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Announcer: There are few things that make people successful. Taking a step forward to change their lives is one successful trait, but it takes some time to get there. How do you move forward to greet the success that awaits you? Welcome to *Next Steps Forward* with host, Chris Meek. Each week, Chris brings on another guest who has successfully taken the next steps forward. Now, here is Chris Meek.

Chris Meek: Hello, I'm Chris Meek, and you've tuned in to this week's episode of *Next Steps Forward*. As always, it's a pleasure to have you with us. Our very special guest today is Donna Rice Hughes. Donna has 30 years of leadership as a social entrepreneur, internet safety expert, author, speaker, commentator, and producer. She is CEO and president of Enough Is Enough, a non-partisan organization that has led the fight to make the internet safer for children and families since 1994.

Under her leadership, Enough Is Enough has led advocacy efforts to pass groundbreaking bipartisan federal laws, develop the Internet Safety 101 program, and an Emmy-winning PBS *Internet Safety 101* TV series, launched the National Safe Wi-Fi Campaign that resulted in McDonald's and Starbucks filtering illegal content on their public Wi-Fi, and led the Children's Internet Safety Presidential Pledge, Governor's Pledge, and State Attorney General Pledge. Donna graduated magna cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa, from the University of South Carolina. She's married to Jack Hughes, and they have five grandchildren. Donna Rice Hughes, welcome to *Next Steps Forward*.

Donna Rice Hughes: Thank you, Chris. I am delighted to be with you. Thank you for having me.

Chris: No, thank you. It's a pleasure and an honor, and I really appreciate you joining us today because there's so much to talk about. I want to start with some shocking statistics that your team sent to me, and I'd like you to take them one by one if you would, to explain how and why these things are happening. First, 58% of youth consumers of pornography are under the age of 14. As a parent myself, my son's 12, I imagine every parent out there would never imagine a stat like that. Again, how and why are children that young getting their hands on pornography?

Donna: First of all, anytime a child is connected to the internet, they have access to all of the good content and all of the bad and illegal content, like this hardcore pornography. Let me just start with that point there. A lot of people think that the hardcore pornography that's on the internet is protected under the First Amendment. The majority of it is not. It's illegal under federal obscenity laws even for consenting adults, so this is very important. Why is it there? Because those laws have not been enforced since George W. Bush was president.

That means that any child with an internet connection, and if that has not been filtered to block out pornography and other forms of dangerous content, the kids have access to it. The pornographers are deliberately targeting kids because they know their content is addictive, and if they get an ongoing consumer at a young age,

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they'll likely keep them hooked for life. Now, let me just describe really quick, Chris. This isn't the pornography of yesteryears, *Playboy Penthouse*. This is hardcore extreme. Themes depict teen rape, incest, and the majority of it, over 90%, depict some type of violence against the female.

Chris: Unbelievable. How did we get here?

Donna: Honestly, when the internet happened, I believe it just opened up all of the good, obviously, because the technology is fabulous, but the criminal elements and the illegal content and the dangerous people were at the front end of this technology. It has been catch-up and whack-a-mole with law enforcement and laws, even, to stay on top of this. Back during the Bush years, during Ashcroft, that was the last time they enforced those laws. We have been trying all the time to get the Department of Justice to enforce the laws, and they haven't done it yet.

Chris: The second issue is sexting. There's been a three-fold increase in self-generated imagery by 7 to 10-year-olds. That's 7 to 10-year-olds. What the hell's going on there?

Donna: Exactly. I draw a lot of links of this to the sexualized culture and the fact that we were just talking about kids have access to all of this toxic pornography. What happens when kids see content? First of all, this sexualizes them, and they will often act out what they see. I believe that that is one of the big reasons that kids are actually taking nudes and sexually-explicit videos and pictures of themselves, sharing them with other kids.

Sometimes a young girl might share with a boy or to get his attention, share that kind of thing. Then there's sextortion. That's another whole part of this, but they're imitating what they see. Then there's also a lot of peer pressure. I believe this rite-of-passage thing, and they don't realize that when they do this, first of all, those images, those videos can become public. Oftentimes, when they do, then a predator or a trafficker can get a hold of that and then actually extort or sextort that child to send more pictures and more video.

Chris: It's crazy to think this is the new norm.

Donna: It is.

Chris: Let's stick with the issue of sexting and broaden that out a bit. First, there's the issue of mainly teenagers sexting to other children, their friends and others, and then there's the issue of sexual predators convincing children to send sexually-explicit photos of themselves. According to the information your staff has shared, in 2023, the CyberTipline received 186,000 plus reports of online exploitation, including sex distortion.

Donna: Right.

Chris: Why are kids sending explicit photos of themselves to complete strangers over the internet? Maybe more importantly, where are the parents?

Donna: Yes, good question. First of all, again, let me just say this: sexual predators are very clever. They're very manipulative, and this is part of the grooming process. Their goal is to gain the trust of the child. This can happen online or offline, obviously. When they have done this online-- now remember, kids are hiding behind screens; so are predators and traffickers. It may seem safe, interesting, that the predator will elicit the sexual curiosity of the child. They will probably expose them to pornography, and pornography is a grooming tool in and of itself because it sexualizes that child.

Kids are not immune to becoming aroused by pornography, and predators know that, and they take advantage of it. The predator may, in fact, send an image of themselves and ask the child to do the same. Then this happens, all right? When images and videos of underage kids are out there, this is considered under the law to be child pornography or what we call child sex abuse material now. We're actually renaming that because it is, in fact, the recording or a picture of child sexual victimization.

Chris: You just gave a few examples of how children are being groomed. What are the most common tactics used by sexual predators to target children online?

Donna: Predators will disguise themselves. One of the things I always tell parents and to teach their kids is that you can't detect a disguised predator. Predators don't typically come out and say to a 13-year-old, "Hi, I'm 55 years old, and I want to have sex with you." No, they don't. They become their friends. They will often impersonate someone that the child wants to have an interaction with. I interviewed a convicted sex offender, John Doe.

His video is on our website at enough.org. I said, "John, tell us, how did you gain the trust of these kids?" He told us very explicitly what he did. He says, "If I'm talking to a 12-year-old girl, and she's interested in a 14-year-old surfer, blonde, then I find a picture of a boy that looks like that, and I pretend to be him. If I'm talking to a boy, and he's interested in a particular type of girl, I find a picture of that girl, I impersonate that girl, and that's how I get into their world."

Chris: Disgusting. It's that simple.

Donna: It is. It's very simple. Remember, kids' brains, their prefrontal cortexes have not been fully developed until they're 22 to 24 now, they say. That's why God gave kids parents. They are easily fooled and easily tricked and easily drawn in to these conversations.

Chris: Do we know the percentage of kids who are talking to strangers online?

Donna: I think it's about, oh goodness, 40% of kids grades 4th through the 8th grade are talking to strangers, that they know are strangers. They're sending them personal

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information, including where they live, their phone numbers, and also just personal information about themselves.

Chris: If I'm a predator, how do I find the kids? How do I know the Jane Smith who I see online is 12 years old living in Michigan?

Donna: Kids, again, they're revealing a lot of information about themselves on social media, on gaming sites. Let me just say this about social media and gaming. These are two of the predators' top playgrounds, because where kids are playing, predators are preying. Where kids are, that's where predators are. They're looking for those vulnerable kids, and they're looking for ways to engage them in conversation to befriend them.

Gaming is the perfect platform, quite frankly, because in a game-- parents don't often realize this, but when you allow your kids to these online games, it's everybody that they can play with. A parent has to limit that, or what we suggest, to only let their kids play with people that parents know and approve of. Don't let them just play with anybody because now a stranger, a predator can befriend that kid through a game and get to know a lot about them while they're playing.

Chris: What are some warning signs parents should look out for that may indicate their child has been groomed or targeted by sexual predator online?

Donna: There are a lot of things. I won't talk about the technology tools just yet. First of all, if they start to become very secretive. Now, remember, what's the goal of a sexual predator or a trafficker? It's always sex. It's to get them into private one-on-one conversations and have sexual, basically, cyber sex encounters with them, and eventually get them offline. You may find gifts showing up. You may find that as soon as you walk in the room, the kids screen goes blank. Now that could happen for any number of things, but that's another thing.

They may become unusually sexually curious in age-inappropriate ways, and the same thing can happen with exposure to pornography. They may freak out if you take their technology away because that is the source for them to have contact with that predator. What's really very interesting is that a predator when they effectually groom a child, that child is very connected to the predator, and they want to be with them.

There have been cases just this past year, and it never surprises me, I've been doing this for 30 years, but where a child or usually a preteen girl will actually go travel to see this predator and go to great lengths to see them because they have fallen for them. They followed for the grooming, and their hooked. Oh, another thing is the predator will isolate a child. In other words, they'll isolate them from their family and their friends. In other words, it's you and me. "Your parents they don't really understand you, but I do," those kinds of conversations happen very, very frequently.

Chris: You mentioned how the predator tries to get the child offline. You mentioned that child would travel to great lengths to go see the person. I don't want to take this
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on the rabbit hole, we may not necessarily need to go to, but does that lead to human trafficking at all?

Donna: Oh, of course. A lot of it is very tied to human trafficking. Traffickers operate the same way a sexual predator does. In fact, a trafficker is a sexual predator. The difference is that a sex trafficker will then get that child engaged in the commercial sex industry. That's the purpose. They may actually abuse the child as well, but the purpose is to get them involved in the sex trade.

Chris: The FBI has identified several trends in which sexual predators are using "group grooming" tactics to target and groom children for sexual exploitation. What is group grooming, and how can parents identify and prevent it?

Donna: This is really interesting. We've seen for all the years I've been doing this that predators do congregate online. They validate each other's sexual interest in kids. They basically say this is okay. They exchanged child pornography. In fact the child porn or the CSAM world, child sexual abuse imagery has exploded. We had the largest number of reports ever last year to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Why is that? Because more and more predators, more and more pedophiles are getting this content, they're creating this content and they're sharing it with each other. There's a huge boom and there has been, it's been growing, it's a multibillion-dollar industry.

The grooming is what is happening now where a group of predators will get together in an online area, it could be on a game, on a social media site, and all the predators will pretend to be a child so that the kid is thinking that these are all kids his age or whatnot, but they're not, they're predators. Then they will start introducing sexual talk, and sexual content, and pornography. When they do that, they basically are normalizing this behavior. One may actually send a nude of themselves to the group who's really a predator disguised as a child to basically let the child know it's okay to the real child to send a nude of yourself.

Chris: It's just shocking.

Donna: Again, this is an evil. We're really talking about the sick, evil people. When I talk about the multibillion-dollar industry of child sexual abuse material, these kids, many of them, I can't remember exactly, it's like 50%, are of a very young age, some as young as toddlers and infants. There are people out there who become sexually aroused by violent child rape of very, very young kids.

Chris: Disgusting. We've been talking about online sexual predators were strangers, but the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention statistics indicate that 91% of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by someone known and trusted by the child or the child's family members. That obviously has been a decades-old situation. Have you found that those predators are also incorporating the internet into their grooming and entice new children?

Donna: Absolutely. Because just like us, we're sitting here, Chris, we're using this fabulous technology to communicate with your audiences around the world. Predators do the same thing. We all have online and offline lives. In the life of a predator, they do too. Of course, if you're abusing a child in the physical world that's happening offline, then the typical cycle of abuse is that they will video that abuse, then they will share that in the form of child sexual abuse material online with other pedophiles and then the cycle just continues. There's also virtual molestation, where groups of predators will get together and one predator may actually physically have a child with him that he's abusing in front of the other ones that are watching online. There's always this offline-online cycle, if you will.

Chris: What are the most dangerous online threats that children face today? Is it the sexual predator, bullying from children at their school, the content they see on their own?

Donna: It's really hard to say which is more dangerous because they're all equally dangerous but in different ways. I will just say, with pornography, for instance, I did say it's highly addicting. There's another part of the pornography issue: they found that kids who are exposed to this extreme pornography are three times more likely to be sexually exploited. Why is that? It's because they've been sexualized, so it's much easier for them to be a victim themselves. Of course with any of this child pornography, once these images are out there, they're hard to get taken down.

This can haunt an adult who had those images taken of themselves as a child throughout their lifetime. What that means is that predators and pedophiles are continuing to use and exploit that child or that now adult just by using or being sexually aroused by the the abuse of them when they were a minor child. Bullying is a whole another thing, but we're going to talk about that a little bit later. All of these things can lead to hopelessness, feeling out of control by the child, and lead to depression, and even suicide.

Chris: Let's back up a moment. You've been involved with Enough Is Enough for many years. Tell me what drew you to the organization, and then tell me about Enough Is Enough.

Donna: Thank you. I began in 1994 at the advent of the internet. It was a young organization. Our focus was protecting children and families from pornography actually, and the offline world. When I started two weeks into the job, we saw the beginnings of sexual predators, child pornographers, and pornographers using the pre-internet, this is pre-email, pre-World Wide Web, and I thought, "Oh my goodness, this is going to be the new frontier."

Because we know that criminals get in front of new technologies all the time. They're the first to exploit it and the first to actually use that technology. Of course, kids were the early adopters as well. All of us, digital, I guess, we were the newbies to the digital world where we've been playing catch up, and that includes law enforcement, government leaders, even the Supreme Court.

Chris: Now, how does Enough Is Enough collaborate with other stakeholders such as government agencies, law enforcement, industry partners, and advocacy groups to advance its goals?

Donna: Yes. In a lot of different ways. First of all, we work very closely with Congress at the federal level working on, what are the gaps in the law, what are the loopholes that need to be closed, what do we need to do with the new laws? We work with law enforcement to actually aggressively enforce all the existing laws, and for Congress to fund an appropriate more money to fight these crimes. Remember, sex trafficking is a multi-billion dollar industry, child porn is a multi-billion dollar industry, pornography is a multi-billion dollar industry, child exploitation is multi-billion.

You've got big tech companies, most of them are multi-billion dollar companies. You've got a big perfect storm of folks out there, criminals, and some businesses that are fueling all of this. We want to see new laws and we want to see the laws that we have enforced and funded. As far as advocacy groups, we're part of a lot of coalitions of like-minded NGOs. Together, we're able to make a much bigger difference than one organization here or one organization there. We have a collective voice.

Chris: Strength in numbers.

Donna: Yes.

Chris: No, I love that. Enough Is Enough has a four-pronged approach to improved internet safety. Let's go through them one at a time, starting with educating and empowering the public.

Donna: Yes. The four prongs are educating and empowering the public, and that is critical. Why? Really, since 1994, we have been a voice of, "Look, the internet is great technology, it can be used for good and evil." What are the dangers that kids are being exposed to on a regular basis? If you have a child who's internet-connected, it's not a matter of if, it's probably a matter of when they're going to run into any of the risks that we've already been talking about.

Doesn't mean they're going to fall prey to it, but they will encounter it. We have to educate the public of what the dangers are and then how to protect kids. We also educate the media. We've become a source for the media really for the 30 years we've been doing this. We were the first organization out there talking about these issues. That's very important. Then we have the internetsafety101.org website.

We have information about every danger that a kid can get into trouble with online and how to protect that child from that particular danger, whether it's cyberbullying, or sexting, or using mobile technology, or social media, et cetera. Sex trafficking, pornography. What are the warning signs, what are the red flags, what are the conversation starters? All of that is on that website, and we also have a curriculum

that we developed with that. This is one of our biggest areas that we focus on, and that is public education.

Chris: The next pillar is advocating for greater corporate responsibility.

Donna: Yes. This is really key. Why? Because in particular, these big tech companies, there's a lot more that they can be doing that they have not been doing. Really, I would say for 30 years now, we have relied on their promises to self-regulate, which they typically have not done. In fact, we've seen much the opposite. They have, when I say they, I'm talking about the big guys, they have big lobbies that are fighting a lot of the legislation that we're trying to get passed.

What we've been calling on them to do, we being advocacy groups like Enough Is Enough, is to develop age verification, for instance, for social media companies to put on parental control tools and make them easy for parents to find so that parents themselves can help manage what their kids are doing on social media platforms and on gaming platforms too. We want to see the defaults turned on on filtering and monitoring. Right now, if your child goes to social media or they open up their phone, their smartphone, everything's completely on, they have access to all the good and all the bad.

What we've been trying to do and advocate for is that all the parental control tools are turned on initially right out of the box. That would make it so much easier for parents. Then a parent can certainly say, "Oh, yes, I want little Johnny to have access to whatever kind of content," I'm going to give them access, but at least it's on to begin with. It's so much now for parents to manage with multiple devices per however many kids they have. If they're on social media, then each social media platform has its own controls, if they even have controls as do gaming devices, and the whole thing is just really overwhelming.

Chris: Overwhelming is a perfect word for it.

Donna: Yes.

Chris: Let's talk about the next pillar. Engaging faith-based communities.

Donna: Yes. Look, many people in the United States have some sort of a faith. It's one of the best places to get parents and kids together and to start to talk about these issues in a place where you can actually get to the parents and the kids. We've started different programs there, we've talked to faith-based audiences a lot. We're trying to get churches more involved at putting in prevention measures from kindergarten up through high school and college to start talking about healthy sexuality versus what is exploitive and what is dangerous.

Just to be a safe place for people that are dealing with all this stuff coming at them in this sexually toxic culture. The other thing is, is that this is a spiritual battle that we're facing. There's some real pure evil out there in these areas, and it's important that

the church is involved and that they have a voice, and they're speaking into these culture issues to the people who come to their places of worship.

Chris: Kids just can't be kids anymore, can they?

Donna: No. This really is destroying their innocence and corroding their innocence, quite frankly.

Chris: That's an understatement. I really truly want to say this, I appreciate the work that you've been doing in this. It's just such an important topic. Thank you.

Donna: Thank you.

Chris: I saved advocating for strong public policies for last because that's particularly timely right now. You and I spoke a little bit before the show on this. Share an overview first, but then I also understand that there's important legislation that's stuck in the US Senate right now.

Donna: Right.

Chris: What is that legislation? Oh, sorry, go ahead, please.

Donna: Yes. Let me say this. We all know, and everybody listening is going to appreciate what I'm about to say. This country is so divided on so many things, but protecting kids from sexual exploitation, we're unified on that issue. This is a unifying issue. It's a nonpartisan issue, which is a good thing. In the Senate right now, there are five bipartisan bills that have passed unanimously out of either the Judiciary Committee or the Commerce Committee. That's unanimous. You don't see a lot of unanimous anything happening in Congress, but all these bills have unanimous support.

We are calling for as well as the senators who have signed on to sponsor these bills, that are all child protection bills aimed at dealing with some specific of what you and I have been talking about. We're waiting for Senator Schumer to call for a floor vote. That is the only thing that is holding this up. I would love it if you're okay with it to ask your viewers to call Senator Schumer's office. Now, if you're not **[unintelligible 00:28:56]** you can write this down. You can just call the Senate and you can get to Senator Schumer's office, but I'm going to give it out. All right?

Chris: Please do.

Donna: This is Senator Schumer's office and it's area code 202-224-6542. That's 202-224-6542. Just ask them, say, "We want Senator Schumer to bring these online child protection bills to a House or to a Senate vote immediately." If you want to really get even more engaged, you can call your own senator and say, "I'm supporting this. We want to protect kids and we realize that Congress has got a role to play." What's the role of government?

To basically reign in evil, to deter evil, and this is what all these bills are designed to do. Either bring greater corporate accountability and responsibility. I think you may have asked me earlier when we were talking about child sex abuse material, and I mentioned that last year was the largest number of reports ever made. I think over 103 million videos and pictures of children being sexually violated. Now, one of the bills called EARN IT will actually hold the social media platforms accountable to report that and to take it down.

Right now, they are not required by law because there's a loophole in the law, and I won't go into the details, but this is basically dismantling that loophole. One of the other reasons you're seeing social media companies not doing what they should be doing is because there's no liability. This would remove that liability so that victims could actually sue these companies if they don't do what they're supposed to be doing.

Chris: Again, that's Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer from the State of New York. Let's have his phone number one more time please just because--

Donna: 202-224-6542, or you can just call the United States Senate switchboard and ask him for the number or get them to connect you to his office.

Chris: You just gave a brief overview of how you think the federal government has been engaging in this. Overall, at the local, state and federal levels, how effective do you think current government efforts are in addressing online threats to children?

Donna: I'm very pleased with our Senate. Over the past few years, they've been very, very proactive. I'm going to give a shout out to some of these senators. Senator Graham from South Carolina, Senator Blumenthal, who's co-sponsor. One's a Dem, One's a Republican. Klobuchar, for instance, senator from Tennessee who's a Republican and whose name escapes me right now. They're collaborating. They're doing a great job. We've got to get the rest of the Senate, and like I said, Senator Schumer, to get these bills onto the floor and pass. Then the House, I don't think is doing so great. Hopefully once the Senate, all these bills move over to the House, we'll get some action in inside the house.

The states, on the other hand, are doing great. I think they've gotten sped up as some of us have been, that are advocates, that are nonprofits. They said, "Shoot, we're not going to wait for Congress. We're going to pass our own state laws to deal with some of these things." You've had a number of states pass age verification laws. In those states, like Utah and Mississippi, they have actually Pornhub, the largest pornographer owned by MindGeek has actually left those states because of the age verification laws that have been passed.

Chris: That's great to hear. We were talking earlier in the show about the disturbing statistics connected to the internet and child exploitation. Another shocking stat was the number of child sexual abuse material reports. In 2023, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's Cyber tip line received 36.2 million reports of suspected child sexual exploitation online. You mentioned a minute ago, those

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reports contained more than 105 million images, videos, and other files. Is it true that most of this material involves children under 8 years old?

Donna: Yes. There's a large percent, I don't know how, if it's most. Here's what we know. Any type of this sexual material is highly addictive. What does that mean? That the user will often become desensitized to what they've been using, and they'll want more extreme, more graphic, more violent, or in this case, even younger children. That's the way the addiction cycle works. We've seen this trend over the years-- Actually, gosh, even when I got started, I saw some baby and infant toddler child sex abuse happening even back in 1994.

Here's what's different now, it's become big multi-billion dollar industries that law enforcement can't even enforce their way out of now. This is why the role of these big tech companies is so very important. We need everybody to check their differences at the door and fight for these kids because this is a war. When you look at how many billions of dollars we send to fight wars in other countries-- I'm not going to get into the politics of that because there's pros and cons of all of that.

Yet this is a war on our kids innocence. We aren't putting billions into it. We're putting maybe 100, 200 million depending on, if you count what's going to law enforcement, if you count what's going to-- not much going to the NGOs, I have to tell you. Most of us are raising money through private donations. We're not taking this as seriously as we need to.

Chris: Where is this material being produced, and what's it going to take to stop it?

Donna: It's being produced anywhere. Anywhere a child is being sexually abused or raped is where it's being produced. That's happening everywhere, everywhere in the United States, probably every city, every community, and all around the world. Why? Because when a predator sexually abuses a child or sex trafficker is abusing a child or even an adult, a female, they're taking pictures of that and videos of that, and they're selling it online. Now they're making money. Then they also barter it for images and videos of other kids that they haven't abused because all this feeds their addiction.

Chris: Help me through this here. My son is 12, he just turned 12. He's in middle school. To my knowledge, I put the filters on his phone and his iPad.

Donna: Good.

Chris: I know he is gaming, and for the most part, as far as I know, is his baseball buddies. What else can I do to make sure everything's set properly and that he's okay?

Donna: I would first go to the gaming, because the gaming platforms also have parental control tools. You need to turn those on. I'm going to give you a rundown of what to turn on, whether it's on a gaming platform, a social media platform, the smartphone, the laptop, et cetera. You want to turn on the filters to the strictest

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setting. You want to turn on the monitors because monitors are different than filters. All right? All of these parental control tools have these various features. You don't have to go get them from different places. The monitor will let you see where your kids are going, where they're attempting to go.

If they're trying to get out of a filter or they've gone someplace, you set as off limits. You can also set time controls. Very important. We don't want our kids to get addicted to the technology, and it's very highly addicted, just the technology in and of itself, the way it works. Those time limits are very, very important. You can also set what I call parent-approved buddy list. When talking about gaming, you can limit Chris, who your son can play with. I would highly recommend that you only let him play with the kids that he knows and you approve of. Everybody else is blocked out, and you can set up that gaming list yourself as the parent.

Chris: Awesome. Very helpful. I appreciate that. Artificial intelligence has been talked about quite a bit lately. How do you see the future of internet safety and threats evolving through artificial intelligence?

Donna: It's the new frontier. At this point, there aren't a whole whole lot of experts in artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence is just like anything else. Technologically, it can be used for good and used for evil. With respect to child exploitation, there's lots of ways it's already being used. One is probably what people have heard of called deepfakes, and that's where the image is not really that real person or it's an AI generated version of that person.

In the area of child exploitation, that person, for instance, they could take a picture of me, or let's just say you're a child and turn it into child sex abuse material. They can also age that child. There's all kinds of things that AI can do that is going to create big problems for law enforcement and also for people that fall prey to artificial intelligence and the abuse of the artificial intelligence.

Chris: You mentioned states and the work they've been doing recently. In 2022, 40 states filed legal action that accused social media companies, big tech as we've been calling them, of designing products that are deliberately addictive and are fueling the youth mental health crisis. Those lawsuits paint a big picture of how these companies brush aside safety over profit and exploit and manipulate children. There's a report last year about social media's harmful effects on tweens and teens. Would you share some of those findings with us?

Donna: Yes. Thankfully, the sergeant general came out and issued a warning saying that social media is causing a profound risk to children, including their mental health and their safety. It's not just mental health, but it's also their safety. We know that social media, for instance, is very highly addicting. There's a lot of ways that the algorithms are being designed to suck kids in and take them down rabbit holes of dangerous content and dangerous activity. Let me just give you a few stats here.

Self-harm: 33% of tweens were experiencing self-harm, and 57% of teens on social media platforms. Bullying: tween 67% and teens, 76%. Sexual content, including

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extreme sexual content like we've been talking about, tweens, 58%; and teens, 75%. Of the sexual content here are the biggest losers on that. That's X, Instagram, Tumblr, Kick, and Reddit. I just mentioned the addictive aspects. It's not all just the content. I don't know if you saw, but I think there was a 60-minutes interview, is number of years ago.

They had a lot of whistleblowers come out. They talked about how these companies are actually doing ringtones and likes and doing all their algorithms and stuff to keep kids and adults hooked into this content. It's very deliberate what is happening. It's very planned, it's very orchestrated, and very deliberate. Now, there's another, of course, big actor here, and that's TikTok. Now TikTok is a little different from the rest of them because they're basically run by China, who is an enemy of the United States.

Let me just tell you what TikTok is doing. In China, if a child gets on TikTok-- First of all, they don't let kids under 15 on TikTok, and everybody in China TikTok shuts down at 10:00 PM. People using TikTok in China, especially kids, they're getting what China wants them to get. They're determining the kind of content they're getting. A 15-year-old child in the United States-- this is according to the attorney general of Virginia, who I've done two town halls with.

He said this was demonstrated to him. I'm basically sharing what he shared with me. He said a 15-year-old in America going on TikTok right when she logs on, she's going to see videos being fed up to her, how to date an older man, a graphic video of how to use a sex toy, self-harm videos and other kinds of videos are going to be fed up right away just because of how she's identified herself as a 15-year-old girl.

Chris: Unbelievable. What's more shocking is TikTok wasn't a thing until COVID.

Donna: Yes, that's right. COVID brought a lot of unintended consequences, didn't it? Certainly, it was where kids were online more, and what did that mean? That meant predators were online more too.

Chris: How can policymakers, educators, and parents work together to hold big tech companies accountable?

Donna: Exactly what we are doing at Enough Is Enough. First of all, I would just say anybody listening, if you've had an experience or your child has had a negative experience and you're ready to talk about it, and I would always caution, you never want to victimize a child, of course, until they're ready at some point to talk about it. Talk to the media. Let them know what's happening. The media has been one of our biggest allies. Chris, you're media and we're talking about this and exposing these things to your audience.

Going to the media, go to your legislator, and say, "Look, I need you to do something about this, about the cyberbullying," or getting a sexting law passed in our state. Contact your federal member of Congress or senator and say, "Do something." They listen to their constituents. The other thing is sign up at Enough Is Enough. Go to
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enough.org and sign up for our newsletter. We're sending out information every week, keeping parents updated about how to keep their kids safe, but also sending letters to Congress, signing a petition because it's that collective voice that starts to make change.

You mentioned the 40 states doing things. The estate attorney generals are doing a lot. State attorney general in your state is also someone to go to and to say, "Look, what are you doing? I want this to be front and center." I wrote an article for *Fox News* about a year ago and said, "Look, we need to start treating big tech like big tobacco." When it finally became clear all those years ago that tobacco was causing harm and leading to illnesses that was actually killing people, that's when people took notice, Congress took notice, and everything else. That's where we are now. We're in a much better place than we have been, but we need to keep the pressure up. Remember, your vote counts.

Chris: When you think about big tech having, to your point, hundreds of billions of dollars of revenue, they've got their government affairs office, they've got their lobbyists, they're making political contributions.

Donna: Oh, yes.

Chris: Yes. It's going to take an army here to get this moving forward.

Donna: Yes, it really is. Support those members of Congress who are fighting this and they're not taking the money and they're calling these people out. If you really watch some interesting Senate action, you can go watch the Senate hearing that happened about two months ago. All these senators called in five CEOs of the top big tech companies in the country, including X, TikTok, Mark Zuckerberg was there and he was asked to turn around and apologize to the parents who had lost children on one of his platforms or harm had been caused. There are fighters out there that are our lawmakers who are fighting for you. There are people like Enough Is Enough and other groups who are fighting for you, but we need your help.

Chris: I did see some of that hearing. I do encourage our listeners and viewers to watch that, just to get more insight to that and to see that moment. To your point, when Zuckerberg had to turn around and apologize, very moving.

Donna: Very.

Chris: What are some essential tips you would give to parents to protect their kids' mental health as it relates to social media?

Donna: If I can just run through a lot of tips altogether because it really is, it applies to any area of the internet. We call these safety rules and software tools. I'm going to run through some basic rules. Now, these are for the parent to follow, and they're all on our website. I can just look up rules and tools. The safety rules are the non-technical things that you as a parent need to be doing. As soon as you let your kids start using technology, even if it's not internet connected, one of the first things-- I've

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got grandkids and I've got little one and two-year-olds that want to grab my phone and start to look at stuff because they're already getting connected to this technology.

As soon as they can understand, teach them that this technology is a tool, not a toy, that is a really important point to drill all the time. It's a tool, not a toy. Also, highly recommend that you talk to your kids all of the time on a regular basis about how they're using these tools, even if they're not online yet. Because you want to be as the parent, that safe place. You want them to come to you, you want to share the technology together, and you want to have open, honest communications. Once you do let them online, and I'm of the mindset of wait until eighth grade.

They can use the technology, but it doesn't have to be internet-connected. You can get them a phone, but it doesn't have to be connected to the internet if you get them a gaming device, okay. You don't have to connect it to the internet or you can do, like I said with you, Chris, turn on all the features, the most strict features and limit who they're playing with, same thing on social media. These are non-technical things that parents need to be doing. Regular conversations, be the safe parent.

If you're bringing them up this way, once you do introduce the internet through their smartphone or their laptop, et cetera, then turn all the tools on that we talked about: filtering, monitoring, time controls, set the buddy list. If you're going to let them on social media, go check out the social media platform first and then limit their buddy list, limit who they're talking to. They really shouldn't have more than 100 people if that, that they're connected with on social media. I would say with TikTok, just stay away from TikTok, period. Right now there's long Congress to ban TikTok in the United States. Why? Because of the national security issues involved with that. Not just the safety for children, but the national security part of that, which is very, very real.

Chris: We've been talking a little bit about policy and legislation. Should schools be mandated to incorporate internet safety education into their curriculum?

Donna: I do, I think that they should be. I think that would be a healthy and good thing. The governor of North Dakota, Governor Burgum, who actually ran for president, he came from the tech industry. Sold his big tech company to Microsoft years ago, and I met him and his wife, and his CTO. They had mandated in that state and other states have adopted that starting-- I think it's kindergarten or the first grade, they're introducing cyber security curriculum.

Teaching kids how to use and navigate this technology so that they're creating graduate who can compete with people from China and Japan as far as technology. You can do the same thing with cyber safety curriculums. They're already out there, they've already been developed, they're very good, why not? At school, you've got kids as a captive audience, and they've got age-appropriate curriculum from first grade up to seniors in High School.

Chris: I mentioned the PBS *Enough Is Enough* Internet Safety 101 series at the top of the show, what resources does *Enough Is Enough* provide to support parents, educators, other caregivers in navigating the complexity of online safety for children?

Donna: We've got two websites, enough.org, and also internetsafety101.org. You can get to either one from either one of those sites but sign up for the newsletter. At the internetsafety101.org website, we have a section on every single risk that your child can encounter, whether it's identity theft, cyber security, pornography exposure, sexual predators, trafficking, social media, mobile, all of it, and what to look for, how to prevent it, and even conversations starters.

We even have little quick guides, so if you don't want to go through all that's up there, you can just print those quick guides and learn them. Basically, again, just have these conversations on a regular basis and make it-- You can use the current headlines. Just two weeks ago, there was the P Diddy's scandal and the Nickelodeon scandal. These kids are already hearing about, you can use these things as teachable moments, or headline news. Then you can have those conversation, saying, "Hey, what did you think of that?"

Anybody can be a sexual predator, who would've thought that JLo's ex-boyfriend, P Diddy, might have been running a trafficking ring according to allegations. These are things that can open up conversations and get your kids to open up. I would also say we always say is the rule of thumb, parents, as you get your kids to open up, you will be surprised probably at what they share, if they're honest.

Be careful not to overreact and not to shame them, and not to blame them, because remember, if they're vulnerable. Whether they have gotten into something intentionally, whether they have sexted themselves and sent a nude, you want to say, "Look, we're going to work through this together. We're going to work through this together, you're not in trouble, thank you for telling me. Now let's figure out how we move forward."

Chris: Donna Rice Hughes, president and chairperson of Enough Is Enough. Thank you for being with us today and for tackling this huge, huge issue and crisis.

Donna: Thank you. Thank you so much.

Chris: Thank you to our audience, which now includes people in over 50 countries, for joining us for another episode of *Next Steps Forward*. I'm Chris Meek. For more details on upcoming shows and guests, please follow me on Facebook at facebook.com/chrismeekpublicfigure and then X @ChrisMeek_USA. We'll be back next Tuesday, same time, same place with another leader from the world of business, politics, public policy, sports, or entertainment. Until then, stay safe and keep taking your *Next Steps Forward*.

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Announcer: Thanks for tuning in to Next Steps Forward. Be sure to join Chris Meek for another great show, next Tuesday at 10:00 AM Pacific Time and 1:00 PM Eastern Time on the VoiceAmerica Empowerment Channel. This week make things happen in your life.

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