

June 10, 2024

The Honorable Gus Bilirakis
2306 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kathy Castor
2052 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Erin Houchin
1632 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kim Schrier
1110 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Larry Bucshon
2313 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Bilirakis, Congresswoman Castor, Congresswoman Houchin, Congresswoman Schrier, and Congressman Bucshon,

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, bicameral *Kids Online Safety Act* (H.R. 7891/S. 1409).

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 three years under a public health emergency declaration have led youth mental health issues to surge. For example, between 2011 to 2020, emergency visits among children and adolescents for suicide-related symptoms increased five-fold.² Suicide is now the second leading cause of death for U.S. youth.³ Additionally, during the first year of the pandemic, children and adolescents emergency room visits for an eating disorder doubled.⁴ Medical providers have been sounding the alarm on the trend of increased social media usage and increased mental distress amongst youth.

As of 2021, over 40 percent of children aged 8 to 12 have a smartphone and 18 percent of children aged 8 to 12 report using social media every day.⁵ Numerous hearings and abundant research findings have made the evidence clear regarding the potential harms social media platforms can have on the brain development and mental health of our nation's youth, including hazardous substance use, eating disorders, cyber

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 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). WISQARS Leading Causes of Death Visualization Tool. Retrieved from <https://wisqars.cdc.gov/lcd/?o=LCD&y1=2022&y2=2022&ct=10&cc=ALL&g=00&s=0&r=0&ry=0&e=0&ar=lcd1age&at=groups&ag=lcd1age&a1=0&a2=199>

⁴ 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

⁵ Rideout, V., Peebles, A., Mann, S., & Robb, M. B. (2022). Common Sense census: Media use by tweens and teens, 2021. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense. https://www.common sense media.org/sites/default/files/research/report/8-18-census-integrated-report-final-web_0.pdf

bullying, sexual exploitation, and self-harm.⁶ One report found 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.⁷ Furthermore, studies have shown a correlation between adolescents' social media usage and body dissatisfaction, greater body surveillance, and higher instances of self-objectification.⁸ As we recognize these devastating negative impacts, we also 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 before more harm is done to our nation's children.

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, and creates substantial youth and parental controls to create a safer digital environment for children and adolescents.

We thank you again for your leadership of the *Kids Online Safety Act*, protecting both today's children and generations of kids to come.

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

⁶ Prinstein, M. (2022, March 16). An update on research on social media's impact on children and next steps.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=faOcta9Xlaw>

⁷ Deadly By Design. Center for Countering Digital Hate. (2022, December 15). https://counterhate.com/research/deadly-bydesign/?trk=public_post_com

⁸ 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>

Anxiety and Depression Association of America

Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare

Association for Behavioral Health and Wellness

Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

Children's Hospital Association

Clinical Social Work Association

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance

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