

June 8, 2023

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable McConnell
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Maria Cantwell, Chair
Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and
Transportation
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Ted Cruz, Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and
Transportation
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Majority Leader Schumer, Minority Leader McConnell, Chair Cantwell, and Ranking Member Cruz:

The Mental Health Liaison Group (MHLG), a coalition of national organizations representing consumers, family members, mental health and addiction providers, advocates and other stakeholders committed to strengthening Americans' access to mental health and addiction care, is writing to express our strong support for the bipartisan Kids Online Safety Act ([S. 1409](#)) led by Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) and Marsha Blackburn (R-TN).

We thank the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee for their commitment to address the harm inflicted on children and adolescents who utilize social media platforms. Thorough reporting from *The Wall Street Journal* and the five hearings held by the Subcommittee on Consumer Protection, Product Safety, and Data Security last Congress, have revealed the severe impacts social media platforms can have on the mental health of our nation's youth including, hazardous substance use, eating disorders, cyberbullying, and self-harm.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, mental disorders amongst children were considered a grave public health concern.¹ The pandemic only exacerbated an existing issue that was trending in the wrong direction. Screen time and social isolation combined with the stress of the last three years has led youth mental health issues to surge. For example, between 2011 to 2020, emergency visits among children and adolescents doubled, which includes a five-time increase in visits for suicide-related symptoms.² During the first year of the pandemic, children and adolescents who were treated for eating disorders – one of the deadliest psychiatric illnesses - doubled as well.³ Medical providers have been sounding the alarm on the trend of increased social media usage and increased mental distress amongst youth.

A recent report discovered that researchers posing as 13-year-olds were served pro-suicide content on TikTok within 2.6 minutes after pausing on and liking videos of body image and mental health videos.⁴

¹ Bitsko RH, Claussen AH, Lichstein J, et al. Mental Health Surveillance Among Children — United States, 2013–2019. *MMWR Suppl* 2022;71(Suppl-2):1–42. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.su7102a1>

² Bommersbach TJ, McKean AJ, Olfson M, Rhee TG. National Trends in Mental Health–Related Emergency Department Visits Among Youth, 2011–2020. *JAMA*. 2023;329(17):1469–1477. doi:10.1001/jama.2023.4809

³ Carly E. Milliren, Tracy K. Richmond, Joel D. Hudgins; Emergency Department Visits and Hospitalizations for Eating Disorders During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Pediatrics* January 2023; 151 (1): e2022058198. 10.1542/peds.2022-058198

⁴ Deadly By Design . Center for Countering Digital Hate. (2022, December 15). https://counterhate.com/research/deadly-by-design/?trk=public_post_comment-text

Most recent data published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that nearly 60% of female students and 70% of LGBTQ+ students experienced persistent sadness and hopelessness.⁵ Further, studies have shown a correlation between adolescents' social media usage and body dissatisfaction, greater body surveillance, and higher instances of self-objectification.⁶ At the same time, it is important to acknowledge social media's potential to provide children and adolescents with a healthy space for convening and companionship, including access to supportive networks and other young people from marginalized backgrounds. While we recognize the need for additional research in this area, the real harms of social media are impacting our children today, and more must be done to mitigate the impacts of online social media use.

The Kids Online Safety Act would finally hold social media companies accountable after their repeated failures to protect children and adolescents from the practices that make their platforms more harmful. Utilizing existing Federal Trade Commission authority, the bill establishes a duty of care for social media companies to protect minors from mental health harms, sex trafficking, and illegal products. Additionally, the bill requires companies to go through independent, external audits, allows researchers access to platform data assets, and creates substantial youth and parental controls. Last, it creates transparency for families into the complex and potentially harmful ways young people's data is used by these platforms and would require new safeguards and controls to create a safer digital environment for children and teens.

We urge you to swiftly advance this legislation out of committee and to the U.S. Senate floor for a vote to protect current and future generations of young social media users.

Sincerely,

American Academy of Pediatrics

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy

American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work

American Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

American Counseling Association

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

American Mental Health Counselors Association

American Psychoanalytic Association

American Psychological Association

Anxiety and Depression Association of America

Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare

Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

Children's Hospital Association

Clinical Social Work Association

⁵ Youth Risk Behavior Survey, Data Summary and Trends Report. (2023, February 13). [Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report: 2011-2021 \(cdc.gov\)](#)

⁶ Salomon, Ilyssa & Brown, Christia. (April 21, 2018). The Selfie Generation: Examining the Relationship Between Social Media Use and Early Adolescent Body Image. *Journal of Early Adolescence* 39(4); 539-560. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0272431618770809>

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance
Girls Inc.
Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice
Inseparable
International Society for Psychiatric Mental Health Nurses
Maternal Mental Health Leadership Alliance
Mental Health America
NAADAC, The Association for Addiction Professionals
National Alliance on Mental Illness
National Association for Children's Behavioral Health
National Association for County Behavioral Health and Developmental Disability Directors
National Association for Rural Mental Health
National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners
National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors
National Federation of Families
National League for Nursing
National Register of Health Service Psychologists
Policy Center for Maternal Mental Health
REDC Consortium
RI International
Sandy Hook Promise
SMART Recovery
The Jed Foundation
The Kennedy Forum
Treatment Communities of America