



EDC Applauds the Bipartisan Reintroduction of the Kids Online Safety Act

WASHINGTON, D.C (May 2, 2023) - Today, Senators Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) and Marsha Blackburn (R-TN), reintroduced the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA) a vital piece of legislation to safeguard America’s children and teens from dangerous social media platform practices that push harmful content to young users. KOSA requires technology companies be held accountable for the design features of their products that harm young users, enhanced controls to enable autonomy of the user, disabling of addictive features including the ability to opt out of algorithmic recommendations, and more.

Social media companies knowingly promote harmful mental health content to youth in return for boosted engagement and profits. According to research, platforms place extreme pro-eating disorder, suicide, and depression content next to youth targeting advertising and serve this content to maximize engagement and spending.¹ Instagram is home to 90,000 pro-eating disorder content creators, reaching 20 million followers, and generating over \$230 million per year in profit.² On TikTok, self-harm content and pro-eating disorder content are served to young users every 2.6 minutes and 8 minutes, respectively.³

“The Kids Online Safety Act is an integral first step in making social media platforms a safer place for our children,” **said National Alliance for Eating Disorders CEO and EDC Board Member, Johanna Kandel.** “We need to hold these platforms accountable for their role in exposing our kids to harmful content, which is leading to declining mental health, higher rates of suicide, and eating disorders. As both a CEO of an eating disorders nonprofit and a mom of a young child, these new laws would go a long way in safeguarding the experiences our children have online.”

“Psychological science tells us that certain content displaying disordered eating behaviors can negatively impact the mental health of children,” **said American Psychological Association CEO, Arthur C. Evans Jr, PhD.** “The Kids Online Safety Act takes steps to curtail this content

¹ Byrne 2021; Zhang et al 2021; Frison & Eggermont 2017; Fardouly & Vartanian 2015.

² Fairplay 2022. [designing_for_disorder.pdf \(fairplayforkids.org\)](https://fairplayforkids.org/designing_for_disorder.pdf).

³ Center for Countering Digital Hate. (December 2022). Deadly By Design. Retrieved from <https://counterhate.com/research/deadly-by-design/>.

and creates important new access to data for researchers to further understand the impact of this and other potentially harmful content.”

“Mental Health America is grateful to Senators Blackburn and Blumenthal for introducing this important bill to address mental health harms before they occur,” **said Mary Giliberti, Chief Public Policy Officer of Mental Health America.** “Our online screening data shows that teens are struggling with body image, suicidal ideation, anxiety, and depression. The youth mental health crisis requires Congress to take a comprehensive approach that addresses both the underlying causes of distress and the need for care and support. This bill takes proactive steps to prevent harm and promote well-being by changing incentives for social media platforms and empowering youth and families.”

“Online communities can provide youth with important connections and relationships, but we know that the negative impacts of social media to children’s mental health can often outweigh the good,” **said Executive Vice President and Chief Policy Officer at the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, Laurel Stine, J.D., M.A.** “This legislation promotes upstream strategies to engage children and guardians ahead of any exposure to potentially harmful online content while supporting families to ensure the wellbeing of children.”

Social media is often described as a “perfect storm” that “exacerbates downward spirals.” Survey research indicates that this “perfect storm” weighs most profoundly on LGBTQ+ youth, who are more at risk of bullying, threats, and self-harm on social media.⁴ To protect LGBTQ+ youth, KOSA would require that platforms give young users options to restrict receiving messages from other users and to hide their profiles. KOSA would require platforms to provide a point of contact for users to report harassment and mandate timely response times from the company regarding these reports.

Further, recent research has found that LGBTQ+ people experience significantly greater rates of eating disorders and substance use compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers.⁵ Engagement-based algorithms may increase risk for eating disorders by recommending more eating disorder content to vulnerable users with every click or view. KOSA will protect users from this harm by requiring platforms to give young users the ability to turn off engagement-based algorithms or options to influence the recommendations they receive. A young user would be able to stop recommendation algorithms that are sending them harmful and at times deadly content.

“In a world where what I and other teens see on social media as the benchmark for our lives, KOSA is more vital than ever,” **said EDC Young Adult Council Member, Edward Thomas.**

⁴ Adrendt, Florian, et. al. Effects of exposure to self-harm on social media: Evidence from a two-wave panel study among young adults. 2019. *New Media & Society*, Volume 21, Issue 11-12, 2019, pg. 2422. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/1461444819850106>.

⁵ Johns MM, Lowry R, Haderxhanaj LT, et al. Trends in Violence Victimization and Suicide Risk by Sexual Identity Among High School Students — Youth Risk Behavior Survey, United States, 2015–2019. *MMWR Suppl* 2020;69(Suppl-1):19–27. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.su6901a3external>.

“KOSA is key to allowing children and teens to create healthy relationships with the technology we use every day, instead of being subject to content we can’t control.”

“For far too long, Big Tech have been allowed to play by their own rules in a relentless pursuit of profit, with little regard for the damage done to the children and teens left in their wake,” **said Fairplay for Kids Executive Director, Josh Golin.** “Companies like Meta and TikTok have made billions from hooking kids on their products by any means necessary, even promoting dangerous challenges, pro-eating disorder content, violence, drugs, and bigotry to the kids on their platforms. The Kids Online Safety Act stands to change all that. Today marks an exciting step toward making the internet every child need and deserves, where children and teens can explore, socialize, and learn without being caught in Big Tech's crossfire.”

Over the last three years, eating disorders emergency room visits for adolescent females have doubled⁶ and emergency room visits for pediatric psychiatric disorders have tripled,⁷ it is imperative to hold accountable companies that are exacerbating the youth mental health crisis.

Self-regulation of social media platforms is not enough, and bold action from Congress is needed to put restraints on the unmitigated harm caused by social media’s reckless business practices. The EDC is proud to work with Members of Congress and esteemed organizational partners who recognize the severe harm to mental health caused by social media platforms and are optimistic to see KOSA move swiftly to passage.

The Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy & Action (EDC) is a federal advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C. The EDC advances the recognition of eating disorders as a public health priority throughout the U.S.

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⁶ Leeb et al 2020. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6945a3external>.

⁷ Wolff, J. C., Maron, M., Chou, T., Hood, E., Sodano, S., Cheek, S., Thompson, E., Donise, K., Katz, E., & Mannix, M. (2023). Experiences of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Patients Boarding in the Emergency Department from Staff Perspectives: Patient Journey Mapping. Administration and policy in mental health, 1–10. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-022-01249-4>