



Physicians Caring for Texans

House Select Committee on Youth Health and Safety
Testimony by Brian Dixon, MD, Texas Medical Association
House Bill 18 by Rep. Shelby Slawson
March 20, 2023

Chair Thompson, Vice Chair Hull, and Esteemed Committee Members:

My name is Dr. Brian Dixon, and I'm a child and adolescent psychiatrist in Fort Worth, testifying on behalf of the Texas Medical Association's more than 57,000 physician and medical student members. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today *in support* of House Bill 18, and thank you to Representative Slawson for authoring this legislation to help protect our vulnerable Texas children against potentially harmful digital services.

It is undeniable that digital services such as social media continue to have a mounting effect on communication, interpersonal relations, development, and health. Today, kids grow up immersed in media, which has the potential to both enrich and endanger healthy development. High levels of social media use come with risks to physical and mental health. While young people might use social media to connect with others, it also can detract from quality in-person social interactions and other important childhood activities such as reading, exercise, hobbies, or even sleep.

Social media also has contributed to cyberbullying, which has had alarming negative impacts on youth mental health. With cyberbullying, messages, photos, or videos can spread virally throughout the internet, be seen by everyone at school, and result in lasting, embarrassing, negative effects. Adolescents who are cyberbullied are more likely to have lower grades, academic problems, and a higher risk of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts.¹ Beyond the number of hours spent on social media, *how* a child uses social media can also affect his or her mental health. Research has shown that adolescents who use digital services to follow strangers and engage in social comparisons tend to experience more depression symptoms compared to their peers who only followed friends.²

We can help buffer youth from these negative mental health impacts with support from friends, family, or teachers; however, given young people's attraction to digital services such as social media, it can feel like a losing battle. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends parents consistently limit the time their children age 6 and older spend using media, and limit and the types of media kids use.

HB 18 can help Texas children towards living better, healthier, happier lives. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today in support of this bill, and I would be happy to answer any questions.

¹ <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/138/5/e20162593>

² <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/138/5/e20162593>