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Facebook's Effort to Attract Preteens Goes Beyond Instagram Kids, Documents Show

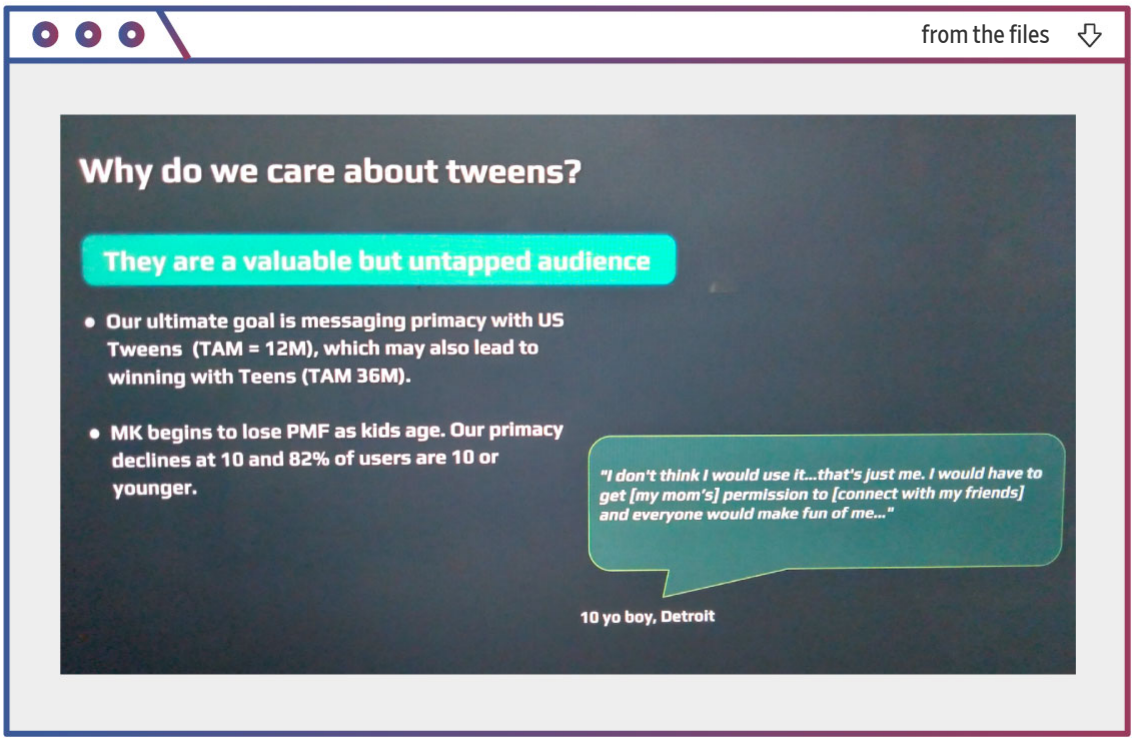
It has investigated how to engage young users in response to competition from Snapchat, TikTok; 'Exploring playdates as a growth lever'

By Georgia Wells and Jeff Horwitz
Sept. 28, 2021 1:24 pm ET

Facebook Inc. has come under increasing fire in recent days for its effect on young users and its efforts to create products for them. Inside the company, teams of employees have for years been laying plans to attract preteens that go beyond what is publicly known, spurred by fear that Facebook could lose a new generation of users critical to its future.

Internal Facebook documents reviewed by The Wall Street Journal show the company formed a team to study preteens, set a three-year goal to create more products for them and commissioned strategy papers about the long-term business opportunities presented by these potential users. In one presentation, it contemplated whether there might be a way to engage children during play dates.

"Why do we care about tweens?" said one document from 2020. "They are a valuable but untapped audience."



Source: February 2020 Facebook presentation titled, 'Tweens Competitive Audit'

Facebook isn't the only technology company to court children and face scrutiny for doing so. Virtually every major social-media platform, including ByteDance Ltd.'s TikTok and YouTube, has confronted legal or regulatory problems related to how children use its products. Federal privacy law forbids data collection on children under 13, and lawmakers have criticized tech companies for not doing more to protect kids online from predators and harmful content.

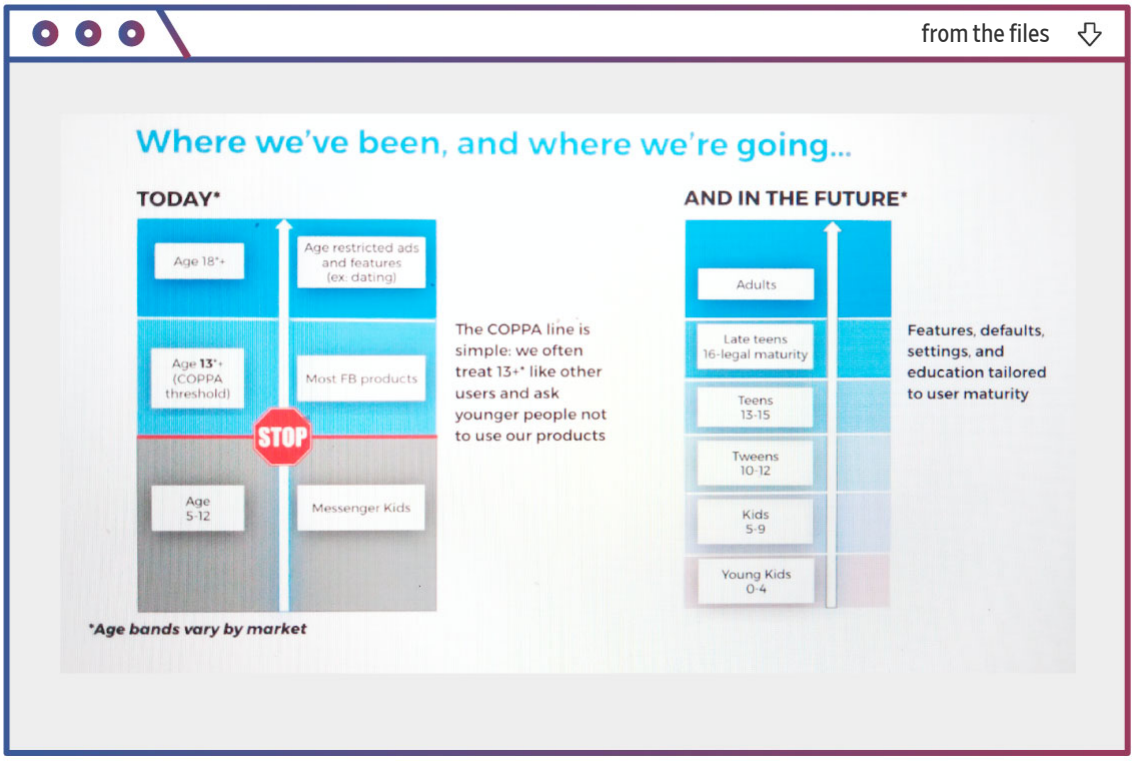
The Facebook documents show that competition from rivals, in particular Snap Inc.'s Snapchat and TikTok, is a motivating factor behind its work.

The company's approach to young users is expected to be addressed during a Senate subcommittee hearing on Thursday, which is expected to probe the effects of Facebook's Instagram platform on mental health. In calling for the hearing, lawmakers cited Journal reporting earlier this month that Facebook's own research has shown that Instagram can have a negative effect on teen mental health, especially among girls.

On Monday, Adam Mosseri, head of Instagram, said the company would pause the development of a version of the app for children, often referred to as Instagram Kids. He said the company wanted time to talk to parents, experts and lawmakers before proceeding. He also contended that underage users would simply lie about their age to access Instagram if a version for children under the age of 13 wasn't available.

Sens. Richard Blumenthal (D., Conn.) and Marsha Blackburn (R., Tenn) said they want to know what research Facebook has undertaken to promote and market its products to children, among other topics.

Over the past five years, Facebook has made what it called "big bets" on designing products that would appeal to preteens across its services, according to a document from earlier this year.



Source: Internal Facebook memo titled, 'Youth Privacy: Defining five groups to guide age-appropriate design'

In more than a dozen studies over that period, the documents show, Facebook has tried to understand which products might resonate with children and "tweens" (ages 10 through 12), how these young people view competitors' apps and what concerns their parents.

"With the ubiquity of tablets and phones, kids are getting on the internet as young as six years old. We can't ignore this and we have a responsibility to figure it out," said a 2018 document labeled confidential. "Imagine a Facebook experience designed for youth."

Earlier this year, a senior researcher at Facebook presented to colleagues a new approach to how the company should think about designing products for children. It provided a blueprint for how to introduce the company's products to younger children. Rather than offer just two types of products—those for users 13 and older, and a messenger app for

kids—Facebook should tailor its features to six age brackets, said a slide titled "where we've been, and where we're going."

The age brackets included: adults, late teens ages 16 to maturity, teens ages 13 to 15, tweens ages 10 to 12, children ages 5 to 9 and young kids ages zero to four.

In a written statement, Facebook spokesman Andy Stone said the chart was a taxonomy of the stages of childhood for internal discussion.

It isn't uncommon for companies to pursue young people as customers. Yet the work is sensitive for the social-media giant: Facebook and Instagram prohibit children from using their apps before their teenage years, but the company's future depends on ultimately recruiting them.

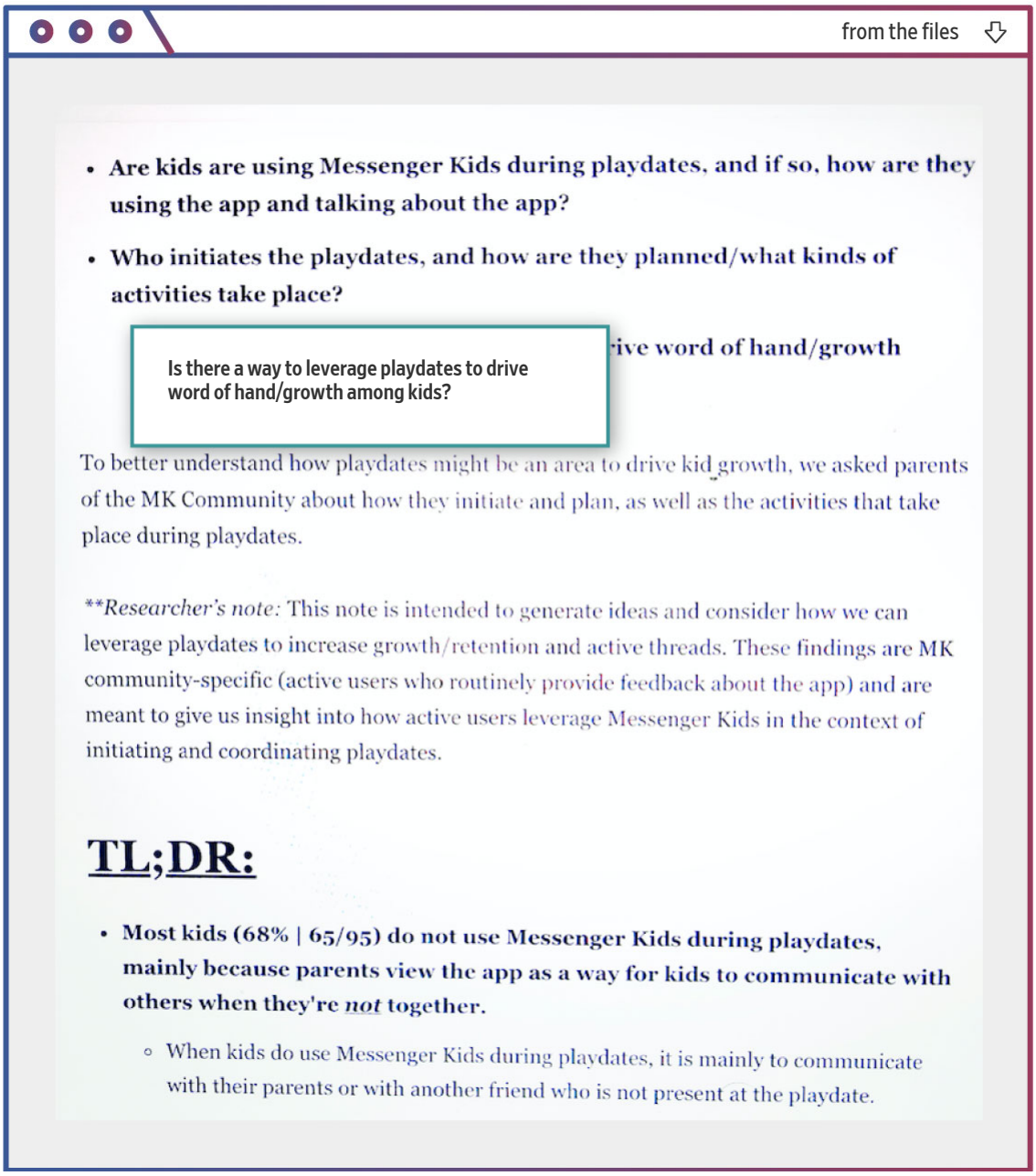
"If kids are under 13, they're not allowed on Instagram and they should not be using our service," said Mr. Mosseri in a written statement for this article. "It's not new and it's not a secret that social-media companies try to understand how teens and preteens use technology. Like all technology companies, of course, we want to appeal to the next generation, but that's entirely different from the false assertion that we knowingly attempt to recruit people who aren't old enough to use our apps."

He said the company had removed more than 600,000 accounts in the past three months for violating its rules on age limits.

Facebook's first foray into child-specific products was its 2017 launch of Messenger Kids, a video-and-chat app heavy on parental controls. The app says it is designed for users ages 6 through 12 and meets legal requirements on data collection. The hope was that the family-friendly product would set the stage for the children to eventually adopt other Facebook platforms, the documents show.

"Our ultimate goal is messaging primacy with U.S. tweens, which may also lead to winning with teens," one of the documents said.

That same year, Facebook's market researchers uncovered a weakness in the plan. Interest in Messenger Kids tapered off after age 10 and tweens viewed Facebook as a product for old people. They also weren't yet interested in Instagram and what the document called its focus on "self-presentation." Instagram was vulnerable to a challenge from Snapchat, which had a growing preteen following.



Source: May 2019 Facebook internal report titled,
'Exploring playdates as a growth lever for Messenger Kids (Findings from the MK Community)'

"It's fun, funny, silly and creative—seemingly made just for them," the 2017 presentation said of Snapchat, warning that "signing up for social media is a given" for tweens. TikTok's rise added to the pressure, with the main Facebook product no longer a serious contender among teens.

"Global teen penetration on FB is low, and acquisition appears to be slowing down," a March 2021 document states. In the U.S., the daily number of teens using Facebook has fallen by 19% over the past two years, another document noted, and would likely fall by an additional 45% by 2023.

A Pew Research Center survey from 2020 found that among 9-to-11-year-olds, 30% said they used TikTok, 22% said they used Snapchat, 11% said they used Instagram and 6% Facebook.

Facebook is relying on Instagram to recruit young users in the hope that they'll age into the company's eponymous platform over time. A November 2020 presentation cited an eventual goal of pitching Facebook as the "Life Coach for Adulting."

A March 2021 review conducted for Facebook Chief Product Officer Chris Cox found that Instagram still saturated the teen social-media market in developed countries. But researchers noted that posting by Instagram users had dropped significantly and that teens were spending two to three times more time on TikTok, according to one document.

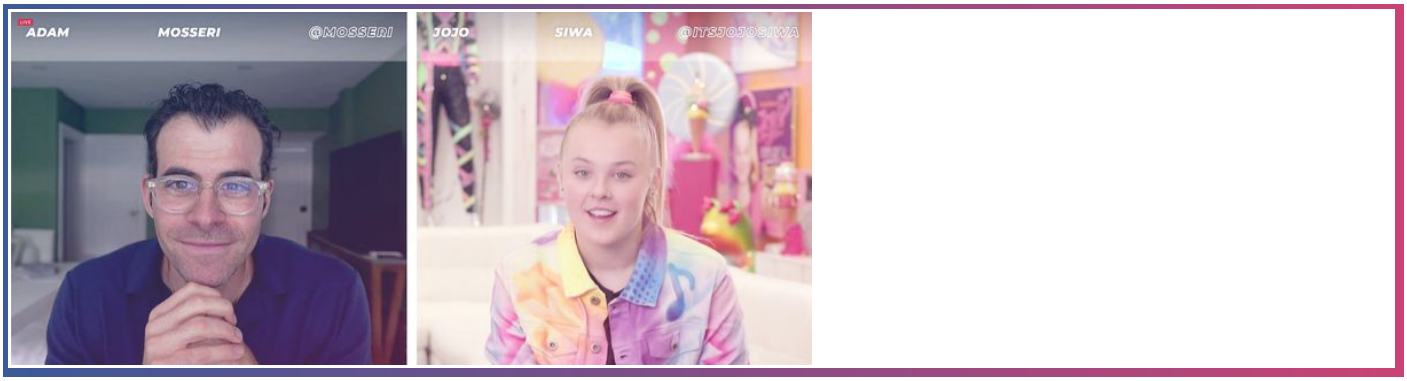
Keeping kids safe on social media is an industrywide issue. TikTok and YouTube have in the past few years each reached settlements for allegedly violating federal privacy laws protecting children, and have announced tighter rules since then to further protect young users. Both companies also have launched versions of their products designed especially for kids.

Snapchat's rules state users must be at least 13 years old, and the company has said it works to identify and terminate accounts for those under that age.

There also are risks of children being exposed to adult content. A Journal investigation earlier this year showed that TikTok's algorithm serves videos containing sex and drugs to accounts registered as minors. Facebook in 2019 said a design flaw allowed young people using Messenger Kids to enter group chats with strangers.

Social media's uncomfortable relationship with children was on display at a Facebook event in June, when star Instagram influencer JoJo Siwa blurted out during a question-and-answer session that she had been active on the platform for almost a decade. Ms. Siwa is 18 years old.

"I don't want to hear it," replied Mr. Mosseri, Instagram's head, who was conducting the online event.



In this screengrab, Adam Mosseri and Instagram influencer JoJo Siwa speak during a Facebook event in June.

PHOTO: AMY SUSSMAN/INSTAGRAM AND FACEBOOK'S CREATOR WEEK/GETTY IMAGES

Ms. Siwa said she had fans and followers under age 13 and wanted to be able to make content for them. She said young kids are drawn to the bright, quick nature of content on Instagram, and that she hoped there would be a product built for them.

"The key thing is making sure you keep kids safe," Mr. Mosseri said. "But like you said, you can lie about your age now, so our hope is to build a version that's designed for kids."

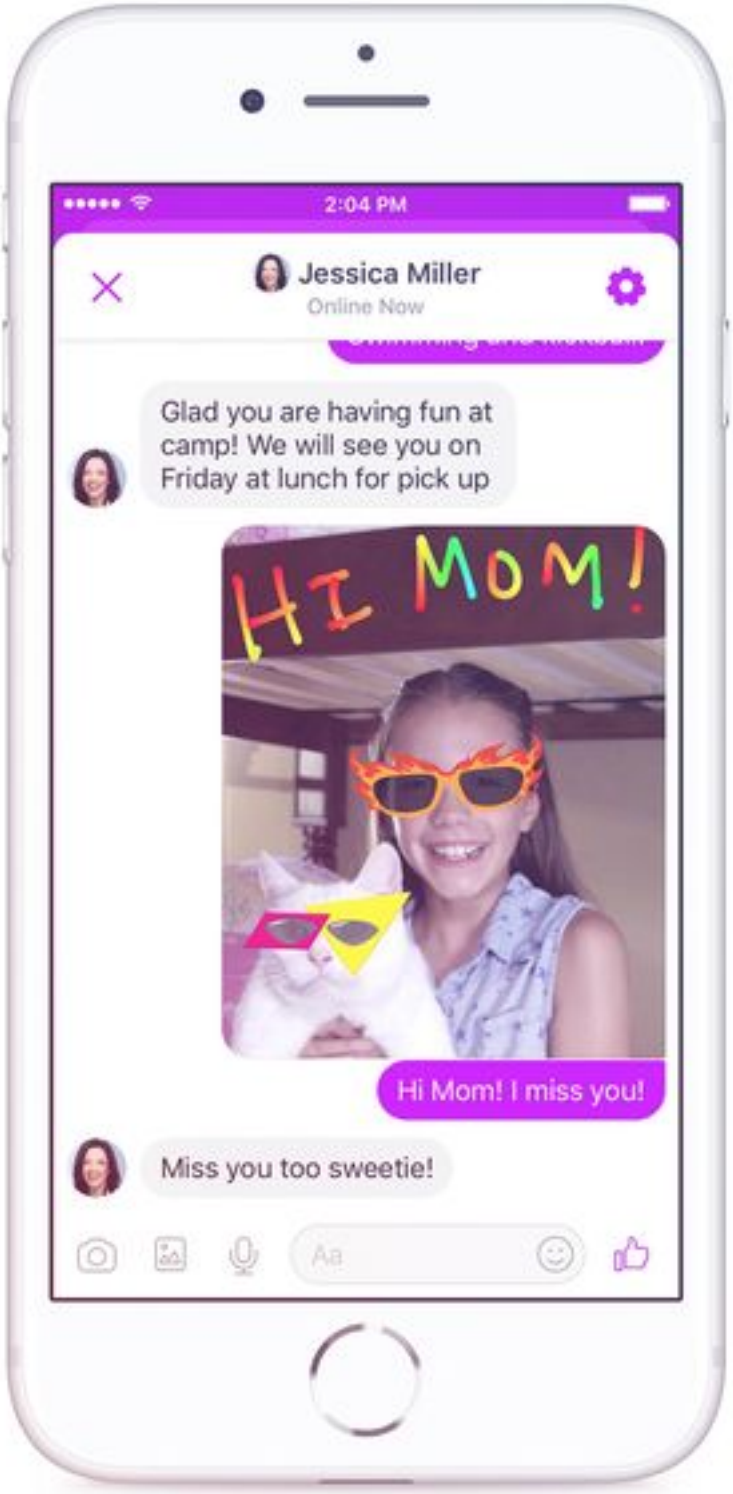
Part of the broader challenge for Facebook, its researchers identified, was that while parents said they were most comfortable with their children using the company's original Facebook product, tweens don't view it as an app made for them.

"Facebook is for old people—old as in 40," an 11-year-old boy told Facebook's researchers.

One Facebook team conducted interviews with children to try to gauge whether there were opportunities to encourage them to use the Messenger Kids app when they were socializing in person, according to a 2019 internal presentation titled "Exploring playdates as a growth lever." The document noted that parents expressed wariness about the idea.

In a study about household dynamics, a Facebook user-experience researcher found that although teens often inspired their younger relatives to join Instagram, those same teens also often counseled the tweens not to share too frequently, and not to post things they would later regret.

"I don't know how to get a perfect picture like my sister says you need to post," a tween told the researcher.



A photo provided by Facebook demonstrates the company's Messenger app for kids.

PHOTO: FACEBOOK/ASSOCIATED PRESS

"We need to understand if this influence over preteen sharing holds at scale," the researcher wrote in a document posted to Facebook's internal message board early this year. "If it is common that teens are discouraging preteens from sharing, there are obvious implications for creation and the ecosystem both in the near and longer-term as

preteens are the next generation coming onto the platform." The presentation cited concern among teenagers about oversharing as a "myth" about Instagram.

A Facebook team studying preteens set a three-year goal to figure out how to provide young people with social-media products built just for them. They noted that figuring out how to reach them would be just half the challenge. Convincing their parents that the products are safe would be the other half.

The team focused on the benefits, mostly around connecting more easily with friends and family, that they believed social media could bring to the younger generation.

"We have a historic opportunity for youth to experience the same positive benefits we have through social media, and more," one of the members of the youth team wrote in a document. Facebook also created a $1 million research fund to study tech's long-term impact on children. A Facebook spokesman said the company recently announced it was supporting the creation of a "digital wellness lab" at Boston Children's Hospital.

Other teams suggested additional products that might appeal to tweens, including quizzes and games that could help tweens connect when they struggle to initiate conversations, ways to surface unexpected content and automatic signals that indicate whether friends are available to interact. They also looked for more ways to expand Messenger Kids.

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