

Meta Settlement Puts Teen Safety Into App Design

A \$17 billion deal would change Facebook and Instagram defaults, raising questions about safety, choice and who designs teens' online lives.



A smartphone illustration shows app controls and a clock, suggesting built-in limits on social media use.

According to an analysis in *The Conversation*, Meta has agreed to pay up to \$17 billion over 10 years to settle claims brought by a bipartisan **coalition** of state attorneys general over Facebook and Instagram. The states argued that Meta deliberately designed its apps to keep children using them, misled the public about possible harms and improperly collected data from children under 13. Meta continues to deny wrongdoing, and the **settlement** still needs approval from Judge Yvonne Gonzalez Rogers.

The money is large, but the more important part for many families may be the redesign. If approved, teens under 18 in participating states would have a **default** two-hour daily limit across Facebook and Instagram, including multiple accounts, and only a parent could lift it. App access would be blocked between midnight and 6 a.m. Notifications would be muted during school hours, except for direct messages. Teens would also see prompts after every 15 minutes of continuous **scrolling**, **autoplay** could be turned off, and some appearance-altering filters would be blocked.

The key word is default. A default is the setting that applies automatically unless someone changes it. Many platforms already offer safety tools, but

those tools often require a user or parent to find them, understand them and turn them on. The settlement would make some limits part of the normal app experience for teens. That shift matters because design does not just decorate an app; it shapes what users are likely to do.

The case also matters because of the legal theory behind it. For years, social media companies have often been protected by Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, a **federal** law that generally shields online platforms from being treated as legally responsible for **content** posted by their users. The states did not mainly argue that Meta should be punished for posts made by other people. They argued that Meta's own product design, business practices and public statements were the problem. That includes features such as infinite scroll, which keeps loading new posts with no natural stopping point, autoplay, which starts videos automatically, push notifications, which send alerts to pull users back, and likes and filters.

That is where the dispute becomes more complicated than simply saying social media is good or bad. State officials say companies should not be allowed to design products that exploit teenage vulnerabilities and then avoid responsibility by saying

users made their own choices. Meta says it did not do anything wrong. Many teens also use social media to maintain friendships, follow interests, organize activities and find communities they may not have offline. A rule meant to reduce harm can also limit something real.

The settlement is not the same as a court ruling that Meta broke the law. It ends a federal trial in Oakland that had just begun, but it does not create legal **precedent**. Other cases are still active, including a California state-court case in Los Angeles and a New Mexico enforcement action, both of which Meta is challenging. The Conversation notes that the \$17 billion, spread across a decade, would amount to only about 1% of Meta's expected revenue during that period. That makes the design requirements potentially more important than the payment.

The unanswered question is whether the changes would actually work. A time limit can be helpful, but teens may move to other apps or accounts. A

parent-controlled limit assumes that a parent is available, informed and willing to manage it. Muting notifications during school hours may reduce distraction, but it does not answer deeper questions about recommendation systems, data collection or how apps measure success. The settlement also applies through participating states, which raises the possibility of different rules for different users depending on where they live.

For schools, families and lawmakers, the case points to a broader choice: should teen safety online depend mostly on individual self-control, **parental** monitoring or rules built into the platforms themselves? Each answer has costs. Individual choice respects independence but may ignore how persuasive design works. Parental control can help but may not be realistic for every household. **Platform** rules can protect users at scale, but they give companies and governments more power to define what a healthy online life should look like.

Written from reporting by The Conversation.

THINK IT THROUGH

1. Should limits on teen social media use be built into apps by default, or should they remain optional tools that families choose for themselves?

2. Is it fair to hold a platform responsible for design features such as infinite scroll and autoplay, even when users choose to keep using the app?

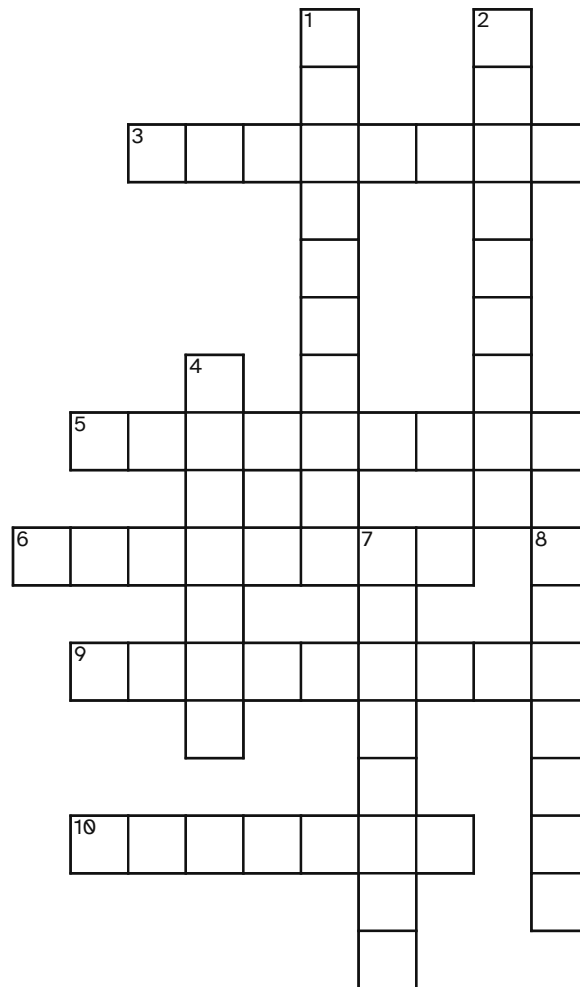
3. What evidence would you want before deciding whether this settlement actually improved teen well-being?

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T L I E I E L F E T O Y L P L D D T
A I E I D I C N C R L L A C R E L E
H P L O C R E I O E A P P N E W M S
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G T G C N T N A L E G L E L T I O T

AUTOPLAY	COALITION	CONTENT	DEFAULT	FEDERAL
PARENTAL	PLATFORM	PRECEDENT	SCROLLING	SETTLEMENT

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ACROSS

- 3 Online service for sharing, communication, or apps
- 5 Earlier court ruling used to guide similar future cases
- 6 Related to a mother, father, or guardian's authority
- 9 Group working together toward a shared goal
- 10 Automatic setting used unless someone changes it

DOWN

- 1 Legal agreement ending a dispute before a final trial ruling
- 2 Moving through online posts by repeated screen swipes
- 4 Connected to the national government rather than state government
- 7 Video feature that begins clips without a viewer selecting them
- 8 Posts, videos, images, and other material shared online

Where this came from

This article was written for 3andB from the reporting below. It is not a reprint — the wording is ours and the facts are theirs.

The Conversation

“Changes to Facebook and Instagram are key part of Meta’s \$17B settlement with the states over harm to teens”

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<https://theconversation.com/changes-to-facebook-and-instagram-are-key-part-of-metas-17b-settlement-with-the-states-over-harm-to-teens-290582>

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