

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

February 22, 2023

Dr. Lawrence A. Tabak, D.D.S., Ph.D.
Acting Director
National Institutes of Health
9000 Rockville Pike
Bethesda, Maryland 20892

Dear Dr. Tabak,

We write to you regarding the unprecedented mental health challenges facing our nation's children, who are growing up in an increasingly digital world. As President Biden highlighted in his recent State of the Union address, social media and new technologies are affecting our children in ways we don't yet fully understand, and we must do more to protect them from online harms.¹ The National Institutes of Health (NIH), our nation's top medical research agency, can now play a key role in addressing this pressing problem by helping us better understand how and why these harms occur. We respectfully urge the NIH to swiftly implement the bipartisan Children and Media Research Advancement (CAMRA) Act provision enacted in the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023 and significantly increase research into the effects of technology use and media consumption on teens, children, and infants.²

Young people increasingly live their lives online. During the COVID-19 pandemic, average daily screen time among kids ages 10 to 14 surged from 3.8 hours to an extraordinary 7.7 hours.³ Social interactions have also moved online, as the number of messages children send and receive

¹ President Joe Biden, State of the Union Address as Prepared for Delivery (Feb. 7, 2023), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/02/07/remarks-of-president-joe-biden-state-of-the-union-address-as-prepared-for-delivery/>. "We must finally hold social media companies accountable for the experiment they are running on our children for profit. And it's time to pass bipartisan legislation to stop Big Tech from collecting personal data on kids and teenagers online, ban targeted advertising to children, and impose stricter limits on the personal data these companies collect on all of us."

² Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, P.L. No: 117-328 (2022).

³ Megan Marples, *Kids Nearly Doubled Screen Time During the Pandemic, But There Is Something You Can Do About It*, CABLE NEWS NETWORK (Nov. 1, 2021), www.cnn.com/2021/11/01/health/children-screen-time-increase-pandemic-study-wellness/index.html.

online increased 144 percent.⁴ Approximately one-third of parents report that their child began using a smartphone before the age of 5,⁵ and over half of children have their own smartphone by age 11.⁶ Children are also early adopters of emerging consumer electronics. In fact, 17 percent of children ages 8 to 18 already reportedly use a virtual reality headset.⁷ This dramatic growth in minors' technology use amounts to nothing short of a sea-change in the way young people grow up in the United States.

Unfortunately, initial scholarship on this topic includes troubling findings regarding this trend's effects on kids' wellbeing. Relevant research, for example, points to connections between children's increased media consumption and poorer sleep patterns,⁸ a relationship between depression and social networking in adolescents,⁹ and links between internet use among young people and issues with emotion regulation.¹⁰ In an increasingly digital world, experts agree that additional nuanced, research-driven approaches are necessary.¹¹

Here is the good news: Congress recently empowered NIH to delve deeply into these issues with a robust research agenda. On December 29, 2022, President Biden signed into law the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023, which included the bipartisan Children and Media Research Advancement (CAMRA) Act.¹² This critical legislation directs NIH to launch a research program on technology and media's effects on infants, children, and adolescents in core areas of cognitive, physical, and mental development.¹³ Critically, Congress appropriated \$15 million for the first year of this initiative.¹⁴

With this mandate from Congress, NIH should act with all deliberateness and haste to utilize its new resources and launch necessary research into the effects of technology on children. We commend NIH for the work it has previously done in this area and look forward to your redoubled efforts.

⁴ Heather Kelly, *Growing Up on Screens: How a Year Lived Online has Changed Our Children*, WASH. POST (Mar. 5, 2021), www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/03/05/screen-time-one-year-kids/.

⁵ Brooke Auxier et al., *Children's Engagement with Digital Devices, Screen Time*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (July 28, 2020), www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/07/28/childrens-engagement-with-digital-devices-screen-time/.

⁶ Anya Kamenetz, *It's a Smartphone Life: More Than Half Of U.S. Children Now Have One*, NAT'L PUB. RADIO (Oct. 31, 2019), n.pr/3Oye2FR.

⁷ Nelson Reed, *What Are Kids Doing in the Metaverse?*, COMMON SENSE MEDIA (Mar. 23, 2022), www.common sense media.org/kids-action/articles/what-are-kids-doing-in-the-metaverse.

⁸ Holly Scott et al., *Social Media Use and Adolescent Sleep Patterns: Cross-Sectional Findings From the UK Millennium Cohort Study*, BJM OPEN (Oct. 22, 2019), www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6830469/.

⁹ Igor Pantic et al., *Association Between Online Social Networking and Depression in High School Students: Behavioral Physiology Viewpoint*, PSYCHIATRIA DANUBINA (Mar. 2012), pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22447092/.

¹⁰ Francesca Gioia et al., *Problematic Internet Use and Emotional Dysregulation Among Young People: A Literature Review*, Clinical Neuropsychiatry (Feb. 2021), ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8629046/.

¹¹ See e.g., Shira Ovide, *The Messy Truth About Kids' Screen Time*, N.Y. TIMES (July 26, 2021), nytimes.com/2021/07/26/technology/kids-screen-time.html.

¹² Press Release, Bill Signed: H.R. 2617, The White House (Dec. 29, 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/legislation/2022/12/29/bill-signed-h-r-2617/>.

¹³ Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, P.L. No: 117-328 (2022).

¹⁴ Explanatory Statement, H. Rept. 117-403 Department of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act of 2023.

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Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Edward J. Markey". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jamie Raskin". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Jamie Raskin
Member of Congress