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June 14, 2022

The Honorable Maria Cantwell

Chair

U.S. Senate Commerce Committee on Commerce, Science, & Transportation  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Roger Wicker

Ranking Member

U.S. Senate Commerce Committee on Commerce, Science, & Transportation  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chair Cantwell and Ranking Member Wicker:

We, the undersigned national, state, and local organizations—including seven Washington State stakeholders and ten Mississippi stakeholders—are writing to urge you in your leadership capacity to hold a Senate Commerce Committee markup this month on the Kids Online Safety Act (S. 3663) and child-related privacy and tech legislation to protect young users online.

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 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 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. ([Daine et al., 2013](#)), however, several distinct lines of inquiry also suggest pathways that link social media use to maladaptive outcomes, including engagement in risk behavior, psychological symptoms, illegal behavior, and aberrant brain development ([De-Sola Gutiérrez et al., 2016](#); [Griffiths et al., 2014](#); [Kirby et al., 2020](#)).



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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 to dozens of potential years of unregulated social media use.

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 lack of transparency into the inner workings, policies and measured impacts of these platforms must be addressed now. The impact of social media algorithms on the user experience is woefully understudied due in large part to the lack of visibility by researchers into the data and how algorithms work ([Epps-Darling et al., 2020](#); [Bravo et al., 2019](#)). 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.

As the Chair and Ranking Member, you both have the power to contribute to tackling this growing issue through advancing the Kids Online Safety Act out of your committee as the wellbeing of future generations depend on it.

We thank you for your attention to this issue and look forward to continuing to work with you.

Sincerely,

Academy for Eating Disorders

Active Minds

Amanda Birkhead Nutrition Counseling LLC

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

American Academy of Pediatrics

American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare

American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

American Mental Health Counselors Association

American Psychological Association

ANAD

Anxiety and Depression Association of America

Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare

Bay Area Nutrition, LLC

Becca Schmill Foundation

Berkeley Media Studies Group

Carolina Resource Center for Eating Disorders



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Center for Digital Democracy

Center for Intuitive Eating

Center for Online Safety

Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

ChildFund International

Clinical Social Work Association

Coalition for the Advancement and Application of Psychological Science (CAAPS) Executive Committee

Common Sense Media

Community Care Network

Consumer Action

Consumer Federation of America

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance

Disability Connection

Eating Disorder Coalition of Iowa

Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy & Action

Eating Disorders Resource Center

EDRD Pro LLC

El Pueblo

Empower Wellness, Inc.

Exposure Labs, The Creators of The Social Dilemma

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Families as Allies

Friends of the Earth

Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice

Global Hope 365

Holistic Moms Network

Hoops Care LLC

Inseparable

Integrative Life Network

International Society for Psychiatric Mental Health Nurses

Jubilee Havens

LookUp

Lynn Meadows Discovery Center Summer Camp



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Lynn's Warriors

Massachusetts PTA

Maternal Mental Health Leadership Alliance

Mental Health America

Mental Health America of West Central Indiana

Mental Health Association of South Mississippi

Mississippi Chapter - American Academy of Pediatrics

Mom Congress

MS Harm Reduction Initiative

National Alliance on Mental Illness—Pierce County

National Alliance for Eating Disorders

National Alliance on Mental Illness

National Association for Children's Behavioral Health

National Association for Rural Mental Health

National Association of County Behavioral Health and Developmental Disability Directors

National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners

National Association of Social Workers

National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors

National Center of Excellence for Eating Disorders

National Center on Sexual Exploitation

National Eating Disorders Association

National Education Association

National League for Nursing

National Register of Health Service Psychologists

Nutrition 4 You, LLC

Oasis Mental Wellness, LLC

Opal: Food + Body Wisdom

ParentsTogether

Peace Educators Allied for Children Everywhere, Inc.

Pinkmantaray LLC

Postpartum Support International

Project HEAL

Project Maria



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Protect Young Eyes

Public Good Law Center

RAINN

Ravenhawk Recovery LLC

REDC Consortium

RI International, Inc.

Roots Nutrition, FLG

Schizophrenia & Psychosis Action Alliance

SMART Recovery

Stop Predatory Gambling and the Campaign for Gambling-Free Kids

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

SunCloud Health

The American Association for Promoting the Child's Right to Play, IPAUSA.org

The American Association for Promoting the Child's Right to Play, the USA affiliate of the International Play Association. IPA USA

The Emily Program

The Jed Foundation

The Kennedy Forum

The Mental Health Strategic Impact Initiative (S2i)

Multi-Service Eating Disorders Association (MEDA)

The National Alliance to Advance Adolescent Health

The Tech Oversight Project

The Trevor Project

Twig & Thread Consulting

U.S. PIRG

UltraViolet Action

UNICEF USA

Washington Association for the Education of Young Children

Washington Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics

Washington Nature Preschool Association

Wired Human

YourMomCares