



November 15, 2023

Alan Davidson

Assistant Secretary for Communications and Information
& NTIA Administrator

National Telecommunications and Information Administration
1401 Constitution Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20230

**Re: Initiative to Protect Youth Mental Health, Safety & Privacy Online Request
for Comments, Docket No. 230926-0233**

Dear Assistant Secretary & NTIA Administrator Davidson:

Chamber of Progress, a center-left tech industry coalition that works to ensure all Americans benefit from technological leaps, welcomes the opportunity to comment on the important issue of social media platforms and youth.

Many stakeholders have rightly raised the alarm about the harm social media platforms may cause or perpetuate, calling for increased protections for our society's most vulnerable users: children and teens. Relatedly, the Surgeon General's report released this past May extensively outlined the detrimental impact of social media on youth mental health.¹ The report also made a cursory acknowledgment of the positive impact social media platforms provide to many youths and failed to highlight the many steps platforms have already taken to address such concerns to make the user experience safer and more inclusive.

Our submission will focus on the following: 1) outlining the benefits of social media for marginalized youth, 2) showcasing the child-safety-promoting tools already on platforms, 3) presenting existing safety features available to all users, and 4) urging any legislative actions to not impede on the work many social media

¹ U.S. Surgeon General, "Social Media and Youth Mental Health" U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, (2023).
<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sg-youth-mental-health-social-media-advisory.pdf>

platforms have already done to ensure a children's safety online, and therefore stifle future protective innovation.

I. Benefits of Social Media for Marginalized Youth

Question 3: What are the current and emerging health and other benefits – or potential benefits – to minors associated with social media and other online platforms (including physical, cognitive, mental, and socio-emotional well-being)?

The 2023 Surgeon General Report, in its efforts to bring attention to the youth mental health crisis, suggests social media is potentially to blame. Yet, many young people, including those with existing mental health struggles, find great benefits from social media, especially in finding like-minded connections. The American Psychological Association's Health Advisory on Social Media indicates that social media is not inherently bad for children, and in fact, has mostly neutral or positive effects.² According to the note, the effects of social media on youth reflect their "own personal and psychological characteristics and circumstances," suggesting that online experiences are dependent on real-life contexts. That said, social media can have a positive impact on mental health and well-being, including through greater access to mental health resources and support through need-specific groups. Thus, in interacting with others experiencing similar struggles, young people may benefit from de-stigmatization and better social connection.³

Among many great advantages of social media for young people is the opportunity for civic engagement, enabling youth activism and mobilization. The voices of marginalized youth are often left out of important policy debates, and social media provides platforms to coalesce and express. A primary example focuses on the salient contemporary health crisis facing predominantly youth in the United States: the prevalence of gun violence in schools. Young activists, especially those

² American Psychological Association, "Health Advisory: Adolescent Social Media Use" American Psychological Association, (accessed October 12, 2023). <https://www.apa.org/topics/social-media-internet/health-advisory-adolescent-social-media-use.pdf>

³ Zain Jafar, et. al., "Social Media for Public Health: Reaping the Benefits, Mitigating the Harms" Health Promot Perspect, (2023). <https://hpp.tbzmed.ac.ir/Article/hpp-41180>

who are Black and Latino, utilize social media to amplify their cause.⁴ Following the Parkland shooting in February 2018, which resulted in seventeen deaths, students organized the March for Our Lives movement to, “eliminate the epidemic of gun violence.”⁵ The movement has proliferated quickly thanks to #MarchForOurLives posts on social media platforms, mobilized rallies and marches in 400+ cities across the U.S., and enabled unprecedented youth voter registration and turnout in recent elections.⁶

Question 3a: Are these benefits generally available to most minors? Do minors in specific demographic or age groups or youths with accessibility requirements benefit in particular (for example, blind youth, low-income youth, or youth affiliated by gender, sexuality, race, or religion)?

Marginalized and at-risk youth have the most to gain from social media engagement, particularly if they face adversity or isolation offline. Researchers have identified that social media can be beneficial by offering meaningful social interactions, confirmed by a recent Pew survey indicating 81% of American teens say social media makes them feel more connected, while 68% say social media makes them feel that they have a support network in face of hardship.⁷ The network benefit is most critical for marginalized children, such as youth with disabilities, low-income youth, or those who identify as LGBTQ+. Such a benefit is notably pronounced among teens of color speaking up against racial prejudice, for example, with 82% of Black and Hispanic users stating that social media is effective for creating sustained social movements.⁸

⁴ Tufts, "Gun Violence Prevention Movement Fueled by Youth Engagement in the 2018 Election," The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) – Tufts University, (accessed October 12, 2023).

<https://www.circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/gun-violence-prevention-movement-fueled-youth-engagement-2018-election>

⁵ March for Our Lives, "Mission & Story," March for Our Lives, (accessed October 11, 2023).

<https://marchforourlives.com/mission-story/>

⁶ Tufts, "Gen Z Voted at a Higher Rate in 2022 Than Previous Generations in Their First Midterm Election" The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) – Tufts University, (accessed October 12, 2023).

<https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/gen-z-voted-higher-rate-2022-previous-generations-their-first-midterm-election>

⁷ Zain Jafar, et. al., *supra* note 3.

⁸ Emily Vogels, et. al., "Teens, Social Media, and Technology 2022" Pew Research Center, (accessed October 10, 2023).

<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/08/10/teens-social-media-and-technology-2022/>

While online platforms continue to improve upon accessibility challenges, users with disabilities still particularly enjoy the positive effects of social media. For example, Deaf children, especially of hearing parents, are often forced to “assimilate” into hearing culture (i.e. told to read lips rather than others learn sign language, or made to wear often uncomfortable and disorientating hearing aids). Deaf children who are otherwise isolated in their own homes and communities may use social media to seek peers experiencing similar challenges and find Deaf role models. Social media has been a crucial resource for ostracized Deaf children to feel a part of a community via social inclusion.⁹

Social media is an invaluable resource for young people who are experiencing often stigmatized challenges. For example, pregnant teens can obtain life-saving information about reproductive healthcare, or children experiencing abuse can access materials to better understand and mitigate their circumstances.

What’s more, LGBTQ+ youth, especially those who may live in communities hostile to their identity, see social media as a crucial tool to connect with LGBTQ+ groups, access content from people's shared experiences, maintain positive connections, and reduce perceived isolation.¹⁰ LGBTQ+ youth use online platforms to seek emotional support, search for information about their identities, and find communities that accept them when their own parents do not.¹¹ According to the Trevor Project, half of surveyed LGBTQ+ youth between the ages of 13-17 have seriously considered attempting suicide, and 61% have experienced symptoms of depression.¹² Suicidal thoughts and depressive symptoms in the LGBTQ+ community are not *caused* by social media, but are instead perpetuated by unsupportive environments. That said, for LGBTQ+ youth living in hostile homes and communities, finding acceptance through social media can be a literal lifeline.

⁹ Cesar Escobar-Viera, et. al., “Examining Social Media Experiences and Attitudes Toward Technology-Based Interventions for Reducing Social Isolation Among LGBTQ Youth Living in Rural United States: An Online Qualitative Study.” *Frontiers in Digital Health*, (2022). <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35832658/>

¹⁰ Id.

¹¹ Michele Ybarra, et. al., “Online social support as a buffer against online and offline peer and sexual victimization among U.S. LGBT and non-LGBT youth.” *Child Abuse & Neglect* vol. 39 (2015). <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S014521341400283X?via%3Dihub>

¹² The Trevor Project, “2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health” The Trevor Project, (2022). <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2022/>

II. Platforms Employ Child Safety Promoting Practices

Question 6a: What practices and technologies do specific social media and other online platform providers employ today for assessing, preventing, and mitigating harms? What specific practices for being especially effective or ineffective?

Platforms have long understood the concerns raised by many stakeholders, from parents to schools to government entities, that children require greater protection online. While state and federal policymakers have explored legislation to address this issue with mixed results, many platforms are *already* prioritizing child safety, and are putting in place tools and procedures aimed at child safety on their platforms.

For example, YouTube Kids is a child-focused platform through which parents choose the types of videos their children can view, such as instructional videos on American Sign Language, or entertaining videos like those of peers playing Minecraft.¹³ With data privacy in mind, YouTube Kids does not allow children to share personal information with third parties or make it publicly available.¹⁴ YouTube's parent company, Google, has a Family Link tool that assists parents in supervising their children under 13, providing features such as screen monitoring and app permissions.¹⁵ What's more, Google does not present personalized ads to children, meaning ads are not based on information from a child's account or profile.

At Meta, privacy and safety features for families are developed in coordination with experts, including the National Association for Media Literacy Education, ConnectSafely, and ParentZone.¹⁶ On Meta's Instagram, parents or caregivers can supervise their child's activity, including setting time limits and reviewing accounts that follow them or that they follow. Parents also receive notifications when their child has reported or blocked an account, and prompts parents to have a constructive conversation on cyberbullying.

¹³ See Youtube Kids. <https://www.youtubekids.com/>

¹⁴ YouTube Kids, "Privacy Notice" YouTube, (2023). <https://kids.youtube.com/t/privacynotice>

¹⁵ Google, "Family Link & Parental Supervision" Google, (2023). https://support.google.com/families/answer/7101025?hl=en&ref_topic=7327495&sjid=9062330972920503214-NA#zippy=%2Cgoogle-services-your-childs-google-account%2Cchow-aaccount-management-works

¹⁶ Meta, "Education Hub - Family Center" Meta, (2023). <https://familycenter.meta.com/education/>

Meta also provides resources and information to empower caregivers. Meta's Family Center Education Hub provides parents and guardians helpful articles, videos and tips on topics including how to talk to teens about social media, digital wellness, safety and privacy, relationships and communication, and media literacy.¹⁷ Parents can also watch video tutorials on how to use the new supervision tools available on Instagram. Given the unique online risks faced by many LGBTQ+ youth, Meta also provides resources that help families protect their vulnerable LGBTQ+ children from online bullying, predators, being outed, and other harms.¹⁸

Snapchat, another platform utilized disproportionately by teenagers, provides a host of parental controls to ensure users experience age-appropriate content.¹⁹ Notably, the Snapchat Family Center offers parents, caregivers, and other trusted adults insight into who their teens are friends with on Snapchat and who they have been communicating with, without revealing the actual content of those communications. This way, younger users can preserve their privacy and growing independence at a critical point in their development, and parents can feel empowered to engage in crucial conversations with their teens.²⁰ At its core, Family Center is about sparking meaningful dialogue between parents and teens about staying safe both on and off Snapchat.

Snapchat also includes some security features by default to protect teenage users. For example, it protects young users from unwanted connections by not allowing teens to communicate one-to-one with another user unless they are an existing contact. The platform also prevents teens from showing up in search results outside their existing friend network, and sends an in-app warning if someone outside their connections tries to contact them. While the majority of Snapchat's features are used in private communication between friends, the public Stories features are moderated through protection detection tools and review processes to ensure content is age-appropriate. As an additional layer of

¹⁷ Meta, "Education Hub- Relationships and Communication" Meta, (2023).

<https://familycenter.meta.com/education/resources/online-bullying-relationships-communication/>

¹⁸ Meta LGBTQ Tech, "Five Things for Families to Know About LGBTQ+ Teens' Safety and Privacy Online" Meta, (2023).

<https://familycenter.meta.com/education/resources/lgbtq-youth-families/>

¹⁹ Shephard, Jack. "24 Essential Snapchat Statistics You Need to Know in 2023." The Social Shepherd, July 26, 2023.

<https://thesocialshepherd.com/blog/snapchat-statistics#:~:text=In%20the%20United%20States%2C%20the,just%205%25%20of%20the%20platform.>

²⁰ "Parents" Snapchat, (2023). <https://parents.snapchat.com/>

protection, parents can set stricter content limits as part of Snapchat Parental Controls.²¹

It is not only platforms that are integrating safety and privacy tools, but technology companies across the board. Apple, for example, provides tools for families to enable safe learning and exploring on Apple products. Parents can track their family's app usage, set time limits and exceptions for preferred apps (like those that are educational), decide who can communicate with their child, manage in-app purchases, and enable content warnings for images featuring inappropriate content.²² Understanding that parents may have limited digital literacy, or may be overwhelmed by the great number of toggles and controls, Apple applies age-appropriate child safety features by default when accounts are created for children.

It must be noted that many of the child safety and privacy tools offered by technology companies require the active involvement of an adult. For some children, their parents or caregivers may not choose to utilize safety features, whether because they lack digital literacy, have little time to explore the tools, or because they are apathetic to how their child uses social media. In addition to targeted and well-thought-out protections, there must also be a greater emphasis on teaching proper "cyber hygiene" and digital literacy in schools - just as kids are taught to look both ways before crossing the street.²³ By empowering youth with tools to be safe online, in addition to any protections put in place by their guardians, young people are better equipped to navigate unfamiliar and potentially unsafe spaces online.

III. Platforms Employ Practices that Maximize Existing Safety and Privacy

Question 10: Among the practices currently employed by social media and other online platforms, which ones best maximize benefits to minors' health, safety, and/or privacy while minimizing the risk of imposition of harm? How do they do so?

²¹ "Safeguards for Teens" Snapchat, (2023). <https://parents.snapchat.com/safeguards-for-teens>

²² Apple, "Families" Apple, (2023). <https://www.apple.com/families/>

²³ Haley DeLeon, "What Is Cyber Hygiene, and Why Is It Important for Your Child?" University of South Florida, (2023). <https://corporatetraining.usf.edu/blog/what-is-cyber-hygiene-and-why-is-it-important-for-our-child>

Kids tend to be more tech-savvy than generations before them, and may easily get around parental restrictions to override time limits and access desired content and features.²⁴ That said, there are a number of practices that platforms utilize to ensure all users are safe, including young people, that mitigate the need for parent/guardian oversight to ensure minors' health and safety.

A practice deployed by Meta, formerly Facebook, in 2020 to minimize the spread of misinformation or harmful content is known as the “viral circuit breaker.” Rather than taking down a controversial post, this feature minimizes its amplification. Two years later, Meta launched a feature that allows users to view posts chronologically rather than an algorithm-defined feed, thereby minimizing exposure to viral and potentially harmful content.²⁵

A system increasingly implemented by platforms to reduce the proliferation of harmful content and misinformation is flag-and-fact-check features. Once a post is flagged as problematic, users will then be directed to credible sources, and as a result, people are less inclined to amplify misinformation.²⁶ Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram implemented fact-check features during the pandemic, and other social media companies may readily benefit from the same tools.

IV. Policy Considerations

Question 17: What policy actions could be taken, whether by the U.S. Congress, federal agencies, enforcement authorities, or other actors, to advance minors' online health, safety, and/or privacy? What specific regulatory areas of focus would advance protections?

Ensuring privacy and safety online while minimizing mental health harms have been a policy priority at the state and federal level. In fact, this past year has seen dozens of bills throughout the country responding to the supposed harms social

²⁴ LERO News, “Children Can Bypass Age Verification Procedures on Popular Social Media Apps by Lying” LERO News, (2021).
<https://lero.ie/news-and-events/children-can-bypass-age-verification-procedures-popular-social-media-apps-lying>

²⁵ Erin Simpson & Adam Conner, “Fighting Coronavirus Misinformation and Disinformation” Center for American Progress, (2020).
<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/fighting-coronavirus-misinformation-disinformation/>

²⁶ NYU Tandon School of Engineering, “Red-Flagging Misinformation Could Slow the Spread of Fake News on Social Media” ScienceDaily, (2020).
<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/04/200428112542.htm>

media have on youth mental health. While rooted in good intentions, many of these bills may erode privacy, pulling away access to the innumerable positive elements of social media from the most vulnerable youth.

Recently, bills have been passed in Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, and Utah that require official age verification before accessing certain platforms, putting users' data privacy at risk, and limiting internet freedom and access.²⁷ Age verification requirements particularly impact certain marginalized groups who prefer to remain anonymous online for safety, including LGBTQ+ individuals or those seeking reproductive care. The Utah bill, to take effect in 2024, is an additional blow to marginalized youth's crucial access to community platforms, as it bans minors from accessing social media without parental consent.²⁸

At the federal level, legislation such as the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA) loosely defines what is considered harmful, opening the door for abuse by state attorneys general to sue platforms for information they perceive as harmful to children. Such lawsuits could negatively impact vulnerable and marginalized children. In a time where conservative states have launched a crusade against transgender communities, KOSA may enable state attorneys general to sue platforms for making information related to gender-affirming healthcare information available to kids.²⁹ Thus, KOSA can be used as a tool to perpetuate discrimination against our country's most vulnerable populations.

In this context, lawmakers and regulators should consider the following when proposing legislation aimed at addressing the safety of youth online:

Ensure Marginalized Kids Are Not at Risk

While most policy proposals assume parents and caretakers know what is in the best interest of a child, many marginalized kids live in unsupportive households. Proposed legislation must acknowledge the importance of online communities for marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ+ and Deaf children, who may seek refuge from hostility in their offline lives. Proposals must ensure that the ability to access supportive and inclusive online spaces is not hindered for these communities.

²⁷ Kelly Makena, "Child Safety Bills Are Reshaping the Internet for Everyone." The Verge, (2023). www.theverge.com/2023/8/29/23849375/kosa-child-safety-free-speech-louisiana-utah-parental-consent.

²⁸ Id.

²⁹ Id.

Avoid Requiring Age Verification Mechanisms

Requiring identification verification to use platforms would be particularly harmful for those wishing to remain anonymous, such as LGBTQ+ kids seeking gender-and-sexuality-affirming resources residing in communities hostile to their identities. Even worse, age verification data can be weaponized, notably by right-wing state actors. For example, Texas could subpoena websites for information pertaining to young people who access reproductive health information. States that ban gender-affirming care can use that information to prosecute those seeking out resources. Proposed policies should thus avoid imposing mandatory age verification methods that may compromise user privacy, and instead, encourage the development of privacy-conscious age verification mechanisms.

Do Not Always Assume Parental Suitability

While it is important to encourage parental involvement and to provide resources for digital literacy and safety education to ensure minors' safety online, parents are not always best suited to control how their child uses a platform. Consent laws, for example, can be weaponized by divorced parents who share custody of a child. If the parents are at odds with each other, they can use consent laws to override each other's decisions, especially when they disagree on what's in the best interest of their child.

Refrain from Interfering with Platform's Existing Efforts

Technology companies have already prioritized safety and protection, providing tools for parents to monitor their kids' social media usage and prompt conversations about safety and privacy, as well as features to minimize harm available to all users. Proposed policies, under the guise of protecting children online, threaten privacy protections, and may exacerbate the vulnerability of certain young people.

V. Conclusion

Protecting youth safety, privacy and health online has been a contentious topic, yet many proposed regulations and policies aimed at protecting children will likely do more harm - especially for vulnerable and marginalized children who rely on social media for crucial connections. Policymakers must take into consideration

the host of tools available to parents and children, and enact policies that value the benefits of social media for marginalized and at-risk youth while recognizing the importance of privacy, safety, and inclusivity in online spaces. Additionally, they must also consider the safety tools and features platforms themselves have designed and integrated into their products, including parental controls, privacy assurances, and mental health resources. The goal should remain to create a robust response to protecting children online and not weakening existing protections.