

Written Testimony of Congressman Jamie Raskin
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Subcommittee on Health
Hearing on “Enhancing Public Health: Legislation to Protect Children and Families”
Wednesday, October 20, 2021

Chairwoman Eshoo, Ranking Member Guthrie, and Chairman Pallone, thank you for holding this important hearing on legislation to improve public health for American children. I am grateful for this opportunity to advocate for my bill, the Children and Media Research Advancement (CAMRA) Act, that is before us today. In 2019, I was delighted to take over this bill from my friend and fellow Marylander, former Congressman John Delaney. Since I reintroduced it earlier this year with Representative Anthony Gonzalez of Ohio, we have worked hard to build support for this bipartisan, bicameral legislation that will provide funding for research on the effects of social media, video games and technology on our children.

Technology and social media dominate our children’s lives. Teens are spending an average of almost seven and a half hours on screen media—not including for homework or school—every day.¹ At the same time, social media companies spend hundreds of millions of dollars each year directly targeting kids with digital ads and trying to keep them on their platforms.²

As parents, we’re eager to help our kids navigate the dangers of the digital world, develop healthy habits and strike a healthy balance between screen time and other activities. Yet we have scarce research on how all of this technology use is affecting our children’s physical, cognitive, and socioemotional development over time. The widespread adoption of technology by kids has not produced more research funding into this critically important problem for our society.

The CAMRA Act aims to fill this significant knowledge gap for parents, educators, health professionals, and policymakers. Our bill would authorize the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to develop a research program looking at how increased technology and media use by children affects their health and wellbeing. The CAMRA Act would, for the first time, provide dedicated federal funding for independent research in this field. As technology platforms change and evolve, steady research funding authorized by the CAMRA Act would enable researchers to track how new digital trends are affecting children, both in positive and negative ways.

One tech titan has come under fire recently after a former employee blew the whistle on its decision to prioritize vast profits over our children’s health and wellbeing. For years, Facebook knew about the mental health risks that Instagram posed to young users. Teens who struggle with mental health problems reported feeling that Instagram made things far worse, and nearly a third of teen girls reported that using Instagram worsened their body image and self-esteem issues.³ The public would never have known about Facebook’s disturbing internal research, had it not been for the courage and moral resolve of this one whistleblower. We can expect technology and social

¹ <https://www.common sense media.org/sites/default/files/uploads/research/2019-census-8-to-18-full-report-updated.pdf>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/16/technology/instagram-teens.html>

³ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-instagram-is-toxic-for-teen-girls-company-documents-show-11631620739>

media platforms to keep changing. But we should not depend on random disclosures of internal corporate studies to protect the mental, physical and emotional health of our children. The public needs access to the kind of independent and objective research that CAMRA would authorize. There is no better organization to serve as a trusted steward for this robust empirical research program than the National Institutes of Health

Despite the potential health risks and harms posed by certain technology and social media platforms, researchers working in this field have emphasized the importance of approaching this topic with an open mind and without any preconceived notions about the consequences of children's technology use. There are undoubtedly many beneficial and educational aspects to children's use of technology. Many teens find community and support on social media. Teens and young users have turned proactively to digital health resources to get the help they need, with young people experiencing depression more likely to do so, according to a report from Common Sense Media published earlier this year.⁴ We need a thorough and comprehensive study, objective in its design, execution and analysis.

Finally, as Congress considers proposals to regulate technology in our various committees, the research authorized in CAMRA will equip us with the robust independent data we need in order to craft sound public health and technology policies. As we develop a more nuanced understanding of how technology use affects children, this deeper understanding will allow us to design better guardrails and more informed regulations around technology platforms.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify about the CAMRA Act. I know your committee will continue to be a leading force in the effort to promote policies that help families navigate an increasingly digital world, and I look forward to working with you in support of research on this critically important topic.

⁴ <https://www.common Sense Media.org/sites/default/files/uploads/research/2021-coping-with-covid19-full-report.pdf>