

Ex-Meta workers tell Congress tech giant stifled research on youth harm

Two former Meta employees told a Senate subcommittee Tuesday the social media giant suppressed critical research on risks young users face in VR.

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By [Naomi Nix](#)

Two former Meta employees told a Senate subcommittee Tuesday that the social media giant suppressed critical research about the risks children face while using the company's virtual reality devices and apps, in what they said was an effort to avoid bad publicity and regulatory scrutiny.

The employees, Jason Sattizahn, a former virtual reality safety researcher, and Cayce Savage, a former youth-focused researcher, testified before a Senate Judiciary Committee panel that Meta screened, edited and sometimes vetoed internal research about youth safety in VR following the 2021 political backlash it faced when former Meta product manager Frances Haugen leaked internal studies.

"I was given a legal counterpart to scrutinize everything that I did, to tell me what research I could and could not conduct, and to ensure my research reports would not create risk to Meta should they be publicly disclosed," Savage testified. "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."

Sattizahn, Savage and two other researchers who still work at Meta turned over thousands of pages of internal messages, memos and presentations from the past decade about Meta's virtual reality service to Congress that they say bolster their claims that Meta failed to investigate the safety risks of young people in VR. They say the company wanted to establish "plausible deniability" about the negative effects of the company's products, according to a joint statement.

Sattizahn previously spoke to The Washington Post for [an exclusive report Monday](#) about the document trove; Savage, who is Sattizahn's domestic partner, also spoke to The Post, but on the condition of anonymity because she still worked in the technology industry.

The documents include instances of Meta's legal team giving instructions to researchers on how to handle studies on sensitive topics that could elicit bad press, lawsuits or regulatory action. The documents also show that Meta workers warned the company as early as 2017 that children younger than 13 were bypassing age restrictions to use the company's virtual reality services. Meta also did not create parental controls for "tween" VR users until after the Federal Trade Commission began investigating its compliance with Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, a children's privacy law, the documents show.

Meta spokeswoman Dani Lever said in a statement that the employees' allegations are "based on selectively leaked internal documents that were picked specifically to craft a false narrative."

"The truth is there was never any blanket prohibition on conducting research with young people," she said, adding the company has continued to conduct research on youth safety and well-being.

The hearing amplified political scrutiny of Meta on Capitol Hill, where lawmakers — along with state attorneys general and child safety advocates — have long argued that Meta and other social media companies keep young people hooked on their products while exposing them to harmful content. Members of Congress have more recently [expressed youth safety concerns](#) about Meta's virtual reality services.

“What we have seen them do is to put profit over children, and they have used children as a profit center when those children are online, regardless of the harms,” Sen. Marsha Blackburn (R-Tennessee) said during the hearing.

Lever has previously said Meta’s virtual reality devices have long had safety features including the ability to block problematic users, and over time the company has used research to develop additional protections for young people.

Hours before the hearing, Blackburn, Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minnesota) and Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Connecticut) held a news conference alongside parents of victims of social media, to make the case for passage of the Kids Online Safety Act. The bill would hold social media companies responsible for taking “reasonable” care to avoid product design features that put minors in danger. The bill passed the Senate last year but died in the House.

Lawmakers also put the spotlight on Meta’s multibillion-dollar metaverse ambitions, which Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg has said will transform human communication. In VR, a user wears a headset that allows them to block out their real environment and fully immerse themselves in a digital world where they interact with other users. Zuckerberg says people in the future will turn to these virtual spaces for work, entertainment and socializing.

As early as April 2017, Meta staffers raised concerns about witnessing users who appeared to be kids breaking the company’s rules to use its VR products, according to one document. One employee post on an internal message board was entitled, “We have a child problem and it’s probably time to talk about it.” The employee, whose name was redacted on the document submitted to Congress, estimated that in some virtual rooms as many as 80 to 90 percent of users were underage.

“This is the kind of thing that eventually makes headlines — in a really bad way,” the employee wrote.

Over the coming years, workers would continue to point out the presence of kids in apps accessible through Meta’s VR headsets in memos posted to company message boards including in 2021 and 2022, the documents show.

But Sattizahn and Savage testified Tuesday that Meta’s appetite for learning about the potential dangers of the company’s products shifted in the fall of 2021 after Haugen released her cache of internal studies and other documents to media organizations.

“Meta’s immediate response to congressional concern was not to do the right thing but rather roll out new processes and policies to manipulate, control and erase data,” Sattizahn said during the hearing. “We researchers were directed how to write reports to limit risk to Meta.”

Soon after, Haugen’s document release, the company — newly renamed Meta — deployed in-house lawyers to caution researchers in Reality Labs, the company’s VR division, about examining “sensitive” topics carrying publicity, policy and legal risks, including children, gender, race, elections and harassment, according to a November 2021 slide presentation.

Meta lawyers advised Reality Labs researchers there were two ways they could “mitigate the risk” of conducting sensitive research, a copy of the slide deck shows. One way was to “conduct highly-sensitive research under attorney-client privilege,” which shields communications between lawyers and their clients from “adverse parties,” the presentation noted. The second way was to limit risk was to “be mindful” about how they frame studies and communicate findings, according to a copy of the presentation.

The company disputed that a lawyer would be in a position to approve or a reject a study and said that lawyers never edit research results. Lawyers offer advice and suggestions, the company said, but research leaders ultimately determine which studies to pursue and the scope of their projects.

Sattizahn told the panel about one case in which he alleged that Meta leaders or lawyers sought to influence the research more directly, according to researchers. While conducting an interview in Germany of a woman and her teen son about virtual reality in April 2023, two researchers told The Post, the teenager said that he frequently encountered strangers and that adults had sexually propositioned his little brother, who was younger than 10, numerous times. The researchers said that after the interview, their boss ordered the recording of the teen’s claims deleted, along with all written records of his comments.

“The mother was horrified,” Sattizahn testified on Tuesday. “Even when Meta tried to — in real time — shut down the questioning by the moderator because they didn’t like the data they were collecting, the mom kept asking for the son to talk about it.”

Meta previously didn't deny or confirm his account but said if such information had been deleted it would have been to comply with U.S. and global privacy regulations that broadly prohibit personal data collection without consent. Sattizahn said the mother gave explicit consent to talk about her son's experiences.

Savage told The Post that in the fall of 2022 she proposed a study of the company's effectiveness at determining the true ages of VR users. The project, which included an international survey to determine which data parents and teens would be comfortable providing to verify their age, was approved with a \$1 million budget. But the project was abruptly canceled in December 2022, she said.

"I knew additional research was needed ... because VR is a new kind of technology," Savage testified. But in the end, "that was the research that was mysteriously shut down."

Lever previously told The Post that the Reality Labs research team decided not to move forward with the project because the company was already developing parental control tools and an age-verification initiative.

As Meta weighed in on researchers' work, the company sought to fend off regulatory action, according to the documents provided to Congress. In March 2022, the FTC sent Meta a legal demand to turn over information about the company's compliance with COPPA, the federal [children's privacy law](#), documents show.

Within months, Meta launched "Project Salsa" an initiative designed to create special "tween" VR headset accounts for children ages 10 to 12, which would include parental controls to help Meta comply with federal law. Lever previously said the effort to create tween accounts came "on top of all the protections we had already in place" for teens.

But even back then some inside Meta worried that the new tween accounts wouldn't adequately address the fact that children under 10 were also using Meta VR products, one of the documents shows. "Because we know there are U10s on the platform," regulators might find the company was violating federal law, one slide presentation warned.

Savage said the problem of children flocking to VR persists. "It's such an issue that every single time I have used VR personally, the majority of individuals that I have observed or interacted with have been audibly under the age of 13," she said during the hearing.
