

Testimony of Dr. Anju Priyadarshini Muninarayana
MPH student at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Dear Honorable Members of the Maryland Legislature,

I am writing to support the Maryland Age-Appropriate Design Code Bill strongly. I am a physician with a decade of experience working in India and the US. I am now a student doing my master's in public health (MPH) at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. But most importantly, I am a mother of an 8-year-old daughter starting to explore the digital world.

As a concerned parent, I want to ensure that my daughter is safe online, and this bill will help me achieve that goal. With her iPad and a desire for privacy, I worry about the potential risks of strangers contacting her online. This bill will help protect her online identity and prevent strangers from getting her. Knowing that she is protected from potential online predators and that her online experiences are age-appropriate will give me peace of mind.

Childhood underwent a significant transformation when smartphones became affordable enough for parents to give their kids this sophisticated gadget. This technology provides children unrestricted access to a world that has become increasingly stuck in their pockets, hands, and attention. Moreover, it offered adults and business entities available and unregulated access to youngsters, which access has since been mercilessly abused.

Parents are overwhelmingly in favor of baseline protections because we are tired of industry norms that encourage addictive design practices or amplify and propose harmful content to the kids. I am also horrified by the idea that an outsider or predator can track my kid's real-time location. I cannot let commercial interests expose my 8-year-old daughter to direct conversations with adults or target my teenage neighbor on Friday nights with advertisements for improper medications.

The fact that this is an issue that neither parents, teachers, nor kids can resolve alone is overwhelming. A system created to demand a child's attention, expose them to an endless audience, and encourage them to lose themselves online is unhealthy. The digital industry can raise the bar and restore children to kids. It is up to the policymakers to insist on the minimum acceptable standard of conduct.

I am thrilled to mention that we have the support of the Maryland Public Health Association for this Bill. As a parent and a medical community member, I believe this bill will help keep our children safe and protect their privacy online.

I will forward to your questions.

