

United States Senate  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 4, 2021

Mark Zuckerberg  
Chief Executive Officer  
Facebook  
1 Hacker Way  
Menlo Park, California 94025

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg,

We write with concern about the growing body of evidence that social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, can have a harmful impact on the mental health of children and teenagers. As the Chair and Ranking Member of the Senate Commerce Committee's Subcommittee on Consumer Protection, we write to request information about Facebook's internal research into the effects of social media platforms on kids' well-being in advance of a September hearing on this matter.

During a recent subcommittee hearing on *Protecting Kids Online*, we heard alarming warnings from witnesses about the addictive nature of social media and platforms' failure to police against harmful content targeting children, including concerns about Facebook's plans to launch an Instagram Kids product for underage users.<sup>1</sup>

An expanding volume of scientific research shows that social media platforms can have a profoundly harmful impact on young audiences.<sup>2</sup> As one of the largest platforms for young audiences, Facebook has a profound obligation to ensure its products do not contribute to this crisis. The Instagram Kids announcement appears to be the most recent step in a strategy to attract children to Facebook, starting with its Messenger Kids chat app.<sup>3</sup> We have grave concerns about this apparent effort to ensnare children into social media platforms at earlier and earlier ages.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, *Protecting Kids Online: Internet Privacy and Manipulative Marketing*, 117th Cong., 1st sess., 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Studies conclude that "excessive screen media use and social media use is linked to many risks for children and adolescents, including obesity, decreased happiness and psychological health, poor quality of sleep, increased risk of depression, and increases in suicide-related outcomes such as suicidal ideation, plans, and attempts." Fairplay, et al., to Mark Zuckerberg, April 15, 2021, [https://fairplayforkids.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/instagram\\_letter.pdf](https://fairplayforkids.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/instagram_letter.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Needleman, "Flaw in Facebook's Messenger Kids Exposed Children to Unauthorized Chats," *Wall Street Journal* (New York, NY), July 23, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/flaw-in-facebooks-messenger-kids-exposed-children-to-unauthorized-chats-11563894874>.

Regrettably, your company’s recent record suggests that it has not always put kids’ well-being first.<sup>4</sup> According to a May 2021 study by the anti-trafficking organization Thorn, Instagram is one of the platforms most prone to risks for minors, with over a quarter of respondents reporting potentially harmful experiences, such as sexual enticement, bullying, and other dangers.<sup>5</sup> Facebook’s own actions often contributed to this concern, including reports of Facebook executives pitching to advertisers their ability to single out teens that feel ‘insecure’ and ‘worthless’ and offering advertising tools that target adult themes to teens.<sup>6</sup> We are especially troubled that Instagram’s business model, which relies on likes and comments on personal photos, poses a heightened risk to the well-being of vulnerable and impressionable young users.

We expect to hold a hearing on Instagram Kids and kids on Facebook’s platforms to better educate parents on the risks from social media platforms and to develop legislative solutions to better protect children. As we understand, Facebook has information that could assist us ahead of these hearings. For example, during a House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee hearing on March 25, 2021, in response to a question about whether Facebook had “conducted any internal research as to the effect your products are having on the mental health of our children,” you stated that you “know that this is something that we try to study and understand” and that you believed that Facebook had conducted such research.<sup>7</sup>

To better understand how Facebook is addressing these risks, particularly in light of its plans to launch Instagram Kids and its significant number of underage users, we believe it is appropriate that Facebook provide information about its internal research into the mental health and well-being concerns associated with social media platforms, as well as how it has used this research in its development of products. Given our Subcommittee’s intentions to move forward with additional oversight hearings on this matter, we respectfully request answers to the following questions by August 16th:

1. Has Facebook conducted research on the effect of its platforms and products on children’s and teens’ mental health and well-being, as you told a House Subcommittee

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<sup>4</sup> According to a May 2021 study by the anti-exploitation and anti-trafficking organization Thorn, 65% of children between the ages of 9-12 have used Instagram, with another 55% having used WhatsApp and 66% on Facebook. *Responding to Online Threats: Minors’ Perspectives on Disclosing, Reporting, and Blocking: Findings from 2020 quantitative research among 9017 year olds* (Thorn, May 2021), [https://info.thorn.org/hubfs/Research/Responding%20to%20Online%20Threats\\_2021-Full-Report.pdf](https://info.thorn.org/hubfs/Research/Responding%20to%20Online%20Threats_2021-Full-Report.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> See also, *The Annual Bullying Survey 2017*, (Ditch the Label, Jul7 2017), <https://www.ditchthelabel.org/research-papers/the-annual-bullying-survey-2017/>.

<sup>6</sup> Sam Levin, “Facebook told advertisers it can identify teens feeling ‘insecure’ and ‘worthless,’” *Guardian* (London, England, United Kingdom), May 1, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/01/facebook-advertising-data-insecure-teens>; Ryan Mac, Charlie Warzel, and Alex Kantrowitz, “Growth At Any Cost: Top Facebook Executive Defended Data Collection In 2016 Memo — And Warned That Facebook Could Get People Killed,” *Buzzfeed News*, Mar 2019, 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryanmac/growth-at-any-cost-top-facebook-executive-defended-data>; Josh Taylor, “Facebook allows advertisers to target children interested in smoking, alcohol and weight loss,” *Guardian* (London, England, United Kingdom), April 27, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/apr/28/facebook-allows-advertisers-to-target-children-interested-in-smoking-alcohol-and-weight-loss>.

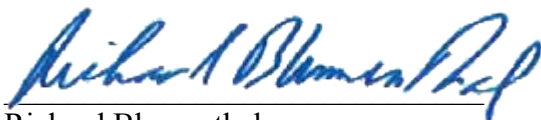
<sup>7</sup> U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Energy and Commerce, *Disinformation Nation: Social Media’s Role in Promoting Extremism and Misinformation*, 117th Cong., 1st sess., 2021.

this March? Please describe the nature of this research.

2. Has Facebook's research ever found that its platforms and products can have a negative effect on children's and teens' mental health or well-being, such as increased suicidal thoughts, heightened anxiety, unhealthy usage patterns, negative self-image, or other indications of lower well-being?
3. Has Facebook ever developed or maintained a platform or product features (such as user interface designs, ad targeting options, social engagement options, or content selection algorithms) that it had reason to believe could have a negative effect on children's and teens' mental health or well-being?
4. Has Facebook ever found that child or teenage users engage in usage patterns that would indicate addictive or unhealthy usage of its platforms or products?
5. Has Facebook ever taken steps to further increase the time that children and teenagers spend on its platforms, knowing that such steps could have harmful effects on young audiences?
6. Will Facebook commit to release the results of its internal research on the effect its platforms and products have on children and teen's mental health and well-being?

In addition to the answers to the above questions, we expect that you will make a senior executive available for a hearing on this topic in September. Thank you for your attention to these important issues. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



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Richard Blumenthal  
United States Senate



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Marsha Blackburn  
United States Senate