



Bipartisan Policy Center

Youth Mental Health and Substance Use Task Force: Safe and Secure Social Media Use

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BPC's Youth Mental Health and Substance Use Task Force launched in January 2024 to develop evidence-based, pragmatic policy solutions to the youth mental health and substance use crises for Congress and the administration. Safe and secure social media use is the first in a series of briefs that the task force plans to release.

Safe and Secure Social Media Use

Amid growing public concerns about how social media is affecting the mental and emotional well-being of America's youth, the Bipartisan Policy Center's Youth Mental Health and Substance Use [Task Force](#) recommends a series of steps for the Biden administration, Congress, and federal regulatory bodies to take that would:

- improve the social media literacy of youth, parents, and those working with children and students;
- strengthen privacy protections for users and restrict how companies collect information;
- increase the transparency of social media companies and their federal oversight; and
- expand research on how social media affects youths' mental health and substance use.

Social media is ubiquitous in the lives of America's children, teens, and young adults, providing both opportunities for stronger connection to peers and interest groups, as well as challenges to their mental health and development.^{1,2} As youths navigate the complexities of social media, its impact on their well-being has become an increasingly central focus of parents, educators, health care professionals, and policymakers.

The task force's recommendations support a federal framework that balances the concerns of youths, health care providers, patient advocates, parents, and caregivers who strongly favor more regulation of social media companies, and the concerns of the technology policy community who cite First Amendment risks that come with increased monitoring and removal of content by social media companies.

Background

In June 2024, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy [called for warning labels on social media](#), building on an [advisory](#) he issued almost a year ago on children's and adolescents' social media use.^{3,4} The advisory highlighted studies linking social media use to depression, anxiety, and self-harm among youths, while also noting it can enhance social connectedness, especially of marginalized adolescents. The following month, the Biden administration's interagency Task Force on Kids Online Health and Safety released a [report](#) detailing best practices for patients and caregivers, recommendations for industry, a research agenda identifying areas for further inquiry, and possible next steps for policymakers.⁵

Lawmakers are also voicing increasing concern about the effects of social media. The Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA, [S.1409](#)), co-sponsored by Sens. Michael Blumenthal (D-CT) and Marsha Blackburn (R-TN), would require social media companies to create a safer environment online for children. In the House, Reps. Gus Bilirakis (R-FL), Kathy Castor (D-FL), Erin Houchin (R-IN), and Kim Schrier (D-WA) have introduced [companion legislation](#).⁶ Congress is also considering legislation that aims to empower users, including children and teens, with greater control over their online experiences by ensuring that their personal information is secure and their privacy rights are respected. Bipartisan legislation, such as the [American Privacy Rights Act \(APRA\)](#) and the [Children and Teens' Online Privacy Protection Act \(COPPA 2.0\)](#), aims to tackle these important and multifaceted issues.^{7,8} KOSA and COPPA 2.0 passed the Senate on July 30, 2024, by a vote of 91–3.

In January 2024, BPC launched its Youth Mental Health and Substance Use [Task Force](#) to develop evidence-based, pragmatic policy solutions to address the mental health and substance use crises facing youths and young adults.⁹ Over the past several months, the task force convened experts from across the health care and technology sectors; industry, consumer, and youth advocates; and Republicans and Democrats to consider how social media affects adolescent mental health and to formulate recommendations for the administration and Congress.

With so much at stake for the nation's youth, now is the time for policymakers to act.

Recommendations

SOCIAL MEDIA LITERACY

- Congress should expand grant funding for the SAMHSA centers of excellence to develop risk screening tools and resources for those working with children and students, as well as for educational materials that enhance social media literacy, including around such topics as cyberbullying, distinguishing between correct and false information, and how to use privacy and age-appropriate design features.
- The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) should work with licensing bodies and higher education institutions to include safe social media training and risk screening tools in health care professionals' training curricula, and should support continuing education units (CEUs) for current health care professionals.
- HHS should develop, promote, and evaluate a social media literacy campaign in partnership with media and social media companies aimed at parents, caregivers, and youths, including those who themselves have struggled with mental health issues and/or addiction, and "influencers."
- Congress should leverage existing grants to support public awareness campaigns and social media literacy in schools, including around cyberbullying and other topics; distinguishing between correct and false information; and how to use privacy and age-appropriate design features. These grants could cover the startup costs necessary to build a longer-term public-private partnership.

To enhance social media educational materials and methods, HHS's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) funds centers of excellence, such as the [Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health](#) at the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP).¹⁰ The AAP Center of Excellence conducts research on best practices for addressing the mental health effects of social media on teens and focuses on developing tools and educational materials for adolescents and families to promote safe social media use and healthy behaviors. To sustain and grow such work, Congress should target current grant funding and increase funding for the SAMHSA centers of excellence to develop risk screening tools and increase social media literacy training for educators and health care professionals.

Health care professionals—including primary care and mental health providers, educators, parents, and caregivers—play crucial roles in guiding adolescents on the potential risks and benefits of social media use, but little training and few resources are available to them.^{11,12,13,14} Industry, academia, and health care stakeholders largely support efforts to raise public awareness about social media literacy and to develop new tools to screen youths for risky behaviors. Such tools would enable youths, parents, and caregivers to engage with social media in an informed way—helping adolescents navigate social media safely and responsibly.

Given their consistent relationships with children and teens, health care professionals are well positioned to identify social media-related issues early in adolescence. According to 2022 data compiled by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), [94% of individuals under 18](#) have had a doctor visit within the past year.¹⁵ Unfortunately, only [2.6% of health care providers report giving regular instruction](#) on internet safety to adolescents.¹⁶ Given their extensive contact with children and teens, health care professionals would benefit from regular training on the evolving understanding of social media's effects on adolescent development.

To promote these competencies, HHS should work with licensing bodies and higher education institutions to develop risk screening tools and training for health care professionals on safe social media usage. It should also support continuing education units (CEUs) for current professionals. After receiving training, health care providers can better educate youth and their caregivers about social media use and can help them navigate its complexities. Health care professionals' training should include areas of focus, such as:

- understanding the risks and benefits of social media use on adolescent mental health and substance use, including early recognition of mental health issues and signs of social media addiction;
- familiarity with changes in and new types of technology and with social media platform design (e.g., the effects of “endless scrolling”); and
- working with families and caregivers to encourage youth to develop safe online habits.

The growing gap between digital natives—those who grew up with digital technology—and their caregivers [underscores](#) the need for improved literacy among parents and caregivers.¹⁷ Adults with children need [media literacy](#) to stay current with their children's media usage and to be able to set rules and enforce limits on their content and media consumption.¹⁸ [Research suggests](#) that training parents in digital citizenship—which includes digital access, etiquette, and safety—can be beneficial.¹⁹

To bolster social media literacy, HHS should collaborate with media and social media companies to develop, promote, and evaluate a social media literacy campaign targeting youth, parents, and caregivers. Given the high social media

usage among teenagers, industry partners, public sector entities, and subject matter experts have all expressed support for social media literacy programs. Several industry partners such as [Meta](#) and [Google](#) have literacy-oriented tools and resources to help promote digital safety online;²⁰ HHS should leverage social media companies' input and expertise to inform the development of additional tools and campaigns, especially for topics related to how content is made available via their platforms. Public awareness campaigns, such as the Drug Enforcement Administration's fentanyl campaign on social media called ["One Pill Can Kill,"](#) demonstrate the potential impact of targeted initiatives, but no federally funded campaigns have focused on social media literacy.²¹

A social media literacy campaign can draw inspiration from other successful public awareness initiatives. For example, the campaign could be modeled after "Schoolhouse Rock!," which taught civics through engaging content, or ["Flocabulary,"](#) which uses educational hip-hop songs to reach K-12 students.^{22,23} Such a campaign could include individuals who have themselves struggled with mental health issues or addiction, and social media influencers to enhance relatability and effectiveness. It could also focus on issues like cyberbullying and misinformation; provide information on how to use privacy and age-appropriate design features such as turning off app notifications; demonstrate how to remove the "like count," opt out of recommendations, and set screen limits; and could include relevant information about healthy social media use, such as building communities and exploring new interests.

According to Media Literacy Now, which is leading a grassroots literacy movement, [19 state legislatures](#) have acted on social media literacy since 2009, with many targeting K-12 schools.²⁴ In 2016, Washington state became the first to pass a bill establishing an advisory council to develop best practices and recommendations for social media literacy instruction. Momentum has increased since then, with five states—California, Connecticut, Florida, New Jersey, and New Mexico—passing similar laws in 2023.²⁵ These developments underscore the growing role that states can play in recognizing the importance of social media literacy.

One critical avenue for engaging children and teens is through schools. Research indicates that parents expect schools to address topics related to internet safety and social media literacy.^{26,27} However, schools are often overburdened, and educators do not have the resources or training to effectively cover these issues.²⁸ The Department of Education should leverage existing grant funding to promote awareness in schools on the public health effects of social media usage. These grants could cover the startup costs necessary for establishing public-private partnerships and then build toward longer-term relationships by establishing a sustainable financing mechanism for these efforts. The Department of Education could also help maintain these programs by ensuring they are evidence-based and incorporate emerging best practices from centers of excellence and other research.

AGE-APPROPRIATE DESIGN AND DATA PRIVACY

- Congress should authorize a federal agency, such as the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) or the Department of Commerce, to develop industry standards, in collaboration with industry, that require the strictest privacy and safety settings by default for minors or to obtain their informed opt-in consent in appropriate situations.
- Congress should authorize the same federal agency to establish guidance and an implementation road map for social media companies and retailers—especially app stores—on technological solutions for determining if a user is a child, teen, or minor while minimizing the data collected or stored and enhancing online safety for minors.
- Congress should require social media companies to provide greater user controls so that all users can manage their online experiences and allow parents or guardians to oversee settings for minors (e.g., disable targeted advertising based on browsing history, implement time limits on social media apps, or manage content and messaging restrictions). Platforms should disclose how users can adjust their online experience in an accessible, clear, and easy-to-understand manner.
- Congress should establish responsible data practice requirements for covered platforms that limit the collection, processing, transferring, and retention of certain sensitive types of data (e.g., geolocation and personal information) to what is necessary for specified primary purposes and is expected or permissible by the consumer.
- Congress should establish acceptable secondary uses of data, such as allowing for safe and secure data transfers, so this information can be available for research purposes and to authorities to protect against child victimization.

Ensuring that privacy and security settings are set to the highest standard by default for minors helps mitigate risks to children.²⁹ Many users do not change their privacy settings from the default position. This decision reflects what is known as the privacy paradox in which individuals express concerns about privacy but do not take action to protect it on their own. Congress should direct a federal agency to develop standards, in collaboration with industry, for default privacy and security settings that it can effectively implement. These standards should default minors to the strictest privacy and security settings as soon as they register a social media account and log-in, or obtain their informed

opt-in consent in appropriate situations. Social media companies should then be required to incorporate agreed-upon standards into their terms-of-service agreements with users.

Regulators are debating which federal entity or entities should establish these safeguards and whether current authorities are adequate. The authority of agencies such as the FTC, Federal Communications Commission (FCC), and Department of Justice (DOJ) to enforce current regulations related to social media platforms is not well defined, leading to gaps in oversight. Ultimately, Congress must determine the best path forward that safeguards against future challenges and ensures that interagency coordination is maintained to protect youths online.

Few reliable technological solutions currently exist for effectively determining whether a user is a child, teen, or minor while minimizing the privacy risks posed by increased data collection and storage. Platforms typically use a self-reported age declaration, which can be falsified and inaccurate. This process allows under-age users (commonly 13 or 18, depending on the content) to bypass age gates and access age-inappropriate content, leading to potential harm. It could also lead to technical challenges when a site tries to correct a user's access or restrictions, or prioritize age-appropriate experiences. Some technology companies use age estimation tools which use AI-powered facial analysis to determine a person's age.³⁰ However, the FTC emphasizes the importance of privacy protections and accuracy to prevent misuse of personal data and protect children online. To create better safeguards around young people's use of social media platforms, Congress should authorize a federal agency to establish guidance and an implementation road map for social media companies and retailers (especially app stores) on agreed upon and effective technological solutions. Although privacy concerns cannot be entirely eliminated, these technological solutions should minimize the data collected and stored to strike a balance between ensuring safety and maintaining privacy, while enhancing online safety for minors.

Harms in the digital arena—such as bullying, harassment, sexual exploitation, and misinformation—can arise from platform-related design issues, user behavior, third-party content, and the proliferation of abusive [AI-generated content](#), which can amplify these harms. Congress should require social media companies to provide greater user controls that are easily accessible so that all users can manage their online experiences and allow parents or guardians to oversee settings for minors. These controls could include options to disable targeted advertising based on browsing history, to implement time limits on social media apps, or to manage content and messaging restrictions. Implementing user controls, including the ability to opt out of algorithm-generated recommendations based on user preferences, gives users the ability to tailor their experience and mitigate online risks of harm.

Beyond this debate, Congress can take several actions to ensure data privacy for minors. First, Congress should establish responsible data practice requirements for covered platforms that limit the collection, processing, transferring, and retention of certain sensitive types of data (e.g., geolocation and personal information) to what is necessary for specified primary purposes and to what is expected or permitted by the consumer. This would provide firm guardrails to protect users' privacy. Second, Congress should establish acceptable secondary uses of data, such as making data available for research purposes and to authorities to protect against child victimization.

TRANSPARENCY AND FEDERAL OVERSIGHT OF SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES

- Congress should require a federal agency, such as the FTC or HHS, to work with social media platforms to standardize disclosure of their content policies to ensure they are accessible, clear, and easy to understand. This agency could develop standards for social media platform design, content moderation policies, transparency, and data use.
- Congress should require the same federal agency to work with social media companies to conduct and report on risk assessments that include risks to children and plans for mitigation before new product or feature launches. This could include requiring social media companies to research, test, develop, and update advanced content moderation technologies, privacy protective age-assurance technologies, and age-appropriate design features that prioritize safety by design.
- Congress should require platforms to create a reporting system for harmful content and require an internal process to respond to reports in a reasonable and timely manner that adheres to their established community guidelines and existing laws.
- The Federal Trade Commission should clarify how to make reporting and the systems used for reporting compliant with the 1998 Children's Online Privacy Protection Act regulations.

As part of a federal framework to support online safety, Congress should require a federal agency to collaborate with social media platforms to standardize the disclosure of their content policies in a way that is accessible to all users. This effort should involve establishing standards for social media platform design, content moderation policies, transparency, and data use. Currently, the FTC oversees regulations related to social media platforms due to its focus on consumer protection, but some experts suggest shifting these responsibilities

to the Department of Commerce because of its expertise and for better allocation of resources. Despite varied opinions on the FTC's role, stakeholders generally agree on the importance of transparency involving aggregated statistics, content samples, and process transparency, with a desire to align U.S. policy with global regulations such as the European Commission's [Digital Services Act](#).³¹

In response to strong calls from policymakers and advocates for enhanced trust and safety on platforms, Congress should mandate that social media companies conduct risk assessments before introducing new products or features. These risk assessments could include an evaluation of a product or feature's socio-technical risks and benefits, internal governance and accountability structures, and safeguards. The company should document the risk assessments and make them available upon request by a government authority; the assessments should include specific measurements for accountability, along with clear implementation and remediation processes.

Given the pervasiveness of illegal, harmful, or inappropriate content online, and the harm this can cause to youths, industry and government should work together to find solutions that protect users from consuming and spreading this content. Congress should require covered platforms to create a reporting system for harmful content that would allow users to report issues directly to the platform. Congress should also require an internal process in which social media companies must respond to reports in a reasonable and timely manner. The response should adhere to the companies' established community guidelines and to existing laws. To achieve this goal, the FTC should clarify how to make reporting and the systems used for reporting compliant with existing regulations from the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998.

TARGETED RESEARCH

- Congress should direct the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to prioritize existing funding toward research on the effects of social media use on youth, including its relationship to mental health and substance use conditions and other harms.
- The NIH should use a rapid review process, something that is reserved for emergencies, when researching the effects of social media usage on youths.

While policymakers have gained significant insights into the effects of social media on the nation's youth, much remains to be learned. NIH research priorities should include investigating social media-based health promotion tools and exploring the effects of social media on teenagers' and young adults'

mental health and substance use. For example, in November 2023, the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) issued a [request for applications](#) for clinical trials focusing on the bidirectional relationships between social media use and adolescent mental health.³² However, there are currently no known NIH grants, such as those from the National Institute on Drug Abuse, specifically funding research on the impact of social media usage on substance use and misuse. Existing grants, like the NIMH grant, can fund research exploring gaps in understanding the positive and negative impacts of social media usage on youth mental health and substance use and misuse.

To study the effects of social media on youths' mental health and substance use, lawmakers could allow independent researchers to access secondary data from social media companies. This access is crucial for carrying out comprehensive and unbiased studies.

Although the current version of the Kids Online Safety Act includes a study on the harms of social media to youth, including substance use, experts believe researchers must also examine the benefits of social media to gain a comprehensive understanding of its impact. Given the growing need to produce this research in a timely manner, the NIH should utilize a [rapid review process](#), something that is reserved for [emergencies](#).^{33,34}

Endnotes

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