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).
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
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
Fairplay
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
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
Protect Young Eyes
Public Good Law Center
RAINN
Ravenhawk Recovery LLC
REDC Consortium
RJ 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