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American Academy
of Pediatrics



DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN

July 25, 2022

U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation

Dear Senate Commerce Committee Member,

We are writing to urge you to vote “yes” on both the Kids Online Safety Act (S. 3663) and Children and Teens’ Online Privacy Protection Act (S. 1628) at the Senate Commerce Committee markup scheduled for July 27th. By mandating a safety by design approach and restricting unnecessary and harmful data collection and processing, these bills have the potential to significantly improve young people’s wellbeing by transforming the digital environment for children and teens.

Overall, youth have been faced with a growing mental health crisis in recent years. For instance, [depression rates](#) for teens doubled between 2009 and 2019. While declines in youth mental health are attributable to numerous factors, the growing use of social media platforms designed in ways that increase exposure to harmful content, undermine privacy, and encourage unhealthy patterns of use has helped exacerbate these trends. Over the last two years, the pandemic has also caused youth to spend more time than ever online. This is happening at a time when suicide is the [second leading cause of death](#) for U.S. youth, with [one in five teens](#) considering suicide during the pandemic, and eating disorder emergency room admissions for teen girls 12- to 17-years-old [doubling](#) since 2019.

After five hearings held by the Subcommittee on Consumer Protection, Product Safety, and Data Security and numerous research findings, the evidence is abundantly clear of the potential severe impacts social media platforms can have on the [brain development](#) and mental health of our nation’s youth, including hazardous substance use, eating disorders, and self-harm. Below are just some of the stark national findings:

- Instagram includes [90,000 unique pro-eating disorder accounts](#) with a reach of 20 million followers.
 - Children as young as 9 and 10 follow three or more pro-eating disorder accounts.
 - Meta derives an estimated \$230 million annually from pro-eating disorder accounts.
- Fifty-nine percent of U.S. teens have reported being [bullied on social media](#), an experience linked to increased risky behaviors such as smoking and increased risk of [suicidal ideation](#).
- Twenty-five percent of 9- to 17-year-olds report having had an [online sexually explicit interaction](#) with someone they believed to be an adult.
- It is estimated that [online advertising firms hold 72 million data points on the average child](#) by the time they reach the age of 13, allowing marketers to target young people’s vulnerabilities with extreme precision. Researchers have demonstrated that it is possible [to target ads to teenagers on Instagram based on their interests in dieting, alcohol, and gambling](#).

It has been long established that adolescence is associated with neurological changes that promote cravings for social attention, feedback, and status. Research on associations between social media use is emerging. There are data to suggest possible developmental benefits from online social interaction.



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([Daine et al., 2013](#)), however, several distinct lines of inquiry also suggest pathways that link social media use to maladaptive outcomes, including engagement in risky behavior, psychological symptoms, illegal behavior, and aberrant brain development ([De-Sola Gutiérrez et al., 2016](#); [Griffiths et al., 2014](#); [Kirby et al., 2020](#)). Young users are simply less able to resist temptations to remain online ([Ang & Lee, 2017](#); [Somerville & Casey, 2010](#)) as full brain maturation typically does not occur until age 25, which leaves children and youth vulnerable to dozens of potential years of unregulated social media use.

The enormity of the youth mental health crisis needs to be addressed as the very real harms of social media are impacting our children today. Taken together, the Kids Online Safety Act and the Children and Teens' Online Privacy Protection Act would prevent online platforms from exploiting young users' developmental vulnerabilities and targeting them in unfair and harmful ways.

The Kids Online Safety Act seeks to hold social media companies accountable after their repeated failures to protect children and adolescents from the practices that make their platforms more harmful. The bill establishes a duty of care for social media companies to protect minors from mental health harms, sexual trafficking, and illegal products. Additionally, the bill requires companies to go through independent, external audits, allows researcher access to platform data assets, and creates substantial youth and parental controls to create a safer digital environment.

The Children and Teens' Online Privacy Protection Act would expand privacy protections to teens for the first time, establishing a "Digital Marketing Bill of Rights for Teens" that limits the collection of personal information. The bill would also expand protections for children under 13, including banning surveillance advertising, and preventing companies like TikTok and Instagram from turning a blind eye towards the millions of younger users on their sites. In addition, the bill would improve enforcement by creating a dedicated division of Youth Marketing and Privacy at the Federal Trade Commission.

There has been no significant federal legislation to protect children and adolescents online since the passage of COPPA in 1998 – long before smartphones and platforms like Facebook and YouTube even existed. With young people spending more time online than ever before, it is critical that Congress give them the protections they deserve when using the internet for learning, connection, and entertainment.

We thank you for your attention to this critical matter.

Sincerely,

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American Academy of Pediatrics

American Psychological Association

Center for Digital Democracy

Common Sense Media

Eating Disorders Coalition



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Mental Health America

Academy for Eating Disorders

Active Minds

Alaska Eating Disorders Alliance

Amanda Birkhead Nutrition Counseling LLC

American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work

American Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

American Association of Social Work and Social Welfare

American Counseling Association

American Federation of Teachers

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

Anxiety and Depression Association of America

Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare

Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents (ALAS)

Banu Foundation

Be Real

Becca Schmill Foundation

Berkeley Media Studies Group

Bilateral Safety Corridor Coalition

Brave Movement

Carolina Resource Center for Eating Disorders

Centerstone

The Center for Online Safety

Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder



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Children and Screens: Institute of Digital Media and Child Development

Citizens for Decency

Clinical Social Work Association

Community Campaign against Human Trafficking - West Florida

Compass 31

Consumer Action

Crosswalk Atl

Defending the Early Years (deyproject.org)

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance

Eating Disorder Coalition of Iowa

Eating disorders Resource Center

ECPAT-USA

EDGE Consulting Partners

EDRC

Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC)

The Emily Program

End Exploitation Montana

Exposure Labs - Creators of The Social Dilemma

General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC)

#HalfTheStory

I Am Light Ministries

IGGY Ventures LLC

International Society for Psychiatric Mental Health Nurses

Jasmine Grace Outreach



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Lynn's Warriors

Massachusetts PTA

Maternal Mental Health Leadership Alliance

MaryAnn Michaelis Counseling Services LLC DBA Addo Recovery

Mayor of Morrisville, North Carolina

McCallum Place

Media Education Foundation

Mental Health America of Arizona

Mental Health America of Greater Dallas

Mental Health America of Greater Houston

Mental Health Association of South Mississippi

Mental Health Colorado

Mentari

Multi-Service Eating Disorders Association (MEDA)

National Alliance for Eating Disorders

The National Alliance to Advance Adolescent Health

National Association for Children's Behavioral Health

National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners

National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors



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National Center of Excellence for Eating Disorders

National Center on Sexual Exploitation (NCOSE)

National Eating Disorders Association

National Federation of Families

National League for Nursing

National Register of Health Service Psychologists

NC Stop Human Trafficking

Parent of Survivor

Parents Who Fight

ParentsTogether

Pinkmantaray LLC

Porn Free Colorado

Postpartum Support International

Protect Young Eyes

Public Citizen

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REDC Consortium

REGO Payment Architectures

RI International

SAFEchild

Sandy Hook Promise

The Samaritan Women - Institute for Shelter Care

Schizophrenia & Psychosis Action Alliance



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Shift SC

Stop Predatory Gambling and the Campaign for Gambling-Free Kids

STRIPED (Strategic Training Initiative for the Prevention of Eating Disorders)

SunCloud Health

Susan K. Youngsteadt LCSW, PLLC

UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Health

UltraViolet Action

Veritas Collaborative

Waldorf Early Childhood Association of N. America

Washington State PTA

WealthManagementMinistries-Prevention Works Joint Task Force & Coalition

WithAll

*Worthy*²

YCA Human Trafficking Task Force