



**EATING DISORDERS COALITION APPLAUDS THE BIPARTISAN  
INTRODUCTION OF COMPREHENSIVE KIDS' ONLINE SAFETY  
LEGISLATION BY SUBCOMMITTEE CHAIRMAN BLUMENTHAL AND  
RANKING MEMBER BLACKBURN**

*The introduction of the Kids Online Safety Act follows the series of Senate and House hearings on the pediatric mental health and eating disorders crisis and Big Tech's repeated failures to protect children and teenagers on their platforms*

WASHINGTON, D.C. - On February 16, 2022, Senators Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) and Marsha Blackburn (R-TN), Chair and Ranking Member of the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, Subcommittee on Consumer Protection, Product Safety, and Data Security, introduced the *Kids Online Safety Act*, a comprehensive bipartisan bill to protect children's mental health and safety online. Recent heartbreaking reporting has revealed the severe harms of social media on youth body image, negative appearance comparison, and risk for eating disorders, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Chair and Ranking Member's legislation will protect minors on social media from algorithmic harms, empower parents, and hold platforms accountable for their promotion of eating disorders and other mental and physical harms.

"The purpose of the *Kids Online Safety Act* is in fact to empower young people, children, who are in the midst of a mental health crisis. A mental health crisis that we see across America as shown by rising hospitalization rates for eating disorders, self-harm, suicide, depression—and it has been aggravated by the pandemic and by social media," **said Senator Blumenthal**. "What we're doing here is requiring the social media tech platforms to give options to children and their parents, to protect their information, to disable addictive features, and to opt out of the algorithm recommendation that often involve driving toxic content to kids. I will fight for swift passage alongside Senator Blackburn, my partner in this effort."

"Protecting our kids and teens online is critically important, particularly since COVID increased our reliance on technology," said **Senator Blackburn**. "In hearings over the last year, Senator Blumenthal and I have heard countless stories of physical and emotional damage affecting young users, and Big Tech's unwillingness to change. The *Kids Online Safety Act* will address those harms by setting necessary safety guiderails for online platforms to follow that will require transparency and give parents more peace of mind."

Two million U.S. children alive today will develop an eating disorder before they reach 20 years old<sup>1</sup> and this mental illness has the second highest mortality rate of any psychiatric condition. The COVID-19 pandemic magnified the existing pediatric eating disorders crisis by enabling these conditions to thrive in physical isolation and increased social media engagement. Consequently, pediatric hospital admissions for

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<sup>1</sup> Deloitte Access Economics. The Social and Economic Cost of Eating Disorders in the United States of America: A Report for the Strategic Training Initiative for the Prevention of Eating Disorders and the Academy for Eating Disorders. June 2020. Available at: <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/striped/report-economic-costs-of-eating-disorders/>.

eating disorders more than doubled in 2020 and eating disorder diagnoses among youth aged 12-18 have increased by 25% since the pandemic onset.<sup>2,3</sup>

High frequency and prolonged social media use have been linked to depressed mood and negative appearance comparison in adolescents.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, research indicates that engagement with objectifying social media predicts youth body shame, body surveillance, and eating disorder symptoms.<sup>5,6</sup> Platform algorithms have been shown to place extreme eating disorder content next to youth-targeted advertising and serve it to vulnerable users to maximize engagement.<sup>7</sup>

“The social media giants are peddling a false narrative that their platforms are simply a reflection of its users’ interests and experiences, without distortion or manipulation by the platforms. But they know full well that this not true,” said **Dr. S. Bryn Austin, Professor at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and Director of the Strategic Training Initiative for the Prevention of Eating Disorders and Board Member of the EDC.** “For teens struggling with body image, eating disorders, anxiety or other mental health issues, the extreme eating disorders content that is algorithmically boosted to them on social media and the resulting negative social comparison are a dangerous trap, intensifying their engagement and extending the time they spend on the platform even while simultaneously worsening their symptoms. It is going to take bold action from Congress to finally put restraints on the unmitigated harm to the mental health of young people being caused every day by social media’s reckless and predatory algorithms.”

Responding to the current youth mental health crisis is the responsibility of everyone, including social media platforms that have knowingly promoted eating disorders content to youth in return for boosted engagement. The EDC is proud to work with the Subcommittee Chair and Ranking Member to finally hold platforms accountable and protect youth from purposefully addictive destructive content.

*The Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy & Action (EDC) is a Washington, DC-based, federal advocacy organization comprised of advocacy organizations, academics, treatment providers, family/loved ones of children with eating disorders, and people experiencing eating disorders nationwide. The EDC advances the recognition of eating disorders as a public health priority throughout the United States. Additional resources can also be found at [eatingdisorderscoalition.org](https://eatingdisorderscoalition.org).*

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<sup>2</sup> Alana K. Otto, Jessica M. Jary, Julie Sturza, Catherine A. Miller, Natalie Prohaska, Terrill Bravender, Jessica Van Huysse; Medical Admissions Among Adolescents With Eating Disorders During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Pediatrics* October 2021; 148 (4): e2021052201. 10.1542/peds.2021-052201

<sup>3</sup> Dave Little, MD, Adrianna Teriakidis, PhD, Eric Lindgren, JD, Steven Allen, MD, Eric Barkley, Lily Rubin-Miller, MPH, April 2021, <https://epicresearch.org/articles/increase-in-adolescent-hospitalizations-related-to-eating-disorders>

<sup>4</sup> Byrne 2021; Zhang et al 2021; Frison & Eggermont 2017; Fardouly & Vartanian 2015

<sup>5</sup> Lonergan, A. R., Bussey, K., Fardouly, J., Griffiths, S., Murray, S. B., Hay, P. J., . . . Mitchison, D. (2020). Protect me from my selfie: examining the association between photo-based social media behaviors and self-reported eating disorders in adolescence. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 53(5), 485-496.

<sup>6</sup> Salomon, I. & Brown, C. S. (2019). The selfie generation: examining the relationship between social media use and early adolescent body image. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 39(4), 539-560.

<sup>7</sup> Byrne 2021; Zhang et al 2021; Frison & Eggermont 2017; Fardouly & Vartanian 2015