March 22, 2022

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

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

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Majority Leader Schumer, Minority Leader McConnell, Speaker Pelosi and Minority Leader McCarthy:

As leading organizations working on behalf of America's youth and their families, we respectfully urge Congress to enact a set of policy safeguards to protect children and teens online. In his recent State of the Union address, President Biden underscored the growing risks to young people's health, well-being, safety and privacy, asserting that "we must hold social media platforms accountable for the national experiment they're conducting on our children for profit." We agree with President Biden's call that Congress:

- Strengthen children's privacy and ban targeted advertising for children online;
- Institute stronger online protections for young people, including prioritizing safety by design standards and practices for online platforms, products, and services;
- Stop discriminatory algorithmic decision-making that limits opportunities for young Americans.

We are deeply concerned that young people, who are spending more and more time online, are being targeted in unfair ways by online platforms and apps that take advantage of their developmental vulnerabilities. There is bipartisan agreement that young people deserve meaningful privacy protections, including banning harmful and discriminatory uses of data and

enacting regulations that require digital service providers to ensure the health, safety, and wellbeing of children and teens in the design of their products and services.

Digital platforms have become vital spaces for learning, socializing, and relaxing. Children and teens should be able to engage freely with this environment without being manipulated into spending more time online, spending more money, watching ads targeted to their vulnerabilities, surrendering more data, or engaging with content that undermines their wellbeing.

The current unregulated business model for digital media is fundamentally at odds with children's wellbeing. Digital platforms are designed to maximize revenue, and design choices that increase engagement and facilitate data collection, all of which put children at risk. Data gathered on young people, which can include information about their race, ethnicity, religion, income and network of friends, can be used in discriminatory ways that may harm their access to opportunities and services. It is estimated that online advertising firms hold 72 million data points on the average child by the time they reach the age of 13, allowing marketers to target children's vulnerabilities with extreme precision.[1] And algorithms designed to maximize engagement often promote harmful content, often aimed at young people's greatest vulnerabilities, such as their interest in dieting or self-harm.[2]

Excessive use of digital media use and social media is linked to a number of risks for children and adolescents, including obesity,[3] lower psychological wellbeing,[4] decreased happiness,[5] decreased quality of sleep,[6,7] depression,[8] and increases in suicide-related outcomes such as suicidal ideation, plans, and attempts.[9] Fifty-nine percent of US teens have reported being bullied on social media,[10] an experience which has been linked to increased risky behaviors such as smoking and increased risk of suicidal ideation.[11]

The pressure to spend more time on digital media platforms and maximize interactions with other users also puts children at risk from predation. 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.[12]

In order to protect children and teen's privacy, better support youth mental health and wellbeing, and create a safer online environment for young people, we call on Congress to pass legislation that:

- Protects children and teens wherever they are online, not just on "child-directed" sites;
- Expands privacy protections to all minors;
- Bans targeted (surveillance) advertising to young people;
- Prohibits algorithmic discrimination of children and teens;
- Establishes a duty of care that requires digital service providers to both make the best interests of children a primary design consideration, and to prevent and mitigate harms to minors;
- Requires platform to turn on the most protective settings for minors by default;
- Provides greater resources for enforcement by the Federal Trade Commission.

There will never be a better time to pass legislation to protect young people online.The Facebook whistleblower's revelations about the ways technology platforms prioritize profits over children's wellbeing make it clear that congressional action is needed. Parents from across the political spectrum want Congress to do more to protect children online.[13]

Congress has the ability to make children safer, give parents and caregivers peace of mind, and promote an internet that serves children, rather than taking advantage of them. We urge you to use that power, and create the internet American children and teens deserve.

*If you have any questions or would like to speak with members of our coalition about the concerns raised herein, please contact David Monahan at Fairplay (*david@fairplayforkids.org*).*

Sincerely,

Accountable Tech
Alana Institute
American Academy of Pediatrics
American Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
American Psychological Association
Becca Schmill Foundation
Berkeley Media Studies Group
Brave Movement: End Childhood Sexual Violence
Center for Digital Democracy
Center for Humane Technology
Center for Online Safety
Center for Science in the Public Interest
Children and Screens: Institute of Digital Media and Child Development
ChildFund International
Coalition for Healthy School Food
Common Sense
Consumer Action
Consumer Federation of America
Consumer Federation of California
Darkness to Light
Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy & Action
ECPAT-USA
Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC)
Enough Is Enough
Exposure Labs, Creators of The Social Dilemma
Fairplay
Friends of the Earth
Global Hope 365
Holistic Moms Network
Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility (ICCR)
Juggernaut Project

Keep Kids Safe
LookUp.live
Lynn's Warriors
Massachusetts Parent-Teacher Association
Me2B Alliance
Media Education Foundation
Mental Health America
National Alliance to Advance Adolescent Health
National Alliance for Eating Disorders
National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners
National Center on Sexual Exploitation
National Eating Disorders Association
Network for Public Education
Parent Coalition for Student Privacy
Parents Television and Media Council
ParentsTogether
Peace Educators Allied for Children Everywhere, Inc.
Project HEAL
Protect Young Eyes
Public Citizen
Public Good Law Center
REDC Consortium
5Rights Foundation
SNAP Network
Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine
Stop Predatory Gambling and the Campaign for Gambling-Free Kids
Tech Oversight Project
Tech Transparency Project
Turning Life On
UltraViolet
U.S. PIRG
WithAll
Youth Villages

cc: Honorable Maria Cantwell
        Honorable Roger Wicker
        Honorable Frank Pallone, Jr.
        Honorable Cathy McMorris Rodgers

Endnotes

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