

1-31-26

Dear Senators:

I am Jody Scheer, a retired pediatrician, mother, grandmother and a co-founder of OregonUnplugged, a nonprofit formed to help Oregonians work to protect our State's children from the harms of digital media. I strongly support SB 1546, which places some basic safety measures in place on AI products to protect children and all users.

I speak also from experience with my now 9-year-old grandson. He has always been a delightful, gregarious and social child, who 18 months ago, became addicted to a digital online game. He would come to our home with his school issued Chromebook and want to spend the entire evening playing this game. When the computer was taken away, he would get angry, sit with a blank stare on the couch and refuse to play, talk, eat, go outside, or engage in any type of suggested activity. He would awaken at 2am, sneak his computer into bed, and play until the battery was depleted. These behaviors are clear signs of addiction and withdrawal. No surprise, as digital games are created by technology companies with the help of psychologists and neuroscientists to use persuasive design, which ties into the brain's dopamine reward system and creates addiction. Technology companies do this, despite their own research showing risks of harm to children's physical, mental and emotional health.

Now, these same technology companies have invented Artificial Intelligence digital companion chatbots for kids, which have humanlike voices, personalities and conversational styles. Like other digital products marketed to children, these companion chatbots have been created and marketed to children with little to no proof that they are either safe, efficacious, or healthy for kids. Chatbots endanger user privacy and are created using persuasive design, which prioritizes engagement (and therefore profits) over user health and safety. AI algorithms frequently deliver sexual, violent and inappropriate messages to children, and have been documented to facilitate suicide with how-to guides, devastating families. Kids with mental health crises have not been appropriately counseled by chatbots to speak to their parents or to seek medical help. Kids are vulnerable to developing unhealthy attachments to chatbots, as they have difficulty differentiating these digital companions from real humans.

In sum, technology companies have created AI programs that are dangerous for vulnerable users, especially children. Marketing these unsafe products to children is unconscionable. Our State needs to place safety guideposts now on AI products, in order to save lives and protect children from harm and exploitation. Thank you.

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