December 12, 2022

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

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

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

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy  
Minority Leader  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Leader Schumer, McConnell, Speaker Pelosi, and Leader McCarthy,

On behalf of the more than 230 undersigned national, state, and local organizations, we are writing to urge you in your leadership capacity to include the bipartisan Kids Online Safety Act (S. 3663) as well as strong privacy protections for kids and teens online in your end of year package.

As you know, the bipartisan legislation passed the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation unanimously in July and has the potential to significantly improve young people’s wellbeing by transforming the digital environment for children and teens.

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 numerous hearings held by the U.S. House Subcommittee on Consumer Protection and Commerce and the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Consumer Protection, Product Safety, and Data Security, and abundant research findings, the evidence is 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 report 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 risky 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 vulnerable 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 narcotics. 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.

Through your leadership, you both have the power to contribute to tackling this growing issue through advancing the Kids Online Safety Act and strong privacy protections for kids and teens online, 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,

#HalfTheStory
3Strands Global Foundation
A Safe Place
A&K Ranch Ministries, LLC
Academy for Eating Disorders
Accountable Tech
Active Minds
Alaska Eating Disorders Alliance
Alexander Neville Foundation
American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare
American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work
American Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
American Counseling Association
American Federation of Teachers
American Group Psychotherapy Association
American Mental Health Counselors Association
American Psychological Association
American Academy of Pediatrics
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Mental Health America of Greater Dallas
Mental Health America of Greater Houston
Mental Health America of West Central Indiana
Mental Health Association of South Mississippi
Mental Health Strategic Impact Initiative (S2i)
Mentari
Michigan Eating Disorders Alliance
Millie Mattered – Overdose and Addiction Advocacy
Minnesota – The Emily Program
Mississippi Chapter – American Academy of Pediatrics
Missouri – McCallum Place
Mom Congress
MS Harm Reduction Initiative
Multi-Service Eating Disorders Association (MEDA)
My Life My Choice
National Alliance for Eating Disorders
National Alliance on Mental Illness – Pierce County
National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)
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 (NCOSE)
National Eating Disorders Association
National Education Association
National Federation of Families
National League for Nursing
National Organization for Women
National Register of Health Service Psychologists
NC Stop Human Trafficking
New Englanders Against Sexual Exploitation (NEASE)
North Carolina – Amanda Birkhead Nutrition Counseling LLC
North Carolina – Lutz, Alexander & Associates Therapy
North Carolina – Veritas Collaborative
Nutrition 4 You, LLC
Oasis Mental Wellness, LLC
Ohio - The Emily Program
Opal: Food + Body Wisdom
Oregon - Amanda Birkhead Nutrition Counseling LLC
Oregon – Lutz, Alexander & Associates Nutrition Therapy
Padres Presentes Program
Pan Pacific and Southeast Asia Women’s Association

Parents Against Child Sex Abuse/ KIDS TOO Movement

Parents Who Fight

ParentsTogether

Paving the Way Foundation

Peace Educators Allied for Children Everywhere, Inc.

Pennsylvania – Nurses United Against Human Trafficking

Pennsylvania – The Emily Program

Pinkmantaray LLC

Porn Free Colorado

Postpartum Support International

Project HEAL

Project Maria

Prosperity Eating Disorders and Wellness

Protect Young Eyes

Public Citizen

Public Good Law Center

RAINN

Ravenhawk Recovery LLC

Realized Potential Inc

REDC Consortium

Reflective Spaces Ministry, Corp

Relatives Against Purdue Pharma (RAPP)

Resiliency Foundation

RI International, Inc.

Roots Nutrition, FLG

SAFEchild

Sandy Hook Promise

Save our Children Support Group

Schizophrenia & Psychosis Action Alliance

Serenity Family Over Fentanyl, Let Our Voices Be Heard

She Has a Name

Shift SC

SMART Recovery

South Carolina Legislative Roundtable

Southwest Florida Coalition Against Human Trafficking

Star Guides Wilderness

Stop Predatory Gambling and the Campaign for Gambling-Free Kids

Strategic Training Initiative for the Prevention of Eating Disorders (STRIPED)

SunCloud Health

Susan K. Youngsteadt LCSW, PLLC

Tennessee – Centerstone

The American Association for Promoting the Child's Right to Play, IPAUSA.org

The Avery Center

The Carly Ryan Foundation

The Epidemic Memorial Wall

The Kennedy Forum

The Mental Health Strategic Impact
Initiative (S2i)
The National Alliance to Advance Adolescent Health
The Samaritan Women – Institute for Shelter Care
The Stop Trafficking Project
The Tech Oversight Project
Traffick911
Travis County Overdose Prevention Endeavor
Twig & Thread Consulting
Tyler Clementi Foundation
U.S. PIRG
UNICEF USA
University of Connecticut Rudd Center for Food Policy & Health
Vermont – Addiction Recovery Channel CCTV
Victims of Illicit Drugs
Virginia – Veritas Collaborative
Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America
Washington – The Emily Program
Washington Association for the Education of Young Children
Washington Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics
Washington Nature Preschool Association
We Stand Guard LLC

Wired Human
WithAll
worthy²
YCA Human Trafficking Task Force
YourMomCares
Zachariah Plunks Foundation