

## **Dangers to Children in Meta's Virtual Reality**

*Cover Page: National Center on Sexual Exploitation's Policy on Sharing Proof*

**WARNING:** *The material in this document may contain graphic text, blurred images, and survivor quotes that may trigger the viewer.*

### **Why do we post proof in the first place?**

NCOSE researchers have collected this proof as evidence of the material that is made, contained, and/or distributed by the corporations and institutions NCOSE is confronting.

Proof is shared with corporate executives, shareholders, and/or board members, as well as with policymakers, law enforcement, journalists, and the general public to **give witness to the sexual exploitation and abuse that is often rampant, yet sometimes hidden, on these platforms.**

### **Why do you blur out images, including faces, if they're publicly available?**

While we believe it is important to provide ample evidence of wrong-doing to support our claims and inspire change, **we also strongly believe that no one – neither adult, nor child – should be exposed to the type of material our researchers collect:** either for their own well-being, or out of respect for those being exploited. It is for this reason we pixelate/blur/block not only nudity or sexually graphic content, but also the faces of those being exploited.

We also want to limit access to this material (unfortunately, a luxury not afforded to children and adults using many of the platforms and products made by these companies). Therefore, we add several layers before someone can access the proof, and also don't include all the proof that we have obtained. If someone feels they need to see more evidence to understand the extent of the problem or the type of exploitation that is happening, they may request it of NCOSE by writing to [public@ncose.com](mailto:public@ncose.com).

### **Did you receive people's permission to post?**

Any personal testimony shared to NCOSE directly is posted only with the affected parties approval.

For material that is publicly available, we do not seek permission to post. However, we redact names and usernames of survivors from articles, social media, etc. even when publicly available. To read more about our commitment to ethical engagement with survivors, please go [here](#). We do not redact names or usernames of exploiters who have posted publicly.

*Disclaimer: while we do collect information on those who request access to more proof, that information will only be used for our own, internal analysis. It will not be distributed, shared, or posted publicly or with outside parties.*

Even though minors are technically not allowed in Meta’s portal to virtual reality, Horizon Worlds (the closest thing to how Zuckerberg envisions the metaverse), ample evidence exists that they are there...in droves. Meta has a bad track record of aggressively pursuing new products, new features that will increase profit, rather than prioritizing protection of its users – including children.

Meta-owned Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp are notorious for being hotbeds of sex trafficking, child sex abuse material, grooming, and a host of other crimes and ills. Now, instead of focusing on fixing its many existing problems, Meta has rebranded and hopes to lead the world into the metaverse. And by all indications so far, it seems the corporation is repeating its same mistakes and (by their own admission) “figuring it out as they go along.” This is not an acceptable response when children are the collateral damage when “progress” trumps protection.

### **[Kids are flocking to Facebook’s ‘metaverse.’](#) Experts worry predators will follow. – Washington Post, February 7, 2022**

In theory, kids aren’t allowed in the game. The new virtual-reality app Horizon Worlds, the first foray into [the much-hyped “metaverse”](#) for Facebook parent company Meta, is limited to adults 18 and older.

In practice, however, very young kids appear to be among its earliest adopters. The person I met that day, who told me they were 9 and using their parents’ Oculus VR headset, was one of many apparent children I encountered in several weeks on the app. And [reviews of Horizon Worlds](#) include dozens of complaints about youngsters, some of them foulmouthed and rude, gleefully ruining the experience for the grown-ups.

But experts say the presence of children in Meta’s fledgling [metaverse](#) raises a graver concern: that by mixing children with adult strangers in a largely self-moderated virtual world, the company is inadvertently creating a hunting ground for sexual predators.

When new online forums arise that attract kids, sexual predators “are often among the first to arrive,” said Sarah Gardner, vice president of external affairs at Thorn, a tech nonprofit that focuses on protecting children from online sexual abuse. “They see an environment that is not well protected and does not have clear systems of reporting. They’ll go there first to take advantage of the fact that it is a safe ground for them to abuse or groom kids.”

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**Meta appears to have done little to address the possibility of child-grooming specifically, despite throwing huge amounts of resources into the development of the metaverse, even changing its corporate name from Facebook in October to reflect a new emphasis on virtual reality.**

**Asked whether Meta views young children on Horizon Worlds and Horizon Venues, a sister app focused on live VR events, as a problem, spokeswoman Kristina Milian emphasized that**

social VR is an emerging and rapidly evolving medium and that the company is figuring things out as it goes.

Meta did not respond to a question about whether it had received any reports of child exploitation or grooming in Horizon Worlds. **It also declined to say whether it had taken any measures aimed at protecting children from those threats.**

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### **[UK data watchdog seeks talks with Meta over child protection concerns](#) – The Guardian, January 9, 2022**

The UK’s data watchdog is seeking clarification from Mark Zuckerberg’s [Meta](#) about parental controls on its popular virtual reality headset, as campaigners warned that it could breach an online children’s safety code.

The Information Commissioner’s Office said it was planning “further discussions” with the Facebook and Instagram owner about its £300 Oculus Quest 2 device, which was a sought-after gift over Christmas. However, child safety experts have warned that the **headset’s lack of parental controls – which would allow parents to block content that could be harmful to children – expose young users to the threat of abuse on the platform.**

Research by the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH), a campaign group, has flagged multiple instances of abuse on VRChat, a top-selling social app for Oculus users. Examples of under-18s being harassed on VRChat included a young person’s avatar – the digital representation used by people on virtual reality platforms – **being followed by two heavily breathing men and another male joking in front of an under-18 that they were a “convicted sex offender”.**

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The ICO said it would contact Meta about the device’s compliance with the [age-appropriate design code](#), also known as the children’s code, which states that the [“best interests of the child should be a primary consideration”](#) for online services likely to be accessed by a person under 18.

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“The worries about the Oculus VR Headset demonstrate why we need to see ‘safety by design’ as a new norm in tech,” said Kidron. **“Kids using VR headsets like Oculus can access chatrooms and other features known to carry risk, by simply ticking a box declaring they meet the minimum age requirements. This is an insufficient barrier to underage use of services known to harbour child abuse, harassment, racism and pornography.”**

Andy Burrows, the head of child safety online policy at the NSPCC, said there were “substantive” questions about whether Meta was complying with the children’s code. “Immersive virtual environments present an increased risk to children being exposed to harm in different and intensified ways, and **it’s clear Meta hasn’t developed the Oculus headset in a way that’s at all consistent with a safety-by-design approach.**”

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**[Dangerous by Design metaverse apps allow children to access immersive digital sex clubs](#) – The Blaze, February 23, 2022**

A researcher who went under cover in the metaverse as a 13-year-old girl witnessed grooming, graphic sexual material, and threats of rape.

The researcher, the BBC reported, used an app with a **minimum age rating of 13** and visited virtual reality rooms where other users’ avatars were simulating explicit acts. The researcher, whose online presence depicted that of a 13-year-old girl, was shown sex toys and condoms and approached by several adult men.

One man told the researcher that in the metaverse, users’ avatars can “get naked and do **unspeakable things.**” Other users approached the researcher while in the metaverse and discussed “erotic role-play.”

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Catherine Allen, founder of a UK-based augmented and digital reality consulting firm, said that while VR can be “fun and surreal,” **it also tends to be “quite traumatic and disturbing.”**

She described an **incident in a Meta-owned app where she and a 7-year-old girl were surrounded by a group of men who joked about raping them.**