

My name is Dr. Preetam Kaduluri, and I am a physician, educator and researcher who specializes in child and adolescent health currently doing masters in Public health at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and a source recipient of Bloomberg American Health Initiative and serve as Treasurer for the Child Health Society at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. I have experience running a 1100 student school. I have also conducted research on adolescent school going girls and factors affecting anemia in them with the Indian Council of Medical Research. I am here today to express my strong support for the Maryland Age Appropriate Design Code - SB 844. This bill is a landmark legislation that will protect the online safety and privacy of children and teens in Maryland, and set an example for the rest of the world.

The bill's provisions to require online platforms that target children or likely to be accessed by children to comply with a set of principles and guidelines and make decisions based on best interests of the children, such as setting the highest level of privacy as default and providing clear and age-appropriate information and pursuing policies that minimize the personal data collection and sharing. The bill bans the online platforms from using algorithms or targeted ads which might exploit children or potentially harm children by promoting unhealthy behaviors, addictive products or inappropriate content.

As a physician and researcher who has worked with schools and children, I have witnessed the negative consequences of our present online environment on the mental, physical and emotional well-being of children. Without adequate safeguards, I have seen them being exposed online to cyberbullying, sexual grooming, misinformation. Many of them suffer from depression, anxiety, lack of confidence and low self-esteem and abnormal sleep patterns due to indiscriminate and excessive use of social media and gaming and other online platforms. These are designed to capture their attention and date while keeping them invested without regard for their rights, needs or well-being. I have firsthand experience with the negative effects that these online platforms' indiscriminate targeting of kids has on their mental and academic performance, interpersonal connections, and even their physical health. Also, I have witnessed how these online environments shape children's identities, self-images, and worldviews by influencing their values, beliefs, and behaviors. I have observed kids exhibiting severe mental health problems like eating disorders, self-harm, substance misuse, and suicidal ideation as a result of their internet encounters.

A much-needed and timely action, the Maryland Age Appropriate Design Code - SB 844 will help develop a safer and healthier online environment for kids and teenagers where they may learn, explore, and express themselves without fear of manipulation, exploitation, or injury. Also, the measure will give parents, teachers, and policymakers more ability to better promote and defend children's and teenagers' online rights and interests and to hold internet platforms responsible for their design and behavior.

I implore all companies covered by the bill to abide by its provisions as quickly as possible and to put the best interests of the child first when developing new features and conducting business. I also compel other nations and states to adopt legislation that is identical to Maryland's in order to safeguard children's and teenagers' privacy and safety online. I applaud the Maryland Legislature for their leadership and bravery in approving the Maryland Age Appropriate Design Code - SB 844, which is a historic and forward-thinking move toward building a more kid and human-centered internet.

Thank you for your attention and consideration.