

Responses from Nusheen Ameenuddin, MD, MPH, MPA, FAAP
US Congress Subcommittee on Consumer Protection and Commerce Hearing on March 11, 2021
“Kids Online During COVID: Child Safety in an Increasingly Digital Age”
Respectfully submitted April 8, 2021

The Honorable Lisa Blunt Rochester (D-DE)

1. The technology platforms our kids use undermine a child or teen’s ability to moderate their use of digital media. And the prominence of digital media is not going away, even when we return to normal learning environments – about 3 in 4 teachers and parents are likely to support continue online learning at home or in the classroom. But your testimony suggests it’s imperative that we foster moderation with digital media.

a. Can you discuss why this is so important and what the practical effects are of a digital environment that fosters compulsion and overuse instead of moderation?

Thank you for these thoughtful questions, Rep. Blunt Rochester. You are correct in stating that the prominence of digital media is not going away. It was an issue before the pandemic and was further exacerbated during the pandemic. Pediatricians know that time spent on recreational media is part of the lives of children and teens, but if not applied in moderation, can displace other activities that are critical to mental, physical, social and emotional health and development for children. With children spending an average of over 7 hours a day on entertainment media, it is very important that this mostly sedentary activity does not displace time spent playing outside, being physically active, learning and completing homework, relaxing or sleeping. Moderation is key so that children do not miss out on these important activities that are vital for healthy development.

Unfortunately, the practical effect of a digital environment that fosters compulsion means that this is an uphill battle for children and their parents with the deck stacked against them due to manipulative design of products that encourage unending media use. Even with the best intentions and parental engagement, it is extraordinarily difficult for children and teenagers, particularly younger children who are not sophisticated enough to recognize persuasive advertising, to resist built-in features of technology that keep them interested and online indefinitely. As a result, children lose sleep and they lose out on opportunities to grow and develop skills offline, while also being constantly tempted to spend more money to continue the game.

b. You distinguished the compulsive behaviors associated with unmoderated digital use from a medical disorder such as substance use disorder. Can you describe some recommendations Congress should consider when developing legislation to address compulsive behaviors that accounts for the distinction with medical disorders you made in your testimony?

The most important thing to remember when considering compulsive behaviors associated with unmoderated digital use is that the products youth are using are specifically designed to feed compulsive behaviors through persuasive and manipulative design that keeps them engaged well after they have completed what they originally logged on to do. For example, if the child wants to watch a 30 minute episode, the auto play feature will automatically load the next episode even after the first one is completed. There will also be suggestions that pop up at the end of a show or game that encourage further time spent on the platform. More time spent on the platform generates more income for the tech company through advertisements and in-app purchases. The data that is collected without the knowledge or permission of the child and family is used to create recommendations that are specifically designed to maintain their interest and engagement with the product they are using. With this

understanding, we recommend that Congress strengthen regulations for technology companies to prevent them from collecting information on children, ban data-driven behavioral advertising to young people under 18, make privacy settings default at the highest level, and address auto-play and other design features that encourage overuse.

The Honorable Robert Latta (R-OH)

1. Dr. Ameenuddin: How can we transfer the power back to parents, and by extension, students to make media consumption decisions that benefit their mental health and cognitive development?

Thank you, Rep. Latta. Right now, the entire onus of media decisions rests on parents and children who are facing an unequal battle between moderation and technology that is designed to keep people engaged for as long as possible. This situation has been unsustainable with the amount of time children spend using devices to access media. Even prior to the pandemic, this presented a challenge for families trying to moderate media consumption and make healthy media decisions. We believe that due to manipulative design and platforms that require youth to opt out of design features intended to increase media use, more responsibility needs to be shifted towards platform developers in order to give parents and children the help that they need to have more control over the type and amount of media used. While the AAP offers free tools including the Family Media Use Plan to aid families in this shared goal, it is simply not enough to overcome multiple persuasive and manipulative features built in to media platforms, which is why we are asking Congress to help protect children through legislation that ends these harmful practices and holds tech companies accountable for the products they create.