted research on parent awareness of their children's VR experiences. Yet again, child safety as an area of inquiry and investment failed to be a priority for Meta until regulatory pressure began. If any digital experience were to merit particular investment in safety, it would be the hardware children are wearing on their bodies which poses heightened and unique psychological, social, and even physical danger. And yet, Meta pushed to move fast and drive engagement, instead of ensuring the experience was safe.

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Child safety is a necessary priority for Meta's VR devices. Meta cannot claim ignorance of this. Research both within and outside of Meta clearly shows us that children drive the adoption of new technology within the home; this is even more so the case for technology, like VR, which is associated with being social and with playing games. Meta's focus on the social and gaming aspects of VR is so blatant that the VR app Meta invested millions in developing as a "big bet" - Horizon Worlds - is primarily a social app in which users can *also* choose to play games. During the 2024 holiday season, Meta focused its VR marketing efforts on promoting its Batman: Arkham VR game, which it sold as a bundle with its headsets. Meta is advertising its VR headsets as something it knows will be attractive to children.

Meta is aware that its VR platform is full of children- it is common knowledge inside the company. Meta purposefully turns a blind eye to this knowledge, despite it being obvious to anyone using their products. Users regularly write Meta feedback like this, **"I love Horizon Worlds! I hate that it's an adult only space that's been inundated by unsupervised kids though. More needs to be done to keep children out of this app."**

The reality is that if Meta were to acknowledge the presence of underage users, they would be required to kick those users off of their platform in order to remain COPPA compliant. This isn't happening because it would decrease the number of active users Meta is reporting to shareholders, as well as its engagement metrics. It is more profitable to pretend to have no way of better identifying the real ages of their users. At Meta, engagement is the priority above everything else.

Because VR is immersive and embodied, negative experiences cause greater psychological harm than similar experiences on an iPad or Xbox. To use VR, you must place a piece of hardware on your head which obscures your vision and hearing. From this point forward, all you can see and hear is the virtual world. I personally find that the process of putting on the headset feels especially vulnerable, because I always realize I can no longer see or hear what's happening around me in the real world.

On the platform you have a virtual body. Academic research establishes that embodying a virtual avatar in an immersive context like this heightens the degree to which you identify with your virtual self. If someone corners you and gropes you in the virtual world, it will feel much more personal and emotionally disturbing than if this were to happen to you in a game on your phone. All you can see or hear is what's happening in VR, and it's a 360° experience. It's the difference between watching a scary movie and being inside a haunted house.

Unlike most adults, who are cognitively able to understand the difference between reality and fantasy, children in early development experience *everything* as real. For a child using VR, then,

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the degree of immersion is heightened, making the effect of negative experiences even more severe and disturbing.

Experientially, VR is more like being in Disney World than like playing a game on an iPad. In VR, your child is going to a three dimensional world which, for those few hours, will feel real. In the majority of cases, your child is going into this world without you, because VR is expensive and most families only purchase one headset. Unlike Disney World, though, your child is entering this virtual world in the body of an adult because Meta refused to develop age-specific avatars.

Most of the other people in this virtual world are other children without adults - and a lot of adults who didn't come with kids. It is normal to talk to strangers here, despite household rules about stranger danger. My research showed that it only takes a few interactions before children consider someone they met online as a friend.

Unlike Disney World, this is a place where there are no guards, no nice people in costumes, no security cameras.

There are some age-restricted experiences, but these restrictions will likely be ineffective because the likelihood of your child using an adult-aged account is high (as VR users everywhere will observe). Across Meta's products, data shows that users (and especially young users) consistently misrepresent their age as being over 18. My own research on VR parental supervision showed that, due to the lack of parental education, parents often don't see a need for their children to use an accurately aged account. Research also clearly shows that children prefer to use adult aged accounts across products, as part of development is the desire to seek increasingly mature experiences.

In the virtual world, then, your child likely represents themselves as over 18. Who is going to know otherwise? Just like every other avatar in Meta's virtual world, they look like an adult.

Everything that happens in this world will be real. The relationships, the things that are said and done, the emotions, all of it will be real. Other users - almost always, people your child doesn't know in real life - can physically corner or surround them. Their hearing is spatial, so users can come up behind them and whisper in their ear. And remember, VR is tracking a user's real life movements. So, assault in VR requires the movements to happen in real life.

Your child, especially if they are young, may not remember later whether what happened occurred in the real world or in the virtual one. And you will have no way of knowing what they experienced. Even if your child casts their headset to the TV, it isn't real for you. It's a flat image

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on a TV that you can walk away from. But your child is experiencing it as if it is real. And you aren't there.

When your child returns from this place, you might ask, "How was your time in the Metaverse?" and most of your children will say that it was fun. An eight year old doesn't know what grooming is. A twelve year old who's being sexually propositioned may not want to tell you because she doesn't think it's a big deal and she wants to keep using the headset.

The research on virtual reality and the way it affects our children is still in its infancy. We are still understanding the effects of embodying a virtual avatar that moves when you move. We are still understanding the effects of sexual assault in a virtual space where your visual and auditory experience is immersive. There are so many things for us still to learn. We do know that some users experience "phantom sense," a phenomenon in which they physically feel what's happening to their virtual avatar on their body in the real world. What happens in virtual reality is very real indeed.

Most importantly, Meta is aware that these children are being harmed in VR. In my time on the team, I quickly became aware that it was not uncommon for children in VR to experience bullying, sexual assault, to be solicited for nude photographs and sexual acts by pedophiles, to be regularly exposed to mature content like gambling and violence, and to participate in adult experiences like strip clubs and watching pornography with strangers.

I wish I could tell you what percentage of children using VR experience these harms, but Meta would not allow me to conduct this research.

I personally saw these things happening in VR, consistently heard reports from teens and parents in research, and read countless accounts from concerned parents online. It is easy to learn that children are not safe using Meta's VR products, just by reading public app reviews. One in particular haunts me – It reads, **"Thanks Meta for making this the pedophile kingdom. They have made it so easy for us to meet and exchange information with children here."**

Meta first acquired Oculus, its VR technology, in 2014. I was the first, and for a time, the only researcher dedicated to understanding whether its VR software experiences were safe for children - and I wasn't hired until 2022. So, for eight years, as tens of millions of headsets were sold, Meta did not think about the safety of the children it relied on to achieve global market dominance. Meta, a company valued at almost two trillion dollars, is putting minimum effort into ensuring its products are safe.

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When Meta did invest in parental supervision features for VR - the very basics of child safety - it did so only in response to external regulatory pressure. After eight years of total inaction, Meta leadership demanded these safety features be developed in less than a year, a timeframe which didn't allow for appropriate due diligence. Research across the digital world is very clear that parental awareness and use of supervision features is a significant challenge which *must* be addressed through parental education, *particularly* for new technology like VR. Yet, development of these features was so rushed that work to this end was not prioritized. Despite knowing this, Meta shamelessly announced that it believed its VR supervision features were a meaningful step towards child safety. Unfortunately, this lack of appropriate resourcing and due diligence is common when Meta builds safety features.

Throughout my time on Meta's VR Youth team, child safety issues regularly went unresearched and unaddressed, despite the frequency and severity of the harm. I was given a legal counterpart to scrutinize everything that I did, to tell me what research I could and couldn't do, and to ensure my research reports would not create "risk" for Meta should they be publicly disclosed. I was told not to investigate the kinds of harm children were experiencing in VR, and made to feel I was risking my job if I pressed the matter. This scrutiny became increasingly severe during my time on the team, such that I do not believe I would have been able to publish my reports from the first half of 2022 even in 2023.

Instead of amplifying the voices of our users, my work began being used to silence them so that Meta could claim deniability. I know a number of my colleagues were put in similar positions.

Meta cannot be trusted to tell the truth about the safety or use of its products. For example, in 2023 Meta said it didn't have a record of the large number of underaged children using its VR headsets. This was because it had purposefully avoided gathering that data, despite a number of Meta's leadership sharing that their children use VR, indicating that even Meta's staff were unaware of the minimum age of use, or chose to ignore it. Despite this, research proposed to address this issue was disallowed.

I deliberated for a long time about whether to come forward. Meta responded to Frances Haugen's disclosure in 2021 by cracking down on research internally. Researchers across the company were subjected to sudden censorship, and told it was for our own protection so we wouldn't be part of any future "leaks." Candidly, I am worried that speaking to you today will put my former colleagues, as well as the field of user research within Meta at risk. To my former colleagues who continue to advocate internally for child safety, I would like to express the greatest gratitude and admiration.

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Previous whistleblowers have come before this body to publicly testify to the suffering adults and children experience using Meta's products. Meta has promised it would change. I am here to tell you that Meta has changed, and that these changes have been for the worse. Meta has spent the time and money it could've spent making its products safer shielding itself instead, all the while developing emerging technologies which pose even greater risk to children than Instagram.

Meta consistently demonstrates that it cares more about the bottom line than the emotional or physical safety of the children who use its products every day.

How can Meta care for the safety of children, when it doesn't acknowledge that they exist?