

Dear Chair Griffith and Committee Members,

This letter pertains to the legislation that the State of Maryland is considering (Age Appropriate Design Code) to help increase protection for children and adolescents from exposure to harmful social media content.

I am a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in the State of Maryland, and I have been practicing for nearly twenty years. This letter is co-written with my 19 year old daughter, who is a freshman at the University of Michigan and graduated from Bethesda Chevy Chase High School last year. She has done some investigative work on social media and written an article and been featured in a documentary about social media's effects on youth mental health. The remarks she drafted immediately follow my own.

As a mother and a clinician, I have a vested interest in understanding more about how digital products affect the brain and the interplay between the brain and emotional health of children and adolescents (and adults too). We are the first generation of parents and mental health workers who are navigating the world of social media and the vast amount of available digital content, and seeing and learning in real time, the emerging consequences on health. There are so many pieces of social media and digital content that pose questions and deserve further study to at the very least, be thoughtful and informed about the short and long-term ramifications of our interplay with this evolving technology and its role in our lives.

There are many studies that are now being published that show compelling data about the harmful effects of social media on the developing brain and emotional health (increased depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, addiction, increased loneliness and isolation and more). And as someone who sits with teens and young adults, I see this first-hand. There are also studies and common knowledge that show us that social media and other digital content can bring people closer and keep them connected and part of a community to which they might not otherwise have access. Bottom line is...let's be clear, social media and technology are here to stay and, like human beings, are not blanketly all good or all bad. What is also clear, however, is that we see both in studies and if we are merely watching and paying attention to our youth, that letting things continue to go as they are, is posing a real risk to our and our children's well-being. Coming together to develop and adopt legislation aimed at protecting the wellbeing, data, and privacy of children online makes the most sense.

Being smart and putting the minds and emotions of children and teens before anything else, (putting legislation in place to do so) is the best thing to do from here forward. This legislation will not itself "fix" the complex and ever-changing digital world and its

impact on youth. It will however, be a smart and thoughtful step in taking action to use what we know to address real and true mounting concerns around a rising mental health crisis in our youth.

Now I would like to introduce my daughter, Lola Nordlinger.

As a teenage girl growing up in the age of social media, this topic is extremely relevant and important to me. My whole generation is a victim of social media - not only do we exist in the real world and all the emotions and experiences that come along with it, but also we have to worry about the digital world and how to present ourselves within it. This is an experience our parents have no real experience in, we are the first generation experiencing the realities of existing in both worlds.

When the Frances Haugen Whistleblower trials came to fruition, with the guidance of my High School Newspaper teacher I became curious in understanding the notion of social media and the realities of its harm. While adults had a whole lot to say about how addictive and harmful various social media platforms were for teenagers, there was an apparent lack of youth voice speaking on a topic that was almost entirely relevant to us as a generation. Due to this gap in perspective, I went on to do my own research around the toxic culture of social media.

One of the most impactful findings of my research was conducting individual interviews with girls from each grade of my high school. My team and I began with the question: "do you think social media is toxic in your life?" Their initial response was always along the lines of, "no not for me, but it definitely is toxic." But, after about a 10 minute interview including showing a clip of Haugen's finding regarding the positive correlation between declining mental health social media, girls were much more willing to offer that social media may be toxic in their own lives.

I know that the Age Appropriate Design Code is a step in the right direction to change the narrative of social media- whether we would like to admit it or not- we, the users, as impressionable minds, deserve to be protected from the harms of the algorithm.

Allison Nordlinger
Clinical Social Worker

Lola Nordlinger
Graduate of Bethesda Chevy Chase HS