

‘Chaos’ Agents Are Strategically Targeting Children With Social Media

[THE FEDERALIST](#), BY: [REBEKA ZELJKO](#), SEPTEMBER 01, 2023

In a Friday appearance on “[Verdict](#),” the popular podcast hosted by Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas), Phil McGraw argued children are “being targeted with what they will click on, full-well knowing that it creates anxiety, depression, loneliness, confusion, self-hatred.” McGraw, the longtime host of “Dr. Phil,” posed a poignant question. “If you want to create chaos in a society, where do you start? You attack the children.”

Social media is an unprecedented and pervasive problem, according to Cruz. “From the perspective of parents and grandparents, the pressures that are on our kids right now are qualitatively different from what we experienced,” he said. “I mean, they’re just assaulted online with social media, they’re confronted with themes and messaging and influence that is deliberately poisoning them.”

This is an increasingly daunting reality for parents. According to McGraw, many struggle to grasp the issue. “People don’t understand algorithms, including me,” he said. “But I got myself in touch with experts that do understand this.”

The experts cited by McGraw draw alarming conclusions. The television host detailed an experiment where researchers created fake social media profiles of a 14-year-old female. Algorithms served up “information that led her to eating disorder sites, suicidality sites, different kinds of things that were really unhealthy,” he said. These archers enhanced the test by typing in the words “weight loss,” and the results were “shocking.”

“The algorithm picked up those words and what they do is they feed you what you will click on,” McGraw explained. “So, it was like 10 times more toxic information.”

The negative feedback loop pushed by these toxic social media platforms creates larger, damaging trends. According to a [study](#) from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “adolescents who spent more than 3 hours per day on social media faced double the risk of experiencing poor mental health outcomes including symptoms of depression and anxiety.”

The same HHS study found up to 95 percent of kids aged 13-17 use social media, with a third of them using it “almost constantly.”

In his conversation with Cruz, McGraw said parents should be wary of their children’s social media exposure, especially because we don’t understand the long term affects. “If you get them to hate themselves, be questioned about who they are, what they are, what’s that going to do to the next generation and the next generation?”