Support the Kids Online Safety Act (S.1409)

Senators Marsha Blackburn (R-TN) and Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) introduced the comprehensive Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA) to enhance the safety of children’s online activity. KOSA aims to achieve five main goals:

1. Place responsibility on social media companies to prevent and mitigate harms to minors resulting from use of their platforms through the creation of a duty of care.

2. Require companies to develop and deploy new parental controls that provide education and options for parents and children to further identify and report harmful behaviors on social media.

3. Change the default security and privacy settings for young users, including developing new protections that further shield minors from harmful product features.

4. Require social media companies to conduct and distribute an annual independent audit that demonstrates the risks to minors on their platform.

5. Increase access for public and academic researchers to receive data from companies to conduct research.

Background

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. This is happening at a time when suicide is the second leading cause of death for U.S. youth and eating disorder emergency room admissions for teen girls 12 to 17 years old doubled since 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 have contributed to these trends.

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.

• 59 percent of U.S. teens report being bullied on social media, an experience linked to increased risky behaviors such as smoking and increased risk of suicidal ideation.

• 25 percent of 9- to 17-year-olds report having had an online sexually explicit interaction with someone they believed to be an adult.
**The Science**

It has been long established that adolescence is associated with neurological changes that promote cravings for social attention, feedback, and status. Abnormal brain growth during these periods may have lifetime implications. While research is emerging, there are data to suggest possible developmental benefits from online social interaction. However, several distinct lines of inquiry also suggest pathways that link social media use to maladaptive outcomes, several of which were noted in APA’s recent Health Advisory on Social Media Use and Adolescents.

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.

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**The Ask**

- Senate: Co-Sponsor & Support Passage of the Kids Online Safety Act (S. 1409)
- House: Sponsor & Support the Kids Online Safety Act

**Contact**

For more information about APA’s work on kids and social media, please contact Corbin Evans, Senior Director of Congressional and Federal Relations (CEvans@APA.org).