

Survivor Parent Letter

Below is a letter signed by dozens of parents who have lost their children to online harms.
Use the QR Code on the next page to view the letter with citations.

Oct. 24, 2023

Dear Majority Leader Schumer, Minority Leader McConnell, Chair Cantwell, and Ranking Member Cruz,

We write to you as grieving parents and survivors. We have lost our children to suicide in the wake of relentless cyberbullying. We have lost our children to fentanyl poisoning from drugs purchased through social media. We have lost our children to dangerous viral “challenges” that took their lives. **We have lost our children because time and time again, Big Tech chose to prioritize profits over the safety and well-being of young people.**

We cannot wait another day, let alone another year. Children are dying. We urge you to bring Senate Bill 1409, the *Kids Online Safety Act* (KOSA) to a floor vote.

We know the internet is vital for kids to stay connected with their friends and classmates. That is why it's crucial to prioritize the development of safe online environments. As parents raising our children in the digital age, we did everything we were supposed to. We were open with our children about the dangers they might encounter online and how to react to them, warned them against speaking to strangers on the internet, encouraged them to come to us with their worries. And still, that wasn't enough: even an engaged parent with all the time and resources in the world doesn't stand a chance against manipulative design features and profit-seeking algorithms pushing harmful content to their kids.

Big Tech's abject failure to regulate themselves and protect the young people using their products could not come at a worse time for American children and teens. Between 2010 and 2020, the suicide death rate increased 62% for teens. In 2021, global rates of depression and anxiety among young people were 25% and 20% respectively. Rates of emergency room visits for children and teens for depression, anxiety, and other psychiatric issues rose by 28% between 2011 and 2015. US emergency rooms saw more teen girls admitted for eating disorders during the pandemic. Fatal overdoses among teens doubled between 2019 and 2020, and rose by another 20% in 2021. In 2022, over 3,000 minors were targeted in sextortion cases online - leading to more than a dozen suicides.

The mental health crisis is not happening in a vacuum: a well-established body of research (some from tech companies themselves) shows how algorithmic amplification and social media exacerbate these problems for young people. Malicious actors use social media to sexually exploit children and to financially extort them through threats of distributing intimate images. A recent Wall Street Journal report found that Instagram's algorithm helps connect and promote a network of child sex abuse material (CSAM) and guides pedophiles to content

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sellers through its recommendation systems. When users search for terms related to CSAM, a pop-up warns them that “These results may contain images of child sexual abuse,” but still allows users to “See results anyway.”

The Surgeon General’s Advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health echoes our concern for young people and urges policymakers to develop age-appropriate standards for tech platforms. The report mentions the harms perpetuated by social media, such as disordered eating, diminished self-esteem, and social comparison. Forty-six percent of adolescents expressed that their body image was negatively impacted by social media and two-thirds of adolescents encounter hate-driven content either “often” or “sometimes.” At a time when youth are using social media at increasingly earlier ages, the burden of minimizing the risk of harm on these platforms cannot be placed on the shoulders of children and families.

We know from first-hand experience how digital platforms can turn the normal trials and tribulations of adolescence into incomprehensible tragedy. Young people cannot wait for further studies and research—their development and childhood are happening now. Big Tech must be held accountable for the business decisions that are taking our children’s lives.

This is why the Kids Online Safety Act is so urgently needed. KOSA shifts responsibility for the design and operation of online platforms away from families and onto the companies that own them. At the heart of the bill is a duty of care that requires platforms to prevent and mitigate the most serious harms to young people: suicide, eating disorders, mental health harms, cyberbullying, illegal drug sales, and sexual exploitation. Critically, it also requires platforms to address addictive patterns of use—social media addiction is often the pathway through which so many serious and deadly harms to young people occur.

KOSA also provides parents and young people themselves with better tools to protect themselves online. The bill requires platforms to turn on the most protective settings by default, rather than sending parents and young people through a maze of confusing settings in order to turn off geolocation tracking, adjust account privacy settings, or prevent messages from strangers. Further, it gives young people the ability to avoid dangerous content rabbit holes by controlling the types of content that is recommended to them and to opt out of features that are designed to keep them online. It requires social media companies to work with an outside auditor to assess the risks of harm to minors on the platforms and the platform’s prevention and mitigation efforts. And when a young person or family is in crisis, KOSA requires online platforms to track and respond to issue reports – a feature many of us desperately needed.

American families need the Kids Online Safety Act now: we cannot delay any more. Every single day that social media remains unregulated, more children are lost to its harms. Please, pass the *Kids Online Safety Act*.

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Deb Schmill
Parent to Becca, forever age 18

Maurine Molak
Parent to David, forever age 16

Mary Rodee
Parent to Riley, forever age 15

Julianna Arnold
Parent to Coco, forever age 17

Jennie and Dave Desario
Parents to Mason, forever age 16

Toney and Brandy Roberts
Parents to Englyn, forever age 14

Kristin Bride
Parent to Carson, forever age 16

Steve and Joann Bogard
Parents to Mason, forever age 15

Erin Popolo
Parent to Emily, forever age 17

Shannon Lee
Parent to Ashlyn, forever age 16

Blair F. Aranda
Parent to Brantley, forever age 17

Bridgette Norring
Parent to Devin, forever age 19

Lori A. Schott
Parent to Annalee, forever age 18

Christine McComas
Parent to Grace, forever age 15

Jeff Van Lith
Parent to Ethan, forever age 13

Rose Bronstein
Parent to Nate, forever age 15

Jessica Diacont
Parent to Jacob, forever age 15

Kathy McCarthy
Parent to Jack, forever age 19

Patti Lujan
Parent to Lauren, forever age 18

Laura Lynch
Parent to Brillion, forever age 18

Krystal Lebofsky
Parent to Deja star, forever age 12

Avery Ryan Schott
Parent to Anna, forever age 18

Tammy Rodriguez
Parent to Selena, forever age 11

Maggie Taylor
Parent to Emily, forever age 17

Shannon Rickson
Parent to Madison

Stephen Cahill
Parent to Michael, forever age 20

Hanh Badger
Parent to BB, forever age 17

Diana Trujillo
Parent to Juan, forever age 16

Mary Popolizio
Parent to Alexandra-Victoria, forever age 18

Taj Jensen
Parent to Tanner, forever age 20

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Christopher Wagner
Parent to Christopher

Kathryn Williams
Parent to Chantel, forever age 18

Bradley Richardson
Parent to Tyler, forever age 19

James Ebert
Parent to Jayson, forever age 21

Joseph Ryan Gill
Parent to Emma, forever age 16

Erica Adams
Parent to Daniel

Dani Clewell
Parent to Alexander, forever age 18

Krislynn Wells
Parent to Chandler, forever age 18

April Tsosie
Parent to Melissa, forever age 16

Michael Ourand
Parent to Kevin, forever age 20

Jennifer Mitchell
Parent to Ian, forever age 16

Brittney Shealy
Parent to Keirstyn, forever age 18

Kristine Mandelke
Parent to Jonathan, forever age 22

Jessica Williams
Parent to Z.B.

Jodi O'Dell
Parent to Justin, forever age 18

Georgia Peterson
Parent to Gregg, forever age 19

Shawane Miller
Parent to Leon

Shailyn Malone
Parent to Taylen, forever age 15

Andrea Silvano
Parent to Zachary, forever age 21

Kristina Cahak
Parent to Morgan, forever age 15

Fran Humphrey
Parent to Sophia, forever age 20

Katherine Klingele
Parent to Seqouyah, forever age 16

Christopher A Dawley
Parent to Christopher (CJ), forever age 17

Lindsey Thurman
Parent to Manuel "Manny", forever age 17

Monica Ortiz
Parent of Fidel, forever age 16

Karen Zients
Parent to Ian, forever age 16

Sonja Frezghi
Parent to Khalif, forever age 17

Patrick Cly,
Parent of Vanessa, forever age 18

Tricia and Kinyoun Buford
Parents to Braden, forever age 22

Karen Alfonso
Parent to forever age 22

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Annie McGrath
Parent to Griffin, forever age 13

Kristie Reilly
Parent to Noah, forever age 13

Judith Rogg
Parent to Erik, forever age 12

Karey Kleeman
Parent to Aiden, forever age 14

Sharon Winkler
Parent to Alexander, forever age 17

Bridgette Norring
Parent to Devin, forever age 19

Michael Kuch
Parent to Adriana, forever age 14

John Halligan
Parent to Ryan, forever age 13

Todd Minor Sr.
Parent to Matthew, forever age 12

Georgia Peterson
Parent to Gregg, forever age 19

Devon Adame
Parent to Kayden, forever age 16

Janet Majewski
Parent to Emily, forever age 14

Elizabeth Davis
Parent to Cooper, forever age 16

Christina Arlington-Smith
Parent to Lalani, forever age 8

Hazel Msuorga Lopez
Parent to Paris, forever age 14

Melessa Kocsis
Parent to AJ, forever age 19

Desiree Hawkins
Parent to Noah, forever age 12

Christina Luna
Parent to Josiah, forever age 15