

April 13, 2022

The Honorable Maria Cantwell  
Chair  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Roger Wicker  
Ranking Member  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chair Cantwell and Ranking Member Wicker:

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. 3663](#)) 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 harms 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, 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, and self-harm.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated an ongoing crisis in child and adolescent mental health. For example, medical claims for overdoses for adolescents 13-18 years of age jumped 119%, medical claims for intentional self-harm increased 100%, and eating disorder emergency room admissions for adolescent females ages 12-18 years of age doubled from 2019 to 2020.<sup>1,2,3</sup> Further, studies have shown a correlation between adolescents' social media usage and body dissatisfaction, greater body surveillance, and higher instances of self-objectification.<sup>4</sup> 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 for LGBTQ youth and other young people from marginalized backgrounds. While we recognize the need for additional research in this area, the very real harms of social media are impacting our children today, and more must be done to mitigate the impacts of online social media use.

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<sup>1</sup> FAIR Health. (March 2, 2021). The Impact of COVID-19 on Pediatric Mental Health: A Study of Private Healthcare Claims. Retrieved from <https://s3.amazonaws.com/media2.fairhealth.org/whitepaper/asset/The%20Impact%20of%20COVID-19%20on%20Pediatric%20Mental%20Health%20-%20A%20Study%20of%20Private%20Healthcare%20Claims%20-%20A%20FAIR%20Health%20White%20Paper.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Radhakrishnan, Lakshmi, Leeb, Rebecca, Bitsko, Rebecca . . . & Anderson, Kayla. (February, 18, 2022). Pediatric Emergency Department Visits Associated with Mental Health Conditions Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic—United States, January 2019–January 2022. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report 71. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/wr/pdfs/mm7108e2-H.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> 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>

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, 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. 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 young people.

We urge you to advance this critical piece of legislation out of committee to protect current and future generations of young social media consumers.

Sincerely,

2020 Mom

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 Association of Suicidology

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

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance

Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy & Action

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  
REDC Consortium  
RI International  
Sandy Hook Promise  
Schizophrenia & Psychosis Action Alliance  
SMART Recovery  
The Jed Foundation  
The Kennedy Forum  
Treatment Communities of America