



Commonwealth of Virginia
Office of the Governor

Executive Order

NUMBER FORTY-THREE (2024)

**EMPOWERING AND SUPPORTING PARENTS TO PROTECT
THEIR CHILDREN FROM ADDICTIVE SOCIAL MEDIA &
ESTABLISHMENT OF THE RECLAIMING CHILDHOOD TASK FORCE**

By virtue of the authority vested in me as Governor of the Commonwealth, I hereby issue this Executive Order directing the Secretary of Health and Human Resources, Secretary of Education, Secretary of Public Safety and Homeland Security, Superintendent of Public Instruction, and the State Health Commissioner to coordinate with the Department of Behavioral Health & Developmental Services, Virginia Department of Health, and other relevant agencies to disseminate information to parents, medical professionals, and educators regarding the effects of cell phone usage on academic and mental health development and chronic health conditions—such as depression and anxiety—that affect adolescents and other school-aged children; as well as tools to promote healthy social media and phone usage for youth.

In addition, I am establishing the Reclaiming Childhood Task Force to sustain ongoing collaboration of these efforts to improve youth mental health outcomes by combatting the dangers of addictive social media and creating opportunities for cultural change.

Importance of the Initiative

The data are clear: there is a youth mental health crisis in America. In 2023, 40 percent of high school students reported experiencing persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness.¹ Among adolescents aged 12 to 17, nearly 20 percent had a major depressive episode in the past year. Twelve percent of adolescents have experienced suicidal ideations in the past year.² Suicide is the second leading cause of death for 10 to 14-year-olds.³ Over 30 percent of adolescents have experienced an anxiety disorder at some point in their lives.⁴ Fifty-seven percent of teen girls have persistent feelings of loneliness or hopelessness.⁵ Additionally, emergency room visits for adolescent girls with eating disorders have doubled.⁶

Experts draw a connection between decline in youth mental health and the rise of cell phones and social media use. Jonathan Haidt, a leading researcher in social psychology at New York

University, formerly at the University of Virginia, has extensively studied the impact of technology on adolescence, and argues in his 2024 book *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, that the widespread adoption of smartphones and social media since the early 2010s has significantly contributed to increased rates of anxiety, depression, and self-harm among adolescents. Looking at the staggered introduction of Facebook across U.S. college campuses, a study in the *American Economic Review* showed a negative impact on student mental health and an increased likelihood that students reported experiencing impairments to academic performance due to poor mental health.⁷ Ninety percent of studies showed an association between screen media use and loss of sleep, impacting cognitive function, obesity rates, and academic performance.⁸

Social media use among youth is essentially ubiquitous. According to a 2022 study by the Pew Research Center, 95 percent of U.S. teens age 13 to 17 report using social media⁹ and 98 percent of children have at least one social media account by the age of 18.¹⁰ Studies by Gallup show that the average teen spends 33 hours a week on social media apps like Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok. Forty-one percent of the highest frequency social media users report having poor or very poor mental health, but that number jumps to nearly 60 percent for teens with low monitoring/weak relationships with their parents.¹¹

Concerns are not strictly limited to mental health outcomes. Kids are dying from fentanyl overdoses, often buying the deadly drugs on Snapchat due to its disappearing communications features.¹² Forty-seven percent of teen girls have been approached online by someone they did not know, 40 percent of kids in grades 4-8 chatted with a stranger online,¹³ and 69 percent of tweens and 91 percent of teens have encountered sexual content online. Fifty-nine percent of U.S. teens have experienced some form of bullying online.¹⁴

As concerns over the impact of social media on the overall wellbeing of children and teens continues to grow, it is paramount that the Commonwealth provide resources and guidance to support families to combat social media companies who cause addictive behavior.

What is also clear is that many social media technology companies benefit from their monetization of data collected by social media youth. In 2019, Google and YouTube were fined \$170 million for allegedly collecting personal information from children without their parents' consent in violation of the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) Rule.¹⁵ Thirty-four attorneys general have sued Meta, the parent company of Instagram and Facebook, for collecting kids' personal information without parental consent in violation of federal law.¹⁶ The U.S. Department of Justice has recently sued TikTok for collecting personal information from children under 13 without their parents' knowledge.¹⁷ While these legal actions are encouraging, and there are opportunities at the state and federal level to enhance protections for youth and tools for parents to combat the harmful effects of social media and cell phone use on youth, the crisis is immediate.

Code of Virginia § 1-240.1 affirms that parents have "a fundamental right to make decisions concerning the upbringing, education, and care of" their children. Government action alone will not solve the youth mental health crisis, but the government can and must support parents, empowering them and arming them with the information they need to drive healthy choices for their children.

From public schools to public health, every aspect of government that plays a role in the life of a child must support parents, including on this issue. While we acknowledge that technology is an

integral part of society and has many positive impacts, including on children, parents deserve information and support in mitigating negative impacts on their children.

This Executive Order activates every health and child welfare agency of the Commonwealth in a coordinated awareness campaign to make sure every Virginia parent has knowledge they need to protect their kids from unrestricted cell phone use and addictive social media, to reclaim childhood, and ensure that our future workforce, future military and future parents themselves have the best shot at living out their true purpose and potential.

This Executive Order also creates the *Reclaiming Childhood Task Force* to continue this collaboration among not only among government agencies that impact the lives of children, but to partner with family, community, faith, non-profit, and private sector companies as well to foster outside cultural change, empowering parents to lead government agencies towards additional actions to help them combat the mainstream culture and ensure our children play and learn in healthy ways as social media companies continue to methodically create addictive products and games that treat future leaders as commodities to be monetized and not children to be nurtured.

Directive

Accordingly, pursuant to the authority vested in me as the Chief Executive Officer of the Commonwealth, and pursuant to Article V of the Constitution and the laws of the Commonwealth, I hereby order the Secretary of Education, the Secretary of Health and Human Resources, the Secretary of Public Safety and Homeland Security, the Superintendent of Public Instruction, and the State Health Commissioner, and the Commissioner of the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, collaborating with all relevant agencies, including the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS), Virginia Department of Health (VDH), Department of Education (VDOE), Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS), Department of Medical Assistance Services (DMAS), Office of Children's Services (OCS), the Department of Health Professions (DHP), and Virginia Information Technology Agency (VITA), to:

1. Send a coordinated dear colleague letter to pediatricians, family practitioners, primary care providers, and mental health providers, to promote screening for unhealthy internet and social media use in youth and provide resources to address this issue.
2. Develop a plan for providing regional technical assistance to Community Services Boards (CSBs) through DBHDS that includes specialized training for providers to support treatment of behavioral health concerns linked to social media use and other types of problematic internet use.
3. Create and disseminate a *Social Media and Mental Health Toolkit* to: (a) provide training materials, educational resources, and practical solutions to help children and teens navigate the digital world; and (b) offer educational and technical support for clinicians, parents, and youth to promote healthy social media use. DBHDS shall collaborate with the Virginia Foundation for Healthy Youth in the development of materials related to the impact of social media and screen use on substance use and obesity in youth. VDSS, in collaboration with OCS, shall provide social media safety education to foster youth, foster families, case workers, and Family Assessment

Planning Team (FAPT) members.

4. Launch a public health initiative and strategy related to the impact of social media and screen use in youth, with VDH and DBHDS as the lead, and with a strong emphasis on prevention strategies including a focus on nutrition, exercise, and other non-screen related activities that support wellness.
5. Conduct sessions across the Commonwealth with parents, educators, child welfare and child mental health experts to gather best practices on managing social media and screen use among youth and inform the ongoing development of resources and programs to promote healthy digital habits, reducing mental and physical health risks, ensuring online safety, and reinforcing non-screen-based activities and actions that contribute to mental well-being and resilience.

Further, I direct the secretaries and agency heads to establish the *Reclaiming Childhood Task Force*. The Task Force shall utilize existing resources that support families in reducing screen time and promoting digital health literacy.

The Task Force will be convened by the Secretary of Health and Human Resources, and will include parents and kids from around Virginia, as well as pediatricians, mental health experts, educators, faith leaders, community leaders, private sector technology experts, and public safety leaders to:

1. Raise awareness about the potentially harmful effects of social media on children's physical and mental health;
2. Recognize that government cannot solve this problem alone and therefore must collaborate and create opportunities and avenues for private sector cultural change to ensure healthy child development;
3. Convene experts and thought leaders to highlight best practices and approaches to improving children's mental health outcomes; and
4. Make recommendations to the Governor and General Assembly on additional government solutions.

The *Reclaiming Childhood Task Force* will also incorporate feedback from the 21 stakeholder meetings and community conversations already held in the Commonwealth after Executive Order 33, requiring Cell Phone-Free Education, and complement the Secretary of Education and Department of Education's efforts to improve health outcomes of school-aged children. The Task Force will also coordinate with the Secretary of Public Safety and Homeland Security to incorporate public safety measures to protect children from dangers like fentanyl, human trafficking, and sexual predators.



A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Glenn Youngkin".

Glenn Youngkin, Governor

Attest:

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Kelly Gee".

Kelly Gee, Secretary of the Commonwealth