April 13, 2022

The Honorable Maria Cantwell  
Chair  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Roger Wicker  
Ranking Member  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chair Cantwell and Ranking Member Wicker:

The Mental Health Liaison Group (MHLG), a coalition of national organizations representing consumers, family members, mental health and addiction providers, advocates and other stakeholders committed to strengthening Americans’ access to mental health and addiction care, is writing to express our strong support for the bipartisan Kids Online Safety Act (S. 3663) led by Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) and Marsha Blackburn (R-TN).

We thank the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee for their commitment to address the harms inflicted on children and adolescents who utilize social media platforms. Thorough reporting from The Wall Street Journal and the five hearings held by the Subcommittee on Consumer Protection, Product Safety, and Data Security, have revealed the severe impacts social media platforms can have on the mental health of our nation’s youth including, hazardous substance use, eating disorders, and self-harm.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated an ongoing crisis in child and adolescent mental health. For example, medical claims for overdoses for adolescents 13-18 years of age jumped 119%, medical claims for intentional self-harm increased 100%, and eating disorder emergency room admissions for adolescent females ages 12-18 years of age doubled from 2019 to 2020.12,3 Further, studies have shown a correlation between adolescents’ social media usage and body dissatisfaction, greater body surveillance, and higher instances of self-objectification.4 At the same time, it is important to acknowledge social media’s potential to provide children and adolescents with a healthy space for convening and companionship, including access to supportive networks for LGBTQ youth and other young people from marginalized backgrounds. While we recognize the need for additional research in this area, the very real harms of social media are impacting our children today, and more must be done to mitigate the impacts of online social media use.

2 Ibid.
The Kids Online Safety Act would finally hold social media companies accountable after their repeated failures to protect children and adolescents from the practices that make their platforms more harmful. Utilizing existing Federal Trade Commission authority, 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. Last, it creates transparency for families into the complex and potentially harmful ways young people’s data is used by these platforms and would require new safeguards and controls to create a safer digital environment for young people.

We urge you to advance this critical piece of legislation out of committee to protect current and future generations of young social media consumers.

Sincerely,

2020 Mom
American Academy of Pediatrics
American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy
American Association for Psychoanalysis in Clinical Social Work
American Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
American Association of Suicidology
American Counseling Association
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
American Mental Health Counselors Association
American Psychoanalytic Association
American Psychological Association
Anxiety and Depression Association of America
Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Healthcare
Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
Children’s Hospital Association
Clinical Social Work Association
Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance
Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy & Action
Girls Inc.
Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice
Inseparable
International Society for Psychiatric Mental Health Nurses
Maternal Mental Health Leadership Alliance
Mental Health America
NAADAC, The Association for Addiction Professionals
National Alliance on Mental Illness
National Association for Children’s Behavioral Health
National Association for County Behavioral Health and Developmental Disability Directors
National Association for Rural Mental Health
National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners
National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors
National Federation of Families
National League for Nursing
National Register of Health Service Psychologists
REDC Consortium
RI International
Sandy Hook Promise
Schizophrenia & Psychosis Action Alliance
SMART Recovery
The Jed Foundation
The Kennedy Forum
Treatment Communities of America