

# **Testimony Before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science & Transportation**

## **Protecting Children from Pornography and Inappropriate Content on the Internet**

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Thank you for inviting me to testify before you today on the topic of protecting children on the Internet. My name is Tatiana Platt, and I am Chief Trust Officer and Senior Vice President at America Online, Inc. My responsibilities include providing strategic leadership for the development and execution of processes and practices that ensure the integrity of AOL Inc. businesses. I oversee the integrity of the user experience, consumer protection, advertising and programming standards, privacy, online safety, accessibility, community standards and policy. This includes oversight of our child safety and privacy protections.

AOL has played a significant role in the development of the online medium, and we have always had a special appreciation of its enormous potential to benefit society - especially children. Learning how to explore and understand the online world is an essential skill for our children in today's wired world, but we all agree that kids need and deserve special protection in this ever-evolving medium. AOL wants to give parents the tools and information to help ensure that their children can enjoy a rewarding and safe interactive experience online.

By promoting major public education campaigns and closely cooperating with elected officials and government agencies on outreach and enforcement efforts, we have tried to offer strong proactive leadership in every area of children's safety online. In some ways even more important than those efforts, however, has been our commitment to providing our members with the resources and tools they need to make informed decisions. No law, no technology, and no corporate initiative can ever take the place of an educated and involved parent when it comes to their children's online safety. That's why we work

hard to give AOL parents the most useful information, content, tools and safety tips to help protect their children, as well as convenient access to other resources available for families both on AOL and elsewhere on the Internet. By doing so, we've tried to empower parents so they can reinforce the rules of online safety, pay attention to what their children are doing, and make use of technology such as our Parental Controls to protect their children from inappropriate content and help ensure that their online experience is safe and age-appropriate.

*AOL Parental Controls* have been integrated into the AOL service since the very first days of our company and have long been one of the most compelling reasons for parents and families to use AOL. In the beginning, those controls were mostly focused on limiting or "filtering" children's access to inappropriate web sites and content areas such as chat rooms and message boards.

Over time, however, our Parental Controls have evolved in response to technological changes in the medium – such as broadband access and multiple devices – as well as shifting consumer demand. For example, we created a new *Kids Only* category setting in 1995, recognizing the increasing popularity of our children's content and the increasing number of families getting online. As the online medium became more mainstream, we focused on simplifying our Parental Controls. In 1997, we added our two "teens" categories, for parents who wanted a "one button" solution to setting controls. Even so, we continued to offer fully customizable selections for those parents who wanted to customize their child's experience. This "category" approach has proven very successful and popular with our millions of families with children.

In 1998, we changed our registration process to prompt parents to set Parental Controls for each of the screen names or subaccounts that they can create with their AOL account for a child or other family member. When we integrated that step into the *Create A Screen Name* process, we saw a dramatic increase in adoption of the Parental Controls tools as a result. This process allows parents to make a decision for their child with age-specific Parental Control settings at the time that they are creating a user name for them, rather than leaving it up to the parents to remember to go back later. And to ensure that those controls cannot be circumvented by the child, only the parent's

account – or a “master” account -- can create a new screen name or set or change Parental Control settings.

In the spring of 2000, we launched an online timer to give parents the ability to set limits on how much time their children spend online. A parent can determine when and for how long their child can be online. By doing so, a parent can help ensure that their child can only access the Internet for limited times per day, after homework is done, or when they are there to supervise.

In February 2003, we created *AOL Guardian*, a feature that enables parents to receive updates on their child’s online activities. Parents can choose to receive daily or weekly notices that include information about which web sites their child visited or attempted to visit and to or from whom they sent or received emails or Instant Messages (IMs). The feature provides parents with a higher level of information about their children’s online activities and can act as a springboard to help parents engage in conversations with their children about appropriate online behavior.

Soon after that, we helped parents move their households into the high-speed world with a new feature called *Internet Access Controls*. This feature allows parents to apply Parental Controls to the entire computer, rather than just activities within the AOL software, so that children in the household will always have the protections of those controls, regardless of whether they have a dial-up or always-on broadband connection.

We also gave parents the ability to view, set or modify their Parental Controls from anywhere they have access to the Web through the AOL.com portal, rather than having to log on through AOL at home to change those settings. In addition, we created a new *Web Unlock* feature that lets a child email a request to their parents to be given access to a specific site that has been blocked by the Parental Control settings.

These content settings are judiciously embedded into many of the widely used features on the AOL service including, but not limited to, search (a child’s search capabilities are limited to his or her web settings), email (a child will not be able to click on any links that are deemed inappropriate), and shopping (children will be restricted from accessing and purchasing products deemed to be mature or adult in nature).

When creating a separate screen name for their child, parents are given the opportunity to choose one of three different standard age "category" settings: *KOL*, *RED*, or *RED Plus*. These settings offer compelling age-appropriate content that allow a child to experience all the great things being online has to offer while providing parents a level of comfort that their child is only being exposed to content or people they have approved.

**A *KOL* setting** (recommended for 12 and under) restricts children to the *KOL Channel*, which has been specially created and programmed for children 12 and under. The child also receives a customized Welcome Screen. In addition, *KOL* offers *Radio KOL*, a daily online radio show which now draws more than a million weekly listeners, Games, Interactive storybook, and Homework Help.

Our goal is to create compelling age-appropriate content that will keep kids coming back, while blocking our youngest members from reaching any questionable web sites or content areas or communicating with unknown people. For example, a child using a *KOL* screen name can access age-appropriate content on AOL and the Web and interact with others online through email and in special supervised kids' message boards and chat areas, but he or she is blocked from taking part in general audience chat rooms and message boards on AOL, is blocked from Instant Messaging and cannot visit any web site that has not been approved as age-appropriate.

The reaction from members and media to this online safe zone for kids has been outstanding. In 2001, *Yahoo! Internet Life Magazine* awarded the Kids Only Channel as the "Best Kids Community" for "kid-friendly games, chat and homework helpers." In 2003 and 2005, *KOL* got a "Best of Web" award from *WiredKids*, the world's largest online safety and help group after being nominated by kids and teens and chosen by parent volunteers. And in 2004, *KOL* won the *National Parenting Seal of Approval*.

**AOL's *RED*, or Young Teen** (recommended for ages 13 - 15) category provides more freedom than a Kids Only screen name, but does not provide full access to more mature content and potentially-dangerous interactive features. The *RED* service is designed to respond to the surge in online activity among today's teens and to empower them by letting them customize and personalize their desktop and choose content to highlight based on their specific interests. The *RED* service gives teens their own Welcome

Experience, toolbar and Buddy List(r) feature as well as exclusive content and features from leading brands, original programming and expanded community tools.

Young Teen screen names are allowed to access most AOL content, and they can visit web sites that have been approved as age appropriate. They may communicate with others online through email, IM and in Teen chats and message boards that are monitored by background-checked employees. Teens are restricted, however, from visiting inappropriate web sites, or taking part in private chat rooms.

Older teens are channeled into **RED Plus, or Mature Teen** (recommended for ages 16-17) settings, which allow older teens more freedom than the younger Parental Controls categories as they learn to be responsible adult online users. Mature Teens are offered access to the same RED content areas as younger teens, but they can also access almost all content on AOL and the Web except sites that have been classified for an adult (18 plus) audience. They can locate others and communicate online through Instant Messaging, Teen chats and message boards, and email.

Each of these category settings has a pre-selected set of "defaults" for different features such as chat, email, Instant Messages and Internet access. A parent can choose to customize any of these defaults within a category to ensure the experience best matches his or her child -- so even on a KOL screen name (our most conservative), a parent may choose to further limit access to email to an "approved" list, or, alternately, may decide that the child is mature enough to fully participate in Instant Message conversations.

Today, with over 5 million screen names on Parental Controls, they are the foundation of our child protection package and a key offering of our subscription service. While providing kids with entertaining and educational experiences has always been an important mission for AOL, we strongly feel that it is also our responsibility to help parents manage their child's online experiences.

AOL's Parental Controls give parents both control and peace of mind, enabling them to make informed decisions about their kids' online activities by selecting the appropriate level of participation for each child. Parents also have the ability to customize additional

features - such as chat, email and Internet access - based on their children's online savvy and maturity.

AOL's Parental Controls also have another advantage, in that the majority of our technologies are run at the server level, rather than being limited to a single machine. Thus, we can provide equal protections to children regardless of where they log into AOL – at home, school, or a friend's house – and we can give parents the ability to check and update those controls from any computer with Web access.

But AOL Parental Controls are only one of the tools we use to help keep children safe online. Because we know that email is the number one technique used by spammers and pornographers to spread their filth, we wage an around-the-clock war against unwanted and inappropriate email.

AOL blocks approximately 1.5 billion spam emails per day and has reduced complaints about spam from its members by 75% in the past two years. To reduce the amount of spam received by subscribers, AOL has developed new, more efficient and accurate spam blocking technology over the past few years, investing and continuing to invest millions of dollars every year. This technology permits AOL to identify and stop spam from even reaching a subscriber's mailbox.

AOL is also working with other Internet businesses, including Yahoo and Microsoft, on standards for identifying legitimate email. While the industry hasn't yet settled on a standard, email providers, including Yahoo, Microsoft, and AOL, are testing a variety of technologies, including Sender Policy Framework (SPF), Microsoft Sender ID, and DomainKeys.

To add an additional layer of protection for our younger members, AOL gives parents the ability to create an approved list of screen names and email addresses that limits with whom their child can communicate by email and IM. Manual spam filtering is also available, which allows a parent to block all mail with specific words, from specific senders, or which includes specific content.

To help ensure that kids never see graphic images in email from unknown senders, AOL's default setting for KOL and RED members is to have file attachments, embedded

images or videos blocked in both email and IMs. A parent can make the choice to turn this feature on for their specific child.

Keeping younger members from seeing inappropriate Internet content is not enough, however. One of the greatest strengths of the online medium is its ability to build community, and we want to be sure that our younger members have safe access to chat rooms and message boards where they can make new friends, get homework help, or chat about current events.

Because we know that community areas in both the online and offline worlds can be dangerous if left unsupervised, all KOL and RED chat rooms and message boards are monitored by trained staff. These dedicated individuals have gone through background checks and careful training in order to sensitively work with children and help prevent inappropriate language or conversation in chat rooms and message boards. They control the tone and content of each chat room and message board, warn or remove disruptive participants, and can alert parents if their children engage in dangerous or inappropriate behavior.

Because creative pornographers have started to attack computers directly via surreptitiously-installed software, AOL is also on the forefront of fighting adware and spyware, sometimes referred to generically as spyware. While annoying and potentially-dangerous for adult users, spyware and adware can be devastating for younger users, bombarding them with a never-ending stream of pop-ups for pornography, tobacco, gambling, pharmaceuticals and other inappropriate material.

Once installed on a computer, spyware can also perform other malicious acts such as tracking a user's online behavior. Spyware can be installed on a user's computer surreptitiously using a vulnerability in the operating system or browser, with permission buried deep in an End User License Agreement (EULA), or in exchange for "free" software.

Regardless of how it is installed, spyware can be difficult to remove. First, a user must be able to find it. With the advent of "root kits" and other tricks, spyware authors are hiding their software on users' computers, making detection more difficult. Second,

newer versions of spyware are being written with self-healing routines, delete one file and, the next time the spyware starts up, it creates a new copy of the file.

Early last year, AOL introduced *AOL Spyware Protection* software (ASP). ASP searches for and attempts to block more than 28,000 different types of spyware and adware. Once installed, ASP conducts four separate scans – every few seconds, every 15 minutes, daily, and weekly to find programs that can track users and detract from their online experience. ASP also automatically checks for and installs any new updates every time a user logs on, so it can find and block the hundreds of new types of spyware being unleashed every month. AOL is continuing to improve the software and a new version of ASP was released just a few months ago.

Equally important, as viruses and hackers don't stop to check for age verification, AOL is working hard to make online safety and security easier for members of all ages. In December 2005, AOL released its first version of the *AOL Safety and Security Center* (SSC). SSC is an interface for all aspects of the AOL Safety and Security Center, including anti-virus, anti-spyware, and firewall software. By default, all the safety and security features are on, and all of the features are automatically updated to help protect against the latest threats.

In addition to the tools mentioned here, AOL also makes available extensive educational content to help keep parents as savvy as their children when it comes to the Internet.

We have found that education of our members is an ongoing process. As new consumers come online every day and as our existing customers' lives evolve, their Parental Controls needs may change as well. We believe that every family should periodically review new information, check their child's Parental Controls settings and update them as appropriate for their child's age and maturity. Also important, we have worked to quickly and effectively notify our members of significant news and developments in the area of children's safety, like the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act or new Parental Controls offerings that may impact their family's online safety decisions.

Furthermore, by updating parents on Internet and online developments we try to offer relevant and reasonable tips on how to help ensure their child is having a safe online experience. These tips include:

- Keeping the family computer in a central location and not behind closed doors in a child's room.
- Finding out if your child has a profile on any of the common social networking sites and either removing or reviewing that profile for inappropriate content.
- Checking Google and other major search engines for your child's name, address, phone number and school name to determine if any personally-identifiable information has been placed online that could enable a predator to find them.
- Reviewing your child's email address book and IM Buddy List to be sure you know who all of your child's online and offline friends are.

We have also worked with leading industry groups to help form a common alliance to help protect children online. In 1998, America Online was the first Internet Service Provider to partner with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) and helped launch its CyberTipLine. Since then and on an ongoing basis, AOL has been successfully working with NCMEC in many different arenas including technical assistance, technology training, event sponsorship, online safety campaigns, and financial contributions.

AOL has a variety of different content areas on the service that explain and link to NCMEC's site and the CyberTipLine specifically. AOL is a member of NCMEC's Board of Directors and helps conduct training for the NCMEC staff and the law enforcement community for investigative and prosecutorial training. In November 2002, AOL and NCMEC also launched online "*Amber Alerts*" to help find missing children by instantly sending an alert to both AOL members and Internet users who have opted into those alerts via email, phone or Instant Message.

Furthermore, AOL through its leadership role in the Internet Service Provider trade association, USISPA, has partnered with NCMEC to produce a Best Business Reporting Practices document to promote a uniform and comprehensive referral protocol to facilitate the investigation of online trading of illicit graphic images.

Although the majority of our online efforts are designed to help protect children against the daily threats of pornography, adult content, viruses, hackers, spam, phishing, and spyware, America Online also has a robust process in place to deal with the darkest players of the Internet, those online predators who might attempt to solicit a child for sexual activity. As soon as an AOL member notifies us of such an attempt, we will investigate and, if appropriate, engage NCMEC and/or the local law enforcement agency in order to prevent the incident. We also work very closely with local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies to track down and prosecute child predators. This operation has been ongoing for the last three to four years and as of last year, over 150 of these reports have led to arrests for child solicitation.

Our criminal investigation staff also works to share their experience by training federal, state, local, and military investigators and prosecutors. AOL conducts ongoing cybercrime training and digital evidence training at the FBI Academy, the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, the US DOJ's National Advocacy Center, the National White Collar Crime Center, the National District Attorneys Association, the American Prosecutors Research Institute, the National Association of Attorneys General, and NCMEC. AOL also has periodic law enforcement training at its own facilities in Dulles, Virginia. There are AOL technologists on around-the-clock call when law enforcement contacts AOL with criminal cases that relate to the AOL networks and services. AOL realizes that critical data and the understanding of this information is vital to a case especially if children are involved and at risk.

Because child pornographers often share their illegal images by posting them to public sites, America Online has developed state of the art technology that uses sophisticated processes and protocols designed to help detect illegal image files (child pornography) that are posted to the AOL network. Once detected, an immediate report is made to law enforcement via NCMEC for further investigation and prosecution. It has taken several years of research and testing to produce this countermeasure and has now been in use successfully for the last two years.

We believe this type of cooperation with law enforcement and investigative organizations is critical to supporting AOL's online safety mission.

Despite all of these technological, industry, and legal efforts, however, the most important force in protecting children is actively-involved and well-informed parents. That's why we don't just arm parents with online tools; we also provide them with tips, training, and information to monitor and guide their children's online experience.

To do so, AOL has been a leader in organizing industry efforts to educate consumers about online safety and is committed to continuing this leadership role. AOL was a leading corporate host of the *America Links Up* national public education campaign, designed to give parents information to help their children have a safe, educational and rewarding experience online.

In addition, AOL created and distributed a special video for kids -- called *Safe Surfin'* -- that features online safety tips presented by some of the younger generation's favorite celebrities. This video was developed in partnership with the National School Boards Association and has been introduced into schools across the country.

Furthermore, AOL, in conjunction with the American Library Association, launched the *Internet Driver's Ed* program. This program is a traveling Internet education and safety class for children and parents, hosted in children's museums and other prominent venues in major cities nationwide.

AOL was also a key partner in forming the GetNetWise.org web site – a resource designed to provide consumers with comprehensive online safety information that includes guidance from some of the major industry leaders. We also launched the Safety Clicks! Campaign through a partnership with Childhelp USA and the National School Board Foundation (NSBF). This is a nationwide effort to provide parents, kids and educators with the resources they need to enjoy a safe and enriching online experience. And AOL partnered with scores of governors and first spouses to launch the Internet Keep Safe Coalition, a state-supported educational program whose mascot, *Faux Paws the Techno Cat*, helps educate children to safely navigate the Internet.

AOL also partnered with leading computer manufacturer, Dell, to create the *TechKnow* program. This program trains kids on computer technology and includes training on

Internet safety. The program reaches between five and ten thousand children each year. They "earn" a computer from Dell, and AOL gives them a free account after they take the safety course. Learning about safety on the Internet should be as basic to computer users as the mouse, keyboard or software.

AOL regularly speaks on the topics of protecting children online and Parental Controls and often provides safety demonstrations to local area schools and children's organizations. Such efforts serve to reinforce to parents the need for them to take their child's Internet use seriously and to avail themselves of the tools that can control the access their child has online.

In conclusion, AOL's commitment to families and child safety includes a wide range of elements: educating consumers about online child safety, providing great age appropriate content for young audiences; working with law enforcement to go after bad actors, building an industry-wide coalition of like-minded companies and organizations, and offering parents easy to use, flexible Parental Controls tools to customize their children's online experience.

We are constantly enhancing our offerings to families and working closely with others in the industry to fine-tune our technological tools so that they are the most up to date and effective as possible. The Internet is evolving every day as new types of interactivity arise, and new content is posted. We must strive to be ahead of the curve.

Finally, it bears repeating that there is no substitute for parental involvement. Raising consumer awareness about Parental Controls, choices and child online safety is a collaborative effort. We welcome continued private and public partnerships to achieve that goal.