

Ranking Member Cantwell Opening Statement
“Plugged Out: Examining The Impact of Technology On America’s Youth”
Thursday, January 15, 2026

[VIDEO]

Thank you Mr. Chairman, for calling this hearing today, and thank you to our witnesses for testifying. Children’s safety online is not a partisan issue. Every parent, teacher, lawmaker wants the same thing. We want kids who are safe, healthy and able to thrive.

The real problem is that social media apps are deliberately engineered to hook kids—to keep them clicking, scrolling, and coming back—and they are doing that exactly by design. The University of Washington released a study last week, finding that teenagers spend, on average, more than an hour per day on their smartphones during school hours. And one in four students spends a quarter of their school day on their personal phones. Most of the time was spent on Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, YouTube and video games.

Social media platforms have built their business models around capturing attention and they have become extraordinarily good at it. These companies collect vast amounts of data on children; use algorithmic targeting to feed them content designed to keep them scrolling—because for these platforms, engagement equals revenue.

Dr. Radesky, you say, “Most digital products used by youth were designed by adults for adults only, retrofitted for youth usage and harms were recognized.” And the harms are impossible to ignore. Research at Rutgers University found 20 studies demonstrated a significant relationship between social media use and body image concerns. An Australian research team recently found that TikTok’s algorithm delivers video after video about dieting and exercise to people suffering from eating disorders, and two-thirds of kids are exposed to hate-based content online.

Dr. Radesky, you found that roughly 40% of teens had concerning trajectories for media addiction, which doubles their risk for suicid[al] behavior. We look forward to hearing more in your testimony. Study after study shows that heavy social media use is associated with higher rates of anxiety, depression and feelings of social isolation among youth and people—and one of the reasons why I sought action by Congress to do something about TikTok.

Parents see this clearly—80 percent say social media causes more harm than benefit to their children.

Congress is obligated to act. But rather [than] focusing on threatening E-Rate connectivity for schools, I think we should be passing meaningful protections for kids’ online privacy—regardless of whether they’re accessing the internet from home or school. This includes Senator Markey’s COPPA...2.0 and Senator Blackburn’s KOSA bill[s] which update children’s privacy protections and limit exploitative design and data practices. I thank them both for their leadership.

Ultimately, protecting children also requires, I believe, comprehensive federal privacy legislation that fully safeguards children in the system and allows everyone's data to be protected. The American Privacy Rights Act that I released with former Energy and Commerce Chair Cathy McMorris Rodgers, would establish that [national] standard.

But in the absence of federal legislation, states and [local] governments have stepped up. School districts across the country have introduced smartphone policies. In the State of Washington, 75 percent of school districts have policies limiting access to personal smart devices during the school day. Seventy-five percent.

These state efforts are becoming even more critical—and I know we're going to hear from our witnesses on this—as AI accelerates. It amplifies and makes the existing privacy and social media concerns even more imperative.

Last week, we saw X's Grok chatbot generating nearly ten thousand deep-faked sexualized images an hour, including non-consensual images of minors. It is unconscionable and unlawful that these images are proliferating. The FTC, I believe, should enforce the law, the Take It Down Act, that my colleague and Senator Klobuchar led on. And Grok needs to clean up its act.

Dr. Radesky, you also highlight how children are showing troubling beliefs around AI chatbots, including that kids think these products can think and have feelings and be their friends. That is why I joined Senator Klobuchar in a letter to the Consumer Product Safety Commission regarding the safety of integration of AI into children's toys.

We need meaningful safeguards on AI to address the harms they cause. That is why we cannot tell states to stand down from protecting their kids, especially when we need Congress to put standards in place. Over the last decade, Congress has failed to act on social media becoming more pervasive to harm kids. We cannot make the same mistake now that AI is becoming more pervasive.

We need to address online and AI harms before it's too late, particularly for kids. And our goal cannot be to keep kids away from technology. Students need digital skills for the 21st Century, for the economy, for their communication with parents, for schools to play a critical role in teaching. We need technologies and policies designed with children in mind. And we know...that these designs can't be about just maximizing profits.

I know there's a lot of agreement here among members. I hope we can work together. I hope we can move forward on important legislation. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ranking Member Cantwell Q&A

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[\[VIDEO\]](#)

Sen. Cantwell: Well, continuing on just general questions. I think Dr. Twenge, your research, you know, pointing to 2012 and the change in policy. Do you all believe that Congress should act and do something on AI, because the acceleration of those trends are just going to quadruple [the] problems? Do we need to take action to do something on AI specific[ally]?

Dr. Jean Twenge: I think so. We don't, of course, have as much research on AI because it is so new. But as a parent and as a researcher, I'm even more concerned about the AI companion apps than I am about social media. It is terrifying to think that our kids are having their first relationships with these ... psychopathic chatbots. How is that going to translate to real human relationships?

Dr. Jared Horvath: Yeah, and I totally agree. The data that has come in over the last three years, K through 12 specifically, take adults out of the equation. ChatGPT is not good for learning. All I care about is the learning stuff -- and cognition goes down whenever we touch it. So maybe a good tool for adults, but not for kids.

Emily Cherkin: I believe absolutely. And AI is making all of the existing problems of EdTech worse. I don't believe it belongs in the hands of children without...no, it doesn't belong in the hands of children at all.

Dr. Jenny Radesky: Yes, we need regulations. My biggest concern is attachment and relationships. Kids are wired to want to attach to other humans. It's how they learn their sense of self, what a healthy relationship feels like. And the AI companions are exploiting this.

Sen. Cantwell: Well, I want to bring attention, because this Committee did have a hearing several years ago about how Facebook was specifically using information for agitation purposes. And a whistleblower came to say that they knew they were doing it and continued to pursue the algorithms, even though they had been informed that they were it. And so I think...Ms. Cherkin, you in your testimony say, being fed, quote, "algorithmic driven rage bait content designed to increase engagement, they lose the ability to form their own opinions, [detect] bias and think critically." So that is what these agents are doing, and many other things. But it is the engagement [that] is being driven by this anger, and literally, kids are being attacked by agents, by chatbots, the Grok situation. It is like they are purposely being used against children. So, Dr. Radesky, you said Michigan was working on a few solutions. I brought up all these bills that we need to pass here -- the Blackburn bill, the Markey bill, doing something about AI and privacy. What else is Michigan doing that's further helping and reining in the bad practices?

Dr. Radesky: Yeah, Michigan just introduced a companion chatbot bill that is restricting the use of companion chatbots that have the potential to encourage self-harm, suicidality, violence, drugs, alcohol or eating disorders. They're restricting AI chatbots from providing mental health

therapy, suggesting illegal activities, producing CSAM, engaging in erotic or sexual interactions with youth -- which is a big engagement way that chatbots have been trying to get more users. And limits on optimizing for engagement. And I think it's important that states be able to pass AI bills.

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you. And what about this issue related to TikTok, where the chatbots are specifically attacking kids on things like eating disorders, some of the Rutgers information -- how do we get the word out that this is what's happening? You know, we're doing a good job here evangelizing that we need federal legislation on AI. But what else do we need to do to get parents to realize that TikTok itself and the tools used there are attacking kids?

Dr. Radesky: So some social media companies are embedding AI chatbots into their user interfaces, which is one way that kids are discovering them. So we need rules about being able to inactivate them without having to pay to inactivate them. And we need to make sure that families also can opt out of things like an algorithmic feed or having the presence of AI chatbots in products their kids are using.

Sen. Cantwell: Okay, but clearly people don't understand that TikTok itself is being used this way so...

Dr. Radesky: Well, I'm not as familiar with the specific case that you're talking about, but our general approach in helping families is -- number one to talk with kids about what they're seeing. Use news reports as conversation starters. Because when you hear about a case like that, you can say with your kids, are you hearing about this? Are you seeing this in your feed? What are you doing about it? What do you think tech companies should do better? That's a much better way to kind of open the conversation and hear kids' solutions and then motivate them to perhaps take a break from that, you know, from TikTok, or whatever platform is, which they think is using...

Sen. Cantwell: I think we need to be very loud and clear that the federal government needs to do something on AI. That you here are telling us the problem with social media, but you're basically saying AI is way worse. So it's time to step up. Thank you.