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Chair: Lisa Hepfner

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● (1105)

[*English*]

The Chair (Lisa Hepfner (Hamilton Mountain, Lib.)): We'll call this meeting to order.

Before we begin with our witnesses, I want to advise members that we have a couple of budgets to approve for the meetings coming up, including the meeting with the minister. The amount requested is $500.

Is everyone in favour of approving this budget for food the day we have the minister coming to speak on supplementary estimates?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: We have another budget for the study on the effects of influencers and social media content on children and adolescents: $2,500 for food during those meetings.

Does everyone agree to pass that budget?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Moving on, the final thing I want to mention to members is that we've been invited, I think by the Embassy of Israel, to meet with some anti-Semitism experts this afternoon. You've all been invited. I wanted to verify that you all have that invitation. They're meeting with us and members of the justice committee this afternoon.

With us today for our final meeting on the effects of influencers and social media content on children and adolescents, we have six witnesses. Thank you all for being with us today.

We have Carol Todd, the mother of Amanda Todd and founder of the Amanda Todd Legacy Society, with us by video conference. We have Maude Bonenfant, full professor and Canada research chair in gaming, technologies and society, from UQAM. From Capsana, Guy Desrosiers is here with us in person. From Children First Canada, Sara Austin, Zachary Fathally and Josephine Maharaj are here by video conference. From Luna Child and Youth Advocacy Centre, we have Karen Orser by video conference, and from the Shalem Mental Health Network, which I know very well, in Hamilton, Ontario, we have Aimee Berends.

Welcome.

To start, everybody has five minutes. As an organization, if there are three of you, you get five minutes in total.

We'll start with Carol Todd.

You now have the floor for five minutes for opening remarks.

Carol Todd (Founder and Mother, Amanda Todd Legacy Society): It is an honour to speak here. Thank you, Chair and members of the committee, for inviting me to speak today.

My name is Carol Todd. I am here as a mother, an educator and an advocate and as someone whose life was permanently changed by the devastating impacts of online harm on a young person. Amanda's name has become known worldwide in the fight against cyber-bullying, sextortion, exploitation and mental health, all of these being online harms and what we are here to talk about today.

When I talk about online harms, it isn't theoretical for me. It comes from a deep and personal space and lived experience. I am a mother who buried her child because of what began on a screen. My daughter Amanda was bright, creative and full of possibility, yet her life was stolen by the cruelty of online exploitation, relentless bullying and a digital world that was never built with safety in mind. Her story is not just a headline or a cautionary tale. It is a reminder that behind every statistic is a child who needed protection, a family who expected safety and a world that still needs to do better.

I'm going to go a bit off my written words because I have way too many words. I have sat through all four of the other committee meetings, and one of my fears is that I may not get a chance to say what I need to say off-script. I have submitted my words, and I will resubmit them. They're available for reading. Please read them, because they have lots of detail, empathy and emotion in them.

What I want to say off-script is this. My daughter died in 2012, in October. As a mom and as an educator in British Columbia, I have spent my time ensuring that I understand what is going on in the world in the digital space, and my role as an advocate, a mother and an educator is to ensure the safety of others. The safety of others includes children, youth, adults, caregivers, seniors—basically anyone in the world, no matter what gender, what race and what identity they have.

This is important to me as a Canadian citizen and as an individual, because online harms have been going on for way too long. This started for Amanda back in 2009. We are in 2026 now. Those harms have escalated. Those harms haven't gone away. When I stand in front of this government or a government in the United States or a government in Australia, this is what I say: What are we doing to help the kids and the citizens in our country?

We worked hard. I was in a Canadian heritage meeting back in 2021 or 2022 in British Columbia, and in the Canadian heritage group we were talking about online safety and online harms. That was four years ago. Another bill was brought up and tabled last year or the year before, and it also died in Parliament for whatever reasons.

An online safety bill—we would like an online safety act tabled—and the online harms act are of the utmost importance to all of us. I am in touch with many parents who have lost children or are parent survivors of kids who have dealt with trauma due to online harms. They could not be here today, so I am here for them. I am speaking with them. I am in contact with them. We all, as a parent collective, say out loud that we need better protections for our children, which includes making big tech responsible and includes our government making legislation to ensure that our kids remain safe or become safe in the environment they live in.

No longer are we living in just an environment in an open space. We are living in a digital world. Ninety-eight per cent of children have access to a mobile device and are on Wi-Fi.

● (1110)

As an educator, I go out and talk to parents. I teach my teachers. I also talk to the students in my school district. There are about 40,000 of them. I know what is happening out there in that world and why we need to be a voice.

As I said, I went off-script. I did not read my eight pages. If I don't get a chance to speak again, please read what I have written.

The Chair: Will do, Ms. Todd. I will tell you that I don't think anyone in this country will ever forget what happened to Amanda. That speaks both to her personality, which you mentioned, and to your advocacy all these years. I want to thank you for that.

We'll turn to Maude Bonenfant, who is here in this room.

[*Translation*]

You have the floor for five minutes.

Maude Bonenfant (Full Professor, Canada Research Chair in gaming, technologies and society, UQAM, As an Individual): Madam Chair and honourable members, thank you very much for your invitation.

I've had the opportunity to listen to some of the witnesses who have appeared before you. They delivered eloquent statements on the practices, usage and harms associated with social media, especially as it relates to content. Today, I'd like to draw your attention to something related to my area of expertise, namely the purpose of the economic model, including how it's designed and how it works.

I'd like to highlight four aspects. The first aspect is the importance of understanding economic models because these models pro-vide leverage points for action. As you know, we went from a model where one purchased a product outright to one where a product is provided as a long-term service, and then to one where it's provided for free. Obviously, the free model must make money, and there are three main ways to do that when it comes to social media.

The first is advertising, which represents billions of dollars. Right now, all kinds of strategies are being deployed to blur content, to the point where readers wonders whether they're dealing with advertising, an influencer's material, or sponsorship. There lies the first problem, which is difficult to pin down, especially for young people.

The second aspect is microtransactions. On some platforms, influencers can ask their followers to send them money. This could be young children sending them their pocket money. Platforms will then take a percentage, which can be as much as 50%. On some platforms, such as Roblox, it can be as much as 70%.

There is also the commodification of personal data. As you know, there is a market for personal data, which circulates worldwide. I really want to stress this point on the collection of personal data about young people.

A large-scale harvesting of data is under way. Some of our work has focused on privacy terms and conditions for mobile applications, and currently, they don't comply with Quebec, Canadian or American legislation. There are all kinds of strategies to collect data, including through third-party companies, which are deployed on mobile devices at the same time as social media, and this data is circulated around the world. This comes with a number of risks, including identify theft and other long-term risks. If we start collecting data about our children when they're young, about their habits and how they live, imagine the type of profiling on them that can be done later when they apply for insurance, money for a house, or a job. They could be turned down because they have been profiled from childhood. There's a probability they will be deemed uninsurable, and they will not fully understand why.

Additionally, geolocation data is now being collected. This issue doesn't receive the attention it deserves. Geolocation data is often collected in a completely illegal manner because the geolocation of children is not allowed. However, there are a number of ways in which this is being done. The data is circulating and can end up in the hands of predators. Predators can find out where children live and go to school, and their lifestyle habits, and use this information to approach them on platforms, such as Roblox or other social media. This issue doesn't receive the attention it deserves either.

How is the data used in the data economy? Obviously, it's used to create profiles with the aim of carrying out targeted advertising. Young people are increasingly being singled out and pressured to consume more. There's a reason billions of dollars are being spent on advertising, because advertising works. Children, young people and young adults can be manipulated in their purchasing behaviour.

We're hearing about recommendation algorithms with increasing frequency. These infamous algorithms are becoming more and more sophisticated and specific, with the consequences that you all know. Young people are getting trapped in content pushed to them.

Now, there's a move to generative artificial intelligence where one needn't even create content. The content is generated automatically, which carries risks tied to personalized feeds, a key driver of social media retention. With generative artificial intelligence, we're now seeing extreme levels of personalization, along with all the risks that come with that. The rise of generative artificial intelligence has amplified existing problems, which, in my view, remain insufficiently regulated.

● (1115)

My third point is on the use of persuasive techniques to drive and boost profits on these platforms. What this means is that people use design strategies to influence the behaviour of young people, and it works.

One example of ways to keep people engaged is infinite scroll. The brain is not designed to process an infinite flow of content. It needs breaks, pauses and moments to stop. This infinite scroll plays on this cognitive bias.

Another example is the stimulation of content creation. These platforms don't create content. Users create content, as is the case with Airbnb and Uber, where users generate money for businesses. To nudge users to create content, there's a "like" button, and all it entails in stimulating the brain's reward system, including dopamine release. Platforms also exploit that factor.

Another tactic is to draw people back to the platforms through the infamous notifications, even on platforms aimed at toddlers.

There's also the issue of getting people to spend money using all sorts of strategies, including simplifying transactions to make it possible for people to spend money with two or three clicks.

The final example involves prompting people, including children, to view advertisements. On that note, I want to emphasize that dark patterns remain unregulated. It's now possible to manipulate interfaces to lead young people to take actions they hadn't planned on taking.

My fourth point is on a design aspect that has been magnified to a great degree, namely, gamblification. Betting and gambling are the most addictive activities. These platforms use betting and gambling strategies to keep users hooked for as long as possible. There is an increasingly grey area between gaming and gambling, which means gaming is now drifting into gambling. Skin betting and virtual item exchange are becoming more common, with influencers promoting this practice. Currently, gambling is being promoted among young people. This used to happen on the Twitch platform, but since it was banned, the practice has migrated to Kick, a plat-

form where anything goes. Currently, young people, sometimes very young, are being introduced to gambling on this type of platform.

In conclusion, I'd like to say that social media, gaming and screens have very positive impacts. However, as you know, for our children and adolescents to benefit from these positive effects, we need comprehensive legislation and regulation. If it's safer upstream, young people will feel better downstream. We need to think about safety by design. We need to make these spaces safer from the design stage, and so companies have to be brought in to work with us.

● (1120)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now turn to you for five minutes, Mr. Guy Desrosiers.

Guy Desrosiers (Chief Executive Officer, Capsana): Good day, everyone. Thank you for your invitation to appear today.

First, you have a copy of my brief. I'm going to skip through it. We can rest assured that we're not alone in experiencing this situation. Countries all over the world are now trying to figure out how to recalibrate the place of the digital world in our lives, and this is something that has now become essential. The effects are felt not just by young people, and I'll underscore that throughout my presentation. We're all affected by the positive, and potentially negative, impacts of screens. We need to find solutions, hence the importance of recalibrating the place of screens. Nobody but the industry is to blame. The industry has consciously adopted addictive strategies due to the business model that Ms. Bonenfant has described so eloquently. Ms. Bonenfant and I are in fact working together on some of these areas.

The next three pages of my paper provide data on health impacts. I work with an organization that is attached to the Montreal Heart Institute, and we work in primary and secondary prevention of health problems.

It's also important to know that young people are well aware of the potential harms of screen use, but we're not here to blame them. This is a shared responsibility, as we'll see later. The important thing to note is that according to a very recent study out of Montreal, in the last three years, screen time for leisure purposes has increased across all segments of the population, not only among young people. Here, I want to emphasize that I'm talking about screen time for leisure purposes.

One takeaway is that usage in excess of two hours per day for leisure purposes is related to the onset and increase of health problems. For those who are following the document, this is at the bottom of page 3. Obviously, the recent emergence of artificial intelligence, which Ms. Bonenfant has just spoken to, is only making things worse. I have also described potential harms at the bottom of page 4, and I'll skim through them. There are potential physical, psychological, social and educational harms. We can come back to that later if members wish.

I wish to specifically focus on five major recommendations that I'd like to share with the committee. First, we need to recognize that screens are here to stay. They have become an essential part of our lives. They need to be recognized as a lifestyle habit, in the same manner as sleep, food and physical activity. They will continue to be part of our lifestyle habits. The problem now is that we are all learning how to manage this new lifestyle habit together. Parents have had to learn and children are learning at the same time, which is not the case with sleep habits, for example, where our parents explained clearly when it was time for us to go to bed, that we had to go to bed and get up in the morning. We're all learning how to cope with screens at the same time.

We call on the Government of Canada to close the gap by investing in understanding and analyzing this lifestyle habit over time, because it will evolve. The industry is evolving at a fast pace. For example, our studies on gaming are different from three years ago. The same goes with social media, which has evolved from three years ago.

I also ask that parents be held accountable, but above all, that they be supported. Ms. Todd provided a shining example earlier. I believe parents need to be supported in this aspect of their role. According to a 2022 study, the biggest challenge families are facing today is managing screen time at home.

My third recommendation is, where possible and within each authority's jurisdiction, encourage educational and child care settings to remove personal devices and screens from schools and child care settings, which are learning and socialization environments.

My fourth recommendation seeks to increase awareness of initiatives that are sound but isolated, such as the initiative we developed a few years ago known as PAUSE, which remains largely incomplete due to a lack of funding. The pauseyourscreen.com website is for parents, children, educators and professionals. There are other initiatives as well, of course. Ours is not the only one out there.

● (1125)

I'd also like to ensure we avoid demonizing screens and stigmatizing youth. As I said earlier, we need to measure the overall impact of screens on health, employment, the economy, culture, identity, democracy and politics. Lastly, there's a need for oversight within the industry, which doesn't want to be regulated and is fighting across the world against potential legislation. I think we need to take back control, either through a digital regulatory authority or any other type of regulation, and the industry must be held accountable for its impacts, just like any other product in society.

That's the end of my presentation. Thank you.

The Chair: That was really interesting. Thank you very much, Mr. Desrosiers.

[*English*]

Next we'll go to Children First Canada.

I'm not sure which of you will be speaking, but collectively you have five minutes for opening remarks.

Sara Austin (Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Children First Canada): Good morning, and thank you to the chair and members of the committee.

My name is Sara Austin. I'm speaking to you today as the founder and CEO of Children First Canada, advocating for the rights of eight million children. I'm also the mother of a teenage boy whose 15 years of life has been entirely immersed in the digital age.

I'm joined by two brave and remarkable youth, Zachary and Josephine, and we're here with a very simple message: We do not need more studies and we do not need to debate whether social media is a problem for children. We already know the answer. The evidence is overwhelming and consistent.

Children are sexually exploited, groomed, bullied, extorted and exposed to content that harms their mental health and development at scale every single day. These harms are foreseeable and preventable.

It has been 1,619 days since the government pledged to table the online safety act, and kids are still waiting. That's why we launched the countdown for kids: to make delay visible, measurable and impossible to ignore. While Parliament studies, platforms profit, and while committees debate, kids pay the price. Every day of delay costs children something they cannot get back—a day of their childhood.

We launched the countdown for kids in honour of children like Amanda Todd, Rehtaeh Parsons, Carson Cleland, Daniel Lints, Harry Burke and many more who tragically died due to online harms. Their lives were full of possibility, and their pain was preventable. We say their names because decisions that you make have real consequences.

It seems painfully obvious to parents and children what the solution is, and we need your help. We are fighting against a multi-billion dollar tech industry that opposes the online safety act because their profits depend on engagement at any cost.

Yes, one might reasonably ask what chance parents and kids really have in this David-and-Goliath fight. I live in Alberta, and there's one thing you learn quickly here: You never get between a mama bear and her cubs. The mama bears of Canada are not going down without a fight, and I can promise you that the papa bears are fighting too.

Let me be very clear: There is no silver bullet. No bill will be perfect and no law will stop every harm, but perfection has never been the standard for protecting our children. Seat belts aren't perfect, food safety laws aren't perfect and toy safety standards aren't perfect, yet Parliament has acted when children's lives have been in danger.

We cannot afford partisan gridlock again. If there's one thing that all of you should agree on, it's the protection of our children. This is not about censorship, it is not about moral panic and it is not about blaming parents or children. It is about accountability. Children cannot vote. They do not sit in cabinet. They do not control multibillion dollar algorithms.

Today, I ask you, our Prime Minister and all members of Parliament to treat this as what it is: a crisis that's endangering the lives of Canada's children. Please table the online safety act and pass it quickly. Stop asking children to wait. The time for studies is over. It's time for action.

I now pass the floor to Zachary and then to Josephine.

Zachary Fathally (Member, Youth Advisory Council and Young Canadians' Parliament, Children First Canada): Hello, everyone.

Thank you so much, Sara, for introducing us.

My name is Zachary, and I'm 12 years old. I'm here today not just for me but also as a member of the Young Canadians' Parliament, speaking for kids across Canada.

Adults talk a lot about kids like me, but we don't get asked very often what it actually feels like to grow up online. For my generation, the Internet isn't just screen time. It's where we learn. It's where we play. It's where we connect with our friends and maybe where we live. It's also where kids get bullied, where they see things they were never ready for and where mistakes can follow them forever.

Adults always tell us to be careful online, but how can we be careful when websites are designed to keep us scrolling no matter the cost? That's not a fair fight, and it shouldn't be our job to fix it.

Kids don't need more studies to explain what's bad online. We're living it. It's our home. It's in our phones.

With AI everywhere, the task won't be easy. It's mind-boggling to see how fake content can be created. Imagine that being used against kids.

My message to this committee and to the Prime Minister is simple: Kids have waited long enough. Pass a strong online safety act. Hold companies accountable. Make safety the default, not a setting we have to implement ourselves.

Thank you.

● (1130)

Josephine Maharaj (Member, Youth Advisory Council and Young Canadians' Parliament, Children First Canada): Thank you, Zachary. I'll be quick.

My name is Josephine Maharaj, and I'm 17 years old. I'd just like to thank the chair and members of the committee for this opportunity.

Social media is a system that shapes what we see, how we feel about ourselves and how we think we're supposed to look, act and live. Having come of age in the last decade, I can say that logging off is no longer a viable option for dealing with the risks that come with being online. The Internet is no longer a place that we can leave. It is a cornerstone of our lives. School, work, friendships, news and hobbies are now largely set in the digital landscape.

Current attempts to make the online world safer for children are often remedial or insufficient. They come in the wake of preventable tragedies, and they are often not extensive enough to prevent more kids from being exploited, groomed or hurt.

Thoughtful solutions can only be developed through respectful and consistent collaboration between youth and policy-makers and by holding tech companies accountable for systems designed to take advantage of those who use them.

Thank you for your time.

The Chair: What very well-spoken witnesses we have today. Thank you.

Next we'll turn to Karen Orser from the Luna Child and Youth Advocacy Centre.

You have five minutes.

Karen Orser (Chief Executive Officer, Luna Child and Youth Advocacy Centre): Good morning, Madam Chair and committee members.

My name is Karen Orser. I am the CEO of the Luna Child and Youth Advocacy Centre, located in Calgary, Alberta. The other hat I wear is that of co-chair of Child and Youth Advocacy Centres of Canada.

CYACs provide an integrated response to child abuse. This means that when children experience abuse, those systems, rather than having them navigating complex public systems on their own, come together to wrap around the child and provide coordinated care. The CYAC model was also recently recognized by the federal ombudsperson in the "Rethinking Justice" report as a best practice.

It is because of the investment in the model by the Department of Justice that we have nearly 50 child and youth advocacy centres in Canada. We have also recently formed both a national association, Child and Youth Advocacy Centres of Canada, and Kindex, the national research and knowledge centre for CYACs.

We're in the early stages of developing national data-collection capabilities and will soon have the capacity to provide very thorough national data on the nature and prevalence of child abuse in Canada, though today I'll be providing some more general statistics and some information from our data at Luna.

I will also state that I'm not an expert in social media. However, I'm grateful to speak with you today about how social media and technology show up in relation to child abuse cases seen at CYACs.

Historically, technology-facilitated abuse was seen as something that occurred in isolation, separate from contact-based abuse; however, we are increasingly seeing crossover between online and in-person forms of harm. Because of how CYACs operate, and particularly how referrals and triage occur, the cases we see involving social media and technology also include contact-based abuse.

CYACs are most definitely seeing an increase in files that involve technology and social media. Last year, just over 15% of the children and youth who came to Luna had abuse experiences involving an online or image-based component. This includes luring; the taking of inappropriate images; the recording of offences; the creation, sharing and consuming of CSAM; the showing of child sexual abuse materials; sextortion; and AI-generated CSAM.

The demographics of kids in these files are similar to those in non-Internet-related cases and perhaps slightly older. Caucasian and Black youth are represented at higher rates in image-based abuse files, whereas indigenous youth are represented at higher rates in contact-only cases. Sexual exploitation is particularly concerning, rising from 1% in non-Internet-related cases to 13% in cases where there is an Internet component.

Today, I want to highlight two areas related to technology and child abuse: the harms of access to and the unintentional viewing of harmful content and the increase and nature of technology-involved child abuse.

We know that viewing and accessing harmful content such as child sexual abuse material or adult pornography can impact young people's normative sexual development, their understanding of sex and sexuality and their ability to discern what's age-appropriate. Exposure can normalize or desensitize children to high-risk or harmful behaviours.

There's also a connection to problematic sexual behaviour, or PSB. PSB refers to children 12 and under initiating sexualized behaviours that are developmentally inappropriate or potentially harmful to themselves or others. At Luna, in 2025 we saw a 40% increase in PSB cases. Viewing pornography, intentional or not, is a known risk factor for PSB. If we don't do more to keep kids from viewing harmful content online, there are significant risks.

I'm sure that at this point the committee is well versed on sextortion, CSAM and AI-generated CSAM. I have included some statistics in my brief related to the alarming and rising trends in all three

of them. I will share that at Luna, in 2025 alone, we saw a 34% increase in files involving CSAM and also an increase in files with AI-generated CSAM.

In terms of recommendations, social media and technology have significant impacts on the well-being and development of children. As they relate to child abuse and maltreatment, I would offer the following.

First, strengthen collaboration and coordination between child and youth advocacy centres and child exploitation units, or ICE units. Currently, CYACs receive some cases, while ICE receives many others, and we're really limited in our ability to provide coordinated and equitable services.

Second, support cross-sector information sharing. Support policy frameworks that enable safe, privacy-conscious information sharing among police, child protection, health care and CYACs when technology intersects with child maltreatment.

Third, we need to ensure professionals receive training on emerging dynamics and to provide specialized training on interviewing children about technology use, digital coercion, image sharing and online grooming.

● (1135)

Fourth, we need to promote coordinated data collection across Canada. CYACs are working to develop a minimum dataset, and consistent data will support policy development, prevention and clear response protocols.

Finally, engage with technology companies, as many have said, and advocate for stronger safety features and reporting tools and for child-centric design, including minimum age enforcement and default privacy protections.

Thank you for your time.

The Chair: Thank you.

This is very disturbing testimony we're hearing today.

I'm sorry. Did you say PSB? What does that stand for?

Karen Orser: I'm sorry. PSB is problematic sexual behaviour.

The Chair: Thank you.

Finally, we will turn to Aimee Berends from Shalem.

You have the floor now for five minutes.

Aimee Berends (Registered Psychotherapist, Shalem Mental Health Network): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, committee members.

Today, I'm privileged to provide testimony representing opinions and recommendations from the clinical staff at the Shalem Mental Health Network. Shalem is a non-profit agency and a member of Family Service Ontario, based in Hamilton. We provide counselling and psychotherapy services to individuals, couples, those in relationships and families. We receive our clientele by self-referral, and we offer virtual and in-person services. In Hamilton, Shalem is known for its affordability and accessibility, allowing folks of any background or means to access excellent therapy services for a fee that fits their income level, thanks to community foundations and donors.

I am a certified music therapist and registered psychotherapist at Shalem. Our clinical staff are all registered psychotherapists, social workers or placement interns, so I've asked members of my team to contribute their opinions and reflections to prepare a collaborative statement today.

There's a general sense from our team that the impact of social media on children, teens and their families is substantial. We've seen the benefits of social media with our clients, such as decreasing stigma by exposing kids and families to stories of mental health, and the benefits of free access to psycho-educational and mental health resources. However, there are numerous questions we're left with as clinicians. While there is growing evidence of clinical approaches and guidelines for families, the boots-on-the-ground framework still needs to catch up.

We see families trying to make sense of whether their child's social media use is problematic and what to do about it for the sake of their development. Kids need to learn how to slow down, how to reflect and how to regulate themselves, but when kids are bombarded with content without much control to moderate the exposure, we see them trying to cope, but missing out on opportunities to practise regulation skills.

Partial information or misinformation is challenging for families. We observe families struggling to make sense of the barrage of online information from sites and sources that purport to make use of empirical science but whose methodologies miss the mark. We commonly see clients diagnosing themselves with conditions or mental illnesses that then impact their expectations for therapy and treatment, as well as for themselves and their circles of support. We also see families doing their best to care for their children, but per-haps offering advice that's misguided and based on information they gleaned from a social media source.

We see gaps between parents and kids and gaps in parent awareness. We see parents not knowing what their kids' online activities are or not understanding the impact of unmonitored use. Conversely, we see parents who are aware of the risks, maybe even hyper-aware, but have very few guidelines for how best to protect their children in the granular decisions made each and every day.

Parents generally seem sensitive to the social costs of non-use. Parents also may be struggling to limit their own social media use. We hear about families concerned about the amount of time spent together such that parents may sometimes choose to use social media as the way to bond with their kids. One clinician noted that they've seen families use social media to soothe neurodivergent kids and teens.

In terms of recommendations, we have the following to say.

Social media conversations among families have some similarities with other arenas that parents use to model safety, sound judgment and growing independence to their kids. However, there are unique phenomena with problematic social media use that require our attention. For example, the definitions of visibility and privacy have been rewritten. Social belonging is completely different, too, in how we make friends, belong in a community and repair conflicts.

Content sticks and it's hard to erase, and for some, the audience is not forgiving. A tweet or an Instagram post is hypervisible, collapses the context of what's happening, blurs boundaries and requires constant management to broker the perceptions of the story being told. Families need to learn how to have open conversations about these things and how to guide their children appropriately.

We need more clear guidelines for the continuum between use and non-use. Longitudinal studies would be ideal to compare the long-term impacts for young people over time.

There could be real costs, and those have been spoken to today, of a young person's activities, especially in cases of abuse, cyberbullying, body image issues, depression, etc. However, social media platforms are also what adults use for employment opportunities and professional networking; therefore, non-use for teens may impact future employment if total non-use is what we're advising. Helping parents, teachers and therapists who are guiding these kids to moderate use, or use any disconnective practices, would be most welcome.

We need all the players to take responsibility for protecting our young people. Social media is one of many factors that are disrupting sleep, shortening attention spans, limiting in-person social skills, worsening anxiety, causing dependent habits and perpetuating bullying behaviours, body image concerns and negative social comparisons.

● (1140)

We need prevention and education from multiple sources. Families need help. Parents need support. Research needs to be translated into bite-sized pieces for the average Canadian parent to use today.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now turn to questions from members of the committee.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Généreux, you have the floor for six minutes.

Bernard   Généreux   (Côte-du-Sud—Rivière-du-Loup—Kataskomiq—Témiscouata, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank all the witnesses. This is really interesting.

Mr. Desrosiers and Ms. Bonenfant, I'm turning 64 soon. I remember that when I was five, six, seven or eight years old, I used to watch *Bobino*, *Sol et Gobelet* and shows like that. I remember that I'd come from school and watch television from 4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. That was my screen time.

You have alluded to screen time for leisure purposes. Obviously, today's screens include telephone and tablet screens. Back then, screens were black and white television sets before colour televisions came on the market. We still have television screens, but now, they are 80 inches wide.

I'm referring to screen time because I think your organization also talks about well-being and physical health in particular. Obviously, time spent in front of a screen involves little movement.

Screen time today is different compared to 50 or 60 years ago. The figures you quoted earlier mentioned an average of two hours of screen time. That's generalized data. It doesn't necessarily refer to children, but to the population as a whole.

When it comes to content, the quality of what we find on screens now is likely to be much more of a threat than what we used to watch. I want to make this clear. All this content makes a difference in people's lives.

In your opinion, is there a connection to be made between screen time and content interface? The question is for both of you, because it seems you work together. I'm referring to the quality of what we used to have back in the days. To be clear, *Bobino* is not the same thing as today's artificial intelligence. It's a lot less threatening.

I will let you answer the question.

● (1145)

Guy Desrosiers: Maybe you had televisions that were kind of similar to mine. My dad's television was a bulky piece of furniture. I couldn't bring it to the bathroom or to my bedroom, or take it outside and pretend I was going to play soccer. I couldn't sit in a corner and continue to look at social media, play video games or watch streaming content. Obviously, devices and the strategies behind them are different from those of that era.

Now, time is just one of the three points I described in the subtitle on page 3 of my paper. We have to factor in duration, time and place, and type of content consulted. Combining these three elements will help us assess the benefits and potential harms of screen use. It's a bit more complex.

Obviously, I talked about screen time because many studies focus on that. When we look at the study published by the Montreal Regional Public Health Department on the potential harms of screen time, we see that the moment we double screen time from two to four hours, sleep problems begin because this time is often borrowed. This is time borrowed from quality sleep. This is time borrowed from physical activity or time spent outdoors.

Data on sleep deprivation show that nearly half of young people now report being sleep deprived. Rates of dissatisfaction with life double, and go up to 24% for those with four or more hours of screen time.

Obviously, in our studies, we are required to provide quantifiable indicators, and time is one of them, because other indicators are not always easy to measure.

Bernard Généreux: Do you want to say something else, Ms. Bonenfant?

Maude Bonenfant: I would add that the television programs that you watched as a child were quite slow. The pace was slow, and you kept a certain distance from the screen. Now, and this has been demonstrated, images are accelerated. They move really fast. Children and adolescents are overstimulated with very fast images. That's one difference.

Additionally, screen use is interactive. The youth are made to do something. They have to click. There are all sorts of strategies to apply pressure, especially to make them watch ads. There's a great deal of advertising on social media, even if children are not necessarily aware of this, with such things as the unboxing video phenomenon. They see other young people use products, unboxing products. They think they're just watching some random person, but in reality, it's a form of advertising.

Each of these factors can interfere with the healthy development of young people.

Bernard Généreux: I'll follow up on that quickly.

As you know, Quebec has now banned the use of phones in schools.

Guy Desrosiers: Yes, both of us took part in the select committee on the impacts of screens.

Bernard Généreux: Yes.

I think that has received a positive response, generally speaking, even among youth. I think young people realized they'd stopped talking to each other, that they were texting each other even though they were sitting right next to each other.

Human interaction is very important in all that. I think the testimony we have heard today shows that changes can be made respectfully when it comes to privacy, usage, ability to use social media, and so forth, with youth in particular.

Do you think that this ban should be extended across Canada? I believe the principle applied in Quebec has received a very positive response.

● (1150)

Guy Desrosiers: Yes, absolutely.

That's actually one of my recommendations, for school and child care settings.

For instance, it's not healthy for a child to be passively exposed to videos for an hour in child care settings just to keep them quiet or to avoid engaging with or stimulating them.

In my opinion, this is a high-priority recommendation.

Bernard Généreux: Thank you.

Do I have any time left, Madam Chair?

The Chair: No, your time is up, Mr. Généreux. Thank you.

Mr. Al Soud, you have the floor for six minutes.

[*English*]

Fares Al Soud (Mississauga Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you all for being with us today.

I want to start with a conversation that I had with a parent in my riding shortly before we came back to the House. We landed on the following: It's about ensuring that when young people enter these spaces, they're ready for them.

I leave this question open to anyone who'd like to jump in, but Ms. Berends, I noted that you mentioned the importance of regulation skills, for instance. What does it mean for young people to access these spaces when they're ready? What do you think is essential for that readiness element?

Aimee Berends: Do you mean for the regulation specifically?

Fares Al Soud: Yes.

Aimee Berends: There's a lot to do with your sensory stimulus. It's nearly impossible to pay attention to what's going on inside of

you if what's around you is pinging at your brain at a rate that's far too high to pay attention to.

While I don't research this, what I see is that kids have a really hard time turning inward because there's so much stimulation in their environment. Even when they get home, it doesn't stop. When I went to school, you went home and that was it, unless someone called you, maybe. It just never stops. There's not that same element of privacy.

Fares Al Soud: There's the question of readiness in terms of access to social media. Is it the same for everyone here, for all of our witnesses?

I see Ms. Orser with her hand up, and Ms. Austin.

Karen Orser: It's really important that we don't put all the responsibility of readiness on kids and parents. We have to recognize the reality of brain development in adolescent children and the impact of that on impulsivity and decision-making. We see files at Luna on a regular basis where in particular young boys have been asked to send a picture. It is a matter of seconds before they are asked and send that picture. Then it has huge consequences.

I think we have to really consider brain development before we put the responsibility on kids and parents to be ready, and focus on access to those images.

Fares Al Soud: Ms. Austin.

Sara Austin: I echo what Karen just spoke to.

An element of this is around brain development, but even adults, who have fully developed brains, should not be exposed to much of the harmful content that we see every single day. A significant onus needs to be put on the tech industry to have protection by default and a duty of care to all Canadians, but particularly to our children and youth.

We are seeing, daily now, kids being exposed to extremely graphic content, online hate and sexual content. I could go on and on. You've heard the testimonies about this from countless witnesses.

As Karen has spoken to and as I will echo, we need to take the burden off of children and parents and put it back onto the tech platforms and hold them accountable.

Fares Al Soud: Thank you, all.

On this note of an onus on the tech industry, we've heard this several times over the course of this study. Mr. Desrosiers said it already. It's the idea of countries deciding to move forward with a minimum age requirement for social media. I've heard from parents in my riding, and several witnesses here at committee, that we should be considering the same. Meanwhile, others—and I will use the term "others" here loosely—have indicated that age-appropriate design on social media is a possibility. I think they refer to it as graduated access.

What do you make of the idea of social media platforms' attempts of creating safer spaces for children? Is there a world where this sufficiently protects children in online environments?

[*Translation*]

Maude Bonenfant: Can I answer that?

I think that we must use the safety by design principle and think about the design of these platforms at the front end so that it's based on science and the stages of child and adolescent development. The platforms must respect their privacy, and the design must take into consideration a certain number of these parameters and ban certain practices, such as some use of generative artificial intelligence; I think we can then have spaces that are healthy for children, and replicate something similar to school yards where they can socialize, share, talk about gaming, and so forth.

These spaces can have very positive impacts on their development if they are safe and if there are guardrails around the practice, meaning children are not left to play there all day, that maximum play time is set and that access is gradual.

My work focuses on gaming, and I encourage parents to take a tablet and get their children to play an age-appropriate game from the age of 3 for 10 to 15 minutes, and then switch off the tablet, set it aside and take out crayons, books or something else. That way, the child learns that the screen is one activity among others in their environment and not something that's highly desirable because it's banned or because they're left to their own devices.

I therefore think that it's possible to have healthy spaces, but it's really important to work with industry because they are making billions of dollars on the backs of our children's health. As such, if there are no laws or frameworks to actually set guidelines for platform design, then we're not going to make it with the current platforms. That's why Australia took such a radical step.

● (1155)

Fares Al Soud: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Ms. Todd.

Carol Todd: I want to speak to a social media restriction or ban that Canada and other countries have talked about. This is my opinion and my opinion only.

If we're going to encourage and create a social media restriction or ban in Canada, we have to ensure that there are safety designs to monitor it, to oversee it. Oversight is a big part of the government bringing in an online safety act. If we don't do it, who is going to oversee things being done properly with the tech industry?

I want every member of the committee to do a Google search after this to look up the lawsuit, the trial, happening right now in Los Angeles, in the United States. That is about digital oversight with social media companies and what they are and aren't doing. What they aren't doing is putting in protections for children.

I also want to clarify that there is a big difference.... In B.C., we have a cellphone restriction in each and every on of our schools, but it can be interpreted differently. There is a big difference between recreational versus educational screen time. Many parents I talk to are wondering about kids using laptops to do their [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. It's a life skill to learn how to research. It's a life skill to learn how to put out information in a good way. When young adults are out in the workforce or in post-secondary education, that is of the utmost importance.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Todd. We've run out of time for this question. I apologize for cutting you off.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Champoux, you have the floor for six minutes.

Martin Champoux (Drummond, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for joining us today.

All of us probably had preconceived ideas when we began this study. We all had our opinions about screens and the exposure of youth, children and adolescents to influencers and social media. Our opinions have evolved as we have heard from witnesses who have shared their expertise.

Mr. Desrosiers and Ms. Bonenfant, your approaches probably overlap to some extent. That's encouraging. Your approach is encouraging. It's not a guilt-tripping or accusatory approach that makes people feel uninformed. On the contrary, your approach is much more encouraging.

We know that we need to deal with screens, social media and this universe. We feel that you're not here to put pressure on us to legislate or have a strict framework, but rather, to talk about education, to help us understand that these tools have benefits and they're not negative across the board.

We also heard that from other witnesses a bit earlier in our study. They told us to be cautious, because social media is not negative across the board. In other words, there are ways to get a lot of value from social media. As a matter of fact, I would encourage everyone to visit Mr. Desrosiers's website pauseyourscreen.com because it's very interesting. The first page reads, "For screen use that feels good". It's a different tune altogether. I think that's both refreshing and interesting.

However, there's still a great deal of resistance. There are still many calls for boycotts, calls for strict regulation for children. The more I see this, the more I question whether it's actually a good approach. You fuelled my thinking a little by saying that perhaps not, and that on the contrary, a more gradual approach might be wiser, supported by stronger guidelines, more education and much more vigilance.

I'd like to hear you talk a little bit more about this global movement that's leaning toward banning the use of and access to social media, including in Australia for those below the age of 16. France recently voted 130 to 21, a striking majority, to ban social media for those under 15. Is that a good approach?

As Ms. Berends said earlier, doesn't this deprive them of an opportunity to acquire digital literacy and to better prepare young people to access this universe?

I'd like you to speak to that a little bit because it's quite relevant to your areas of expertise.

● (1200)

Guy Desrosiers: My organization, colleagues and panel of subject-matter experts advocate for the development of self-control. This is a step-by-step process in a child's development. Earlier, we heard about families and children, and guidelines, so to speak. Someone with three children might tell me that the second-born is different from the first and the third is different from both, to the point where you wonder where each came from. We need that spirit to understand the phenomenon and take action.

That is also true among young people. We have committees that consist of young people, we talk to them a lot and we conduct studies involving them. They tell us that they are fully aware of this situation, but they have challenges. The solution is very appealing, as Ms. Bonenfant mentioned, since billions of dollars are invested to make things more and more appealing, because of the business model.

However, young people are also telling us that their parents tell them to get off their screens, but the parents themselves are always on their screens. That's how things are. That's why I say that we need more of a societal approach. All of us have to take back control of screens and review this balance.

I think a ban is not possible because these screens are here to stay. As it is, you need to be 13 years old to use social media and yet 11-year-olds are using these platforms, so we can't count on industry. If we don't control it, it's going to control us, and that is what is happening. This speaks to the importance of developing healthy digital habits, so to speak, the same way we develop lifestyle habits. We speak about "healthy lifestyle habits", but I'm not a fan of this expression, because implicit in that is that experts know what is best for people. It's about lifestyle habits that work for them, and the same applies to digital habits. I think these habits develop over time and maintaining a balance is essential.

I mentioned recommendations from the Canadian society for exercise physiology, which talks about the 24-hour movement that has health benefits. This includes other activities, in addition to sleep.

Martin Champoux: I'm glad you've brought up the 24-hour movement because there's also a movement in France that was originally inspired by a Quebecker. He recommended foregoing television for some time. That has now moved to screen-time habits on our digital devices. Is 10 days screen-free doable?

In my case, I can tell you that in my home, my children will bite off my head if I tell them that we're going to go screen-free for 10 days, and that will be the end of it.

Guy Desrosiers: Abstinence and prohibition in other areas of activity have never worked. Studies are quite clear on this point. However, we need to take a pause to think about it. For our part, through our PAUSE initiative, we are proposing a pause and the 24-hour PAUSE challenge. Reflecting on the place that screens occupy in our lives for just 24 hours, one day, is already quite educational and formative.

Martin Champoux: I would have more luck with a 24-hour pause than with a 10-day pause. I can tell you that.

At this stage, can we demonstrate certain impacts on physical health? We know that there are also psychological and mental issues that can be linked quite directly, but based on your observations, can we see the impacts of screens on the physical health of young people today?

Guy Desrosiers: There are some fairly robust studies on the increase in sedentary lifestyles and the impact on sleep. There is a triad that includes sedentary lifestyles, sleep and obesity or being overweight. In terms of eye health, we have seen an acceleration in myopia and drying of the retina. There are, of course, musculoskeletal disorders affecting the carpal tunnel, neck, shoulders and trapezius muscles.

More and more studies are being carried out, but, once again, there is no causal link. It's important to remember that these are correlations, because it's difficult to establish causal links. I would also invite you to read a study conducted in Austria, specifically on screen time in a university group. There is a control group with less than two hours of screen time per day and another group with more than four hours of screen time per day. The difference is quite striking.

● (1205)

Martin Champoux: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'll turn to Mr. Waugh now for five minutes.

Kevin Waugh (Saskatoon South, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Welcome, everyone, to our committee.

We've studied this in Parliament to death. We started in 2022. We continued with 2023, 2024 and 2025. We keep going around in circles. I don't know if it's because the Liberal government in Parliament has done nothing. I mean, we've studied this now for five years. We've had this at the heritage committee twice in the years that I've been here. We've made no progress. Let's be honest with this. We've made absolutely no progress at all federally with any policy.

You've all agreed to come here today, and I thank you for that. I personally don't know if your submissions today will go up on a shelf and we'll never see this again. I'm honest with that, because you see studies go to status of women, to heritage or to other committees, and then nothing is being done. We just study the same thing over and over. It's frustrating as a parent. It's frustrating as a parent to grandkids. Then we hear this testimony.

Sara, thank you for sharing countdown for kids.

Zach, I'm going to ask you, because you're 12 years old, to talk about your screen time and how you're dealing with it. Thank you for coming and sharing your story today.

You're 12 years old. Other studies have been done, and we've mentioned that those 14 years and under would not be able to have screen time. I just want to know your thoughts on that, since you're 12. When did you pick up the phone or go on Internet? I would like to know your experiences, if you don't mind.

Zachary Fathally: As you asked me, I got my phone at 12.

You said ban under 14. Am I right?

Kevin Waugh: That's what the rumours are, yes.

Zachary Fathally: I don't think a ban would really work, because kids can find workarounds, and if you ban, they'll probably protest. That's one. Two, I don't think they'll go outside. They'll just sleep all day and probably skip school. You could find—how do I say this?—a regulation so that kids don't stay on their screens that much. I don't know how to explain it.

Kevin Waugh: You just said that you're online at the age of 12. You're 12 now. Can I ask you what support systems you have if you see something that you're somewhat uncomfortable with? What do you do then? What kind of support systems do you have, Zach?

Zachary Fathally: What do you mean by support systems?

Kevin Waugh: You're online for the first time this year. If you see something on your screen that makes you say, "I'm not comfortable with that", do you go to your parent or parents? Who do you go to when you see something that you're uncomfortable with or that makes you say, "I'm not sure about this"? What do you do then?

Zachary Fathally: Usually I go to my parents, or else I just skip what I see or report it.

Kevin Waugh: Who do you report it to?

Zachary Fathally: I report it to the website that I'm on. For example, if I'm on YouTube and I see something that makes me uncomfortable, I report it—if I find that it would be uncomfortable for other people around my age too.

● (1210)

Kevin Waugh: Do you ever hear back from them once you report something, or have you reported something?

Zachary Fathally: Yes, I have reported something.

Kevin Waugh: Did they get back to you?

Zachary Fathally: What do you mean? Are you asking if they have reported back to me?

Kevin Waugh: Yes. Did they get back to you on your report of something that you were uncomfortable seeing? You just said that you reported it. Has the organization gotten back to you?

Zachary Fathally: Usually they email me back.

Kevin Waugh: What do they say? Can you share that? I would like to know what the email says.

Zachary Fathally: YouTube says, "Thank you for reporting this. We'll evaluate it, blah, blah, blah." Then it says thank you and your name—so "Zachary".

Kevin Waugh: Thank you for sharing that. I think all of us around the table have the feeling that when you report something, it goes into a hole and never comes back. What do they do about it? That is part of the online harms act that needs to be concentrated on. You shared some of that.

I'm going to—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Waugh.

Kevin Waugh: I'm done. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Ms. Sonia Sidhu, welcome to the heritage committee. It's lovely to see you here today.

You now have the floor for five minutes.

Sonia Sidhu (Brampton South, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for their insightful testimony.

My heart goes out to all the kids who have tragically died because of online harms.

Ms. Todd, thank you for your advocacy. I know we met at the status of women committee, but I really want to say thank you for what you are doing as a mom and as an educator.

My question is for you. When you're talking about the social media tech companies needing to take responsibility, what do you think needs to be done? You talked about B.C. schools and how they have restrictions on kids' cellphones. Do you think the restrictions are important? If they are important, at what age, and what needs to be done on that side?

Carol Todd: The restriction in British Columbia goes from K to 12 in schools. It's based on personal mobile devices.

In my school district, which is the third-largest school district in B.C., in our elementary and middle schools it's bell to bell. Kids are not to bring in their devices; they need to be in lockers or at home. You'll say that kids in elementary school, in grades 4 and 5, shouldn't have devices, but the number of children eight and above who have a mobile device for personal use is up to about 62%. The numbers are rising; kids are getting them at early ages.

In high school, we teach digital literacy. All the schools in my school district have a digital literacy class for grade 9 students. We teach them about cyber-abusive behaviours—restricting the social, the emotional, the physiological, all that stuff—to put it into their heads. My role is to educate teachers and parents on this. I think it's a good thing to have.

I just want to clarify that although Australia has a social media ban, it's not restricting kids from having screen time at all. It's only with regard to 10 applications. Some of the applications that are still allowed are communication apps. Those are the ones that create the cyber-bullying effect, the predatory effect of predators out there. That's why we really need to look at what social media is.

It's not a restriction of devices for all children under 14, or in Australia under 16. It's only 10 applications. I just wanted to clarify that.

I'm sorry for taking your time to do that.

Sonia Sidhu: Thank you.

My next question is for Ms. Orser from the Luna Child and Youth Advocacy Centre. Thank you for running 50 child centres.

My question is about the national data. How do social media platforms presently collect and use data from children, and what risk does this pose to their well-being and privacy?

Karen Orser: I'm not sure I'll be able to answer this question. The national dataset I'm referring to.... The 50 child and youth advocacy centres have created a minimum dataset related to what we see at child advocacy centres and child abuse. It's not related to how technology companies are collecting and using child data. I'm referring to how we hope to collect more national data around the prevalence of child abuse.

● (1215)

Sonia Sidhu: From the perspective of a child and youth advocacy centre, how has social media, including influencer content, contributed to cases of exploitation of or emotional harm to children?

Karen Orser: I'm happy to provide more details, but at CACs, we are definitely seeing significantly more files every year that involve online components, CSAM and cyber-bullying, especially with crossover between contact that is made through applications and abuse in person. These are disturbing trends for child advocacy centres, and for all of us.

Sonia Sidhu: Thank you.

My next question is for the Shalem Mental Health Network.

Ms. Berends, from a clinical perspective, what mental health patterns are you seeing that are connecting to social media influencers, particularly regarding anxiety, depression or body image?

Aimee Berends: We don't collect that data here at Shalem, and there are several reasons for that, but I do know that we have so much research about this. Numbers exist, but I can't provide them from Shalem. What we're more concerned about is, could we have some policy, some legislation or something that reduces harm? Any kind of harm reduction would be welcome.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Champoux, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Martin Champoux: I'll be quick.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'll continue with you, Mr. Desrosiers. One of your recommendations is to regulate the industry. This is something that many have attempted to do, with limited success so far. It's not just here in Quebec and Canada, but everywhere around the world. It's going to become essential. How do we regulate the industry, how do we legislate, when we face systematic obstruction from these industry giants, who are all-powerful and very influential with the most powerful governments? Just look at what is happening in the United States.

Guy Desrosiers: I think we need to try to work with the levels of government that have already started the work. The European Union has begun this work, and I think it has laid some pretty interesting groundwork. Australia is also somewhat ahead of the curve in this area. It's very difficult to do this alone. For example, we've seen this with the news media that has been banned. Be that as it may, I believe in it. We mustn't forget artificial intelligence, which is behind all these solutions today. I would invite you to learn about Yoshua Bengio's global LawZero initiative. I think we need to work together on this, because alone, we can't stand up to these giants.

Martin Champoux: That is indeed my opinion. I don't entirely agree with what my colleague Mr. Waugh said earlier about the studies we are conducting here leading nowhere.

Indeed, we had elections, which caused some of our legislative initiatives to die on the Order Paper, but the fact remains that we have been far too slow to react to this phenomenon, even though it was fairly predictable. Is there room for optimism? It's hard to know. Is it still possible? Should we impose severe restrictions, as some are proposing, while we put a regulatory framework in place and regain control, if you will? Is there a way to do all this from where we are now and succeed in putting something effective in place?

Maude Bonenfant: Something needs to be done. Legislation must be put in place. We can't let companies continue like this. We've seen what happens. Now, we have the knowledge to take very specific action. Yes, we can restrict profitability, meaning that these giants would no longer be able to make billions of dollars off the backs of our young people, but without destroying the economic model either. There could be barriers to restrict certain practices. Here, we could take action on several fronts. We could take action at the database level. We could control how databases are organized, how algorithms work, the structure of the design, and the type of access. All of this could be implemented in a very precise manner. Companies could continue to have a certain economic model, but with reduced harm. We were talking about individual responsibilities earlier, but I think the pendulum is no longer on the side of individuals, of young people, who respond very well to the measures, by the way. Now, it's on the side of companies. They need to be regulated.

● (1220)

Martin Champoux: How much time do I have left, Madam Chair?

The Chair: You've already gone past your time by a minute.

[*English*]

Mr. Diotte, you now have the floor for five minutes.

Kerry Diotte (Edmonton Griesbach, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thanks to everyone for being here.

I'm losing my voice. Hopefully I can last the five minutes.

We're hearing about the effects of influencers and social media on children. We've heard about the bullying, which is horrific, and the graphic porn and sextortion. We've heard some terrible things.

We know that this has been studied to death. I believe it has been more than 1,600 days since the online harms act was first debated, so in turning to immediate solutions, I want to get something from everyone on what big tech should be doing today to stop harms to children.

Maybe we could start with Aimee Berends, and then anybody else who wants to wade in on that question would be most welcome.

Aimee Berends: I really feel this is outside my purview, so I'm going to let someone else answer.

[*Translation*]

Maude Bonenfant: What we can do very quickly is intervene on certain aspects of the device, that is, anything that is more likely to create addiction. We could intervene on the design itself.

I talked about dark patterns, which should be regulated to prohibit this type of practice. Then, we could also act at the database level. If these images appear, it means they are in the databases. We can establish a framework that would regulate both the algorithm and the database on the content that is viewed. We could also intervene in terms of networking between individuals themselves, between young people, again to try to curb certain practices and indicate promotional content more clearly. Some efforts are being made in this area, but we could take even more vigorous action.

It's really a whole range of measures that could be put in place. Earlier, Mr. Desrosiers spoke about Europe, which has put certain rules in place that are currently being implemented and that we could use as a model. If we take global action to regulate these companies, they will have no choice but to comply with certain legislation, if only in terms of privacy.

[*English*]

Kerry Diotte: Thank you.

Ms. Austin, would you care to respond?

Sara Austin: Thank you.

We have spent two decades hoping that the tech industry would do the right thing, and they have proven themselves to be untrustworthy. They are not going to do this as a voluntary effort. Currently in the United States, there are major lawsuits against all of the major tech platforms. Carol Todd and other families in Canada are part of that. It's clear that the tech industry will not do this voluntarily. It requires legislation and imposing strict regulations on them to act and do the right thing for our children and for all Canadians.

We have recommended several key elements for an online safety act. They include a duty of care; clear, enforceable obligations on platforms to prevent foreseeable harms to children; and independent public oversight so there's a strong, independent regulator that has real enforcement powers and technical capacity, along with transparency and authority.

We recommend youth protections by design. We need age-appropriate design, with limits on addictive features, meaningful defaults for minors and safeguards for AI-enabled abuse. Another critical element is data access for public interest research so that Canada can actually measure the harms and enforce compliance.

Last but certainly not least, we want to see AI systems in scope. We can't simply regulate social media; we need to look at AI systems in the whole digital landscape in which children are living and ensure that there is accountability for AI systems, whether they be chatbots or other functions that are exploiting and harming our children.

● (1225)

Kerry Diotte: Does anyone else care to wade in? There's been some very good testimony.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Kerry Diotte: Perhaps it could be Ms. Todd.

Carol Todd: I can talk. I can always talk.

These social media platforms are a business model for big tech. They have algorithms that not only grab our kids; they grab adults as well. How many times have you seen adults who can scroll endlessly? If you look at brain science and at the neuroplasticity of the brain, everything we see and watch embeds into our brains. We can't unsee it. What our kids are seeing harms them in some ways.

I teach technology. I am not anti-technology. I feel that we need some regulations in place to ensure safety, for the same reason we have regulations in place for safety in vehicles, the same reason we have CSA-approved items that we use in our homes, and the same reason we watch to make sure, as parents and grandparents, the playground is safe for our kids. That digital playground doesn't have the oversight needed to keep our kids safe right now. That's why I am imploring our government....

I do not want our testimonies to be shelved. This is my fifth standing committee. I have probably met some of you in other standing committees that I've spoken at. Each time, I ask this: Please create action. We're not creating action. We're creating words. We're creating briefs. We're creating something that is stored somewhere.

This is the time—right now—with this committee. We need something done. If we don't do something, we'll lose more Canadian kids, more Canadian youth and more Canadian young adults to online harms.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Royer, you have the floor for five minutes.

Zoe Royer (Port Moody—Coquitlam, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

We have an extraordinary panel here today.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the profound loss, Carol, of your daughter, Amanda. I think it was just shortly after her 15th birthday. It happened in our community. I know that the community grieved Amanda's tragic death—at the time and for many years. I really want to recognize your courage. You have turned this profound loss into advocacy and education.

Given that you are an educator in school district 43, the Coquitlam school district, and you are supporting kids, can you talk a bit about more tools for prevention that we can implement? I'd like to

really explore that with you. You have four minutes if you need them.

Carol Todd: In this whole space, we've talked about restrictions. We've talked about bans. We've talked about big tech and what they can do, but that's not enough. We also need education. We need awareness. We need to talk to our parents, our caregivers, our children and our students. It needs to be ongoing. I have walked into classrooms in various parts of Canada and teachers have gone, "Do I only have to teach this for a week?" No. Online safety, the digital world and whatever comes about need to be taught the 10 months to the school year.

Sometimes we say it shouldn't be the parents' responsibility, but parent also need to be aware and educated so they can have those conversations with their children, whether it's over the dinner table, in the car as they're going to soccer practice or sitting on the couch and co-viewing, which is becoming more popular.

We are also creating an analog generation out there. I've heard of so many young people who have said they are taking a break from screen time because, basically, they're tired of it, but the 13-, 14- and 15-year-olds aren't tired of it because it's new. If there is a ban, restriction or whatever we want to call it, I don't want that ban or restriction to say to a population of people that we don't have to teach this anymore because kids don't have access. We still have to teach because it is part of the dialogue.

You don't throw a child into a swimming pool without swimming lessons. You don't give the keys to the car to your kids unless they have driving lessons. We need to ensure that our kids know the rules, know how to play safe and know, most importantly, where to go if they need help. For so many young people, if something is going wrong, they internalize it. They don't want it.

To this committee, were you aware of this? I just became aware of it last fall. Public Safety Canada has an interactive road show on online dangers. It's interactive with kids. There are models of technology that show videos, and they can interact with the screens and talk. It's for groups of 30 kids in schools. Right now, it's in Ottawa. They're going to be presenting in Ottawa to some French-speaking schools. I would implore you—and I have a contact if someone wants to contact someone at Public Safety—to see it.

My problem with this is that so much money has been put into making this interactive road show, but it was only in B.C. for eight weeks last fall. Previous to that, it was only in Nova Scotia for eight weeks. I asked Public Safety where it was the rest of the time. It's stored in a warehouse.

This is a prevention tool that I declare awesome. It's excellent. It's a learning place. It should be in every province so kids can see it. It touches on cyber-bullying. It touches on online safety. It touches on exploitation. It touches on sextortion. These are what we want to teach our kids about, but we have a hard time teaching them because it's such a complicated conversation to have.

I have not met many teachers or parents who are comfortable with this topic and the conversation about human trafficking, exploitation or sextortion. Our kids don't know about this, but they should know about it. They need to know about it in a language that is clear and simple.

I think I've used up my four minutes.

Thank you, MP Royer.

● (1230)

The Chair: That's exactly four minutes, right on the mark. It's always valuable to hear from you, Ms. Todd.

I will turn now to Ms. Thomas for five minutes.

Rachael Thomas (Lethbridge, CPC): Thank you so much, everyone, for taking the time to be with us here today.

My first question is going to Sara.

Sara, one of the things you talked about is previous legislation that was brought forward—Bill C-63—and you outlined a few concerns you have with that legislation. Of course, it's not on the table anymore. It died when we went into an election last spring. However, the government is now talking about bringing forward future legislation.

There were a number of criticisms against Bill C-63, and there were a number of really great things about Bill C-63. As the government looks to put legislation in place, I'm curious about whether you wish to highlight the things that absolutely need to be part of that legislation and the things that absolutely need to be left out or done differently.

Sara Austin: Thank you, MP Thomas, for the opportunity to speak, and thank you for your ongoing support for and commitment to amplifying the voices of children and youth and protecting our children.

As you know, Children First Canada has joined forces with many leading experts: the Canadian Medical Association; the Canadian Pediatric Society; children's hospitals such as SickKids, CHEO and McMaster Children's Hospital; tech experts and mental health experts; and on and on. We all agree on the importance of an online safety act and that a social media ban alone will not solve this problem. We need robust legislation.

On what worked in Bill C-63, tabled last year, the important elements included a duty of care: the clear and enforceable obligation on platforms to prevent foreseeable harms. It included important el-

ements about independent public oversight, with an independent regulator with real enforcement powers and technical capacity, transparency and authority. Those are important elements that must continue in a new bill that gets tabled.

I've spoken already about—

The Chair: I'm sorry to interrupt. The interpreters are having a bit of difficulty, Ms. Austin.

Sara Austin: I'm sorry. I'm a fast talker. I'll slow down.

The Chair: Would you mind lowering your boom? Lower your boom and slow down a bit.

Sara Austin: All right.

The Chair: I'll give you a bit of extra time.

Sara Austin: Thank you.

Other important elements are about youth protections by design: age-appropriate design elements, limiting addictive features, meaningful defaults for minors and safeguards for AI-enabled abuse. These are some really important elements.

What was missing in the previous bill was around AI systems. We've seen so much emerge in recent months—even in recent weeks—around AI-fuelled harms for children. That is an important aspect to capture in a new bill that is tabled. There were controversial aspects to the previous bill, particularly the concerns about limiting free speech. Obviously, that needs to go by the wayside. We need to drop what didn't work or what raised significant concerns and really focus on what's most important.

Again, I plead with all members of Parliament: Whatever your political stripe may be, we need to work together. We need the best and brightest minds working together. We've seen MPs from all federal parties attempt to bring forward bills. MP Rempel Garner tabled her own legislation. We really need everybody working together, with the best interests of our children at heart, to find a solution that works for all Canadians.

● (1235)

Rachael Thomas: I'm sorry. I know that was a lot to rattle off. I really appreciate that, though. That's very helpful as we move forward and consider what to do with the hearings for this report.

One of the other things you've made comments on is with regard to the recent developments concerning X and the use of Grok, and the impact that has had on all people who have been impacted by a misuse of this AI tool. In particular, there's a vulnerability for children. Would you care to comment on what you're observing there?

Sara Austin: We've seen in recent weeks the real escalation of AI-enabled harms. Grok has been the most notable example, where we've seen X being used as a platform to amplify harms, particularly against women and children. That went on for far too long. The company was profiting from that.

It's egregious harm. While our government did not take a clear position, we saw governments in the U.K. and otherwise stepping up and taking clear positions on that. We need Canada to be a leader in this space, not a laggard.

When we think about AI, it's not just on social media platforms and it's not just on X. Grok is in Tesla cars. We've seen examples of this. Kids are sitting in their family vehicle and engaging with Grok, which is automatically uploaded to a Tesla car, and kids have been harmed. As you know, Grok is prompting kids to share nudes, for crying out loud. I mean, it is absurd the level of harm that our kids are being exposed to.

We cannot look at regulating this simply for social media. We need to look at the whole digital landscape that our kids are exposed to: in their family vehicles, on their school laptops, on their phones and on every digital device they're exposed to. We need comprehensive legislation that looks at the full landscape. We really urge Canada to go above and beyond what Australia and France have done and table a robust online safety act that protects children and protects all Canadians.

Rachael Thomas: That's awesome. Thank you so much, Sara.

The Chair: I did not know that was happening in cars. Thank you.

Mr. Myles, you have the floor for five minutes.

David Myles (Fredericton—Oromocto, Lib.): Thank you very much.

Thank you to all the witnesses who are here today. It is a fascinating and really important discussion.

MP Thomas scooped my question, and it was a great question. Regarding the previous online harms bill, I was looking for thoughts on where it might have fallen short. I didn't realize there was as much unanimous support for that bill as there appears to be in the room. I agree that it seems to have a place to come back.

I want to frame the conversation a bit, because it seems that each of us is talking about different levels of responsibility. One is the heavy-handed responsibility of the government to call for a ban of social media. I think, as Carol Todd mentioned, it's important to note the difference between being online and being on social media. We are talking about a different thing when we're talking about a social media ban. Then there's the responsibility of the social media companies to create safety by design. The other part is about the responsibility of parents and kids and healthy habits.

I think we're all coming at this from different angles, but realistically, what I'm hearing is that healthy habits can't happen in isola-

tion. Healthy habits by themselves and education aren't going to cut it, because the algorithm itself needs to be adjusted. There needs to be safety by design.

I want to talk to Zachary for a second.

First of all, well done for being here. I was not at your level at 12 years old. I will say I'm very impressed.

Rachael Thomas: You're close now, though.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

● (1240)

David Myles: I'm getting there. That's a very good point. I'm catching up to Zachary very slowly.

I want to talk to you, because you mentioned the idea of making this safe. You know these spaces. You know where the problems are and what, let's say, safety by design looks like for you.

How can you interact with these platforms? Are you interacting with social media or just online platforms? What does responsibility look like in that way?

Zachary Fathally: If I understand well, you basically asked me what social media I use.

David Myles: Yes, and I think at one point you said, "Make safety the default", which I thought was a really good point, so I just wanted to talk about that a bit.

Zachary Fathally: What I mean by "make safety the default" is that, for online platforms, you shouldn't have to find workarounds so you can be safe online. When you're online, you want the first thing in your mind when you're building a website to be, "Are kids or people in general going to be safe?" Do you know what I mean?

David Myles: Absolutely. I appreciate that, because I think it's what we're talking about. It becomes a responsibility of those creating these platforms to create a space that is inherently safe for kids to engage with if they're going to be allowed to engage with them.

Do you engage? Do you have social media as well?

Zachary Fathally: Yes, but I only use YouTube, and my email is on Gmail. That's it.

David Myles: Thank you very much. It's great to have you here.

I wonder, Maude, if you can speak to the three elements to this.

[*Translation*]

We've talked about healthy habits and all that, but I sometimes wonder how we can address the three factors that are important.

Maude Bonenfant: When it comes to regulation, we know we need it because we've let the industry run wild and it's not working. On the industry side, once there are rules, they are guidelines that apply to all companies. As such, each platform must normally comply with them, at the risk of being sued, which we are starting to see for all kinds of violations to the laws that have been put in place.

Furthermore, given the responsibility to ensure that a space is safe for the age group it's targeting, when platforms want to put forward, for example, an Instagram account for young people and children, they must ensure that the settings are configured to create a space that is truly safe for young people. For example, this could be done with default settings because, currently, the default settings are completely open. If, on the contrary, young people are made to unlock the settings one by one, they would learn.

This brings us to the third pillar, which is education. Young people are extremely bright. They are aware. They know and feel in their bodies and in their mental health that some things are not working. They look to adults. They are therefore in a world where they respond very well to devices by staying glued to the screen, and a world where adults do not protect them as they should. It's in this context that we need to talk to them and listen to them. It's great, because Zachary expresses himself extremely well, what he says is brilliant, and we really need to listen to him.

There are organizations that go out into the field. In Quebec, an organization called Le Ciel sends people to schools to listen to young people. Young people talk about their problems with these people. This is a two-way educational process. Adults are also starting to learn about what is going on. Together, we must try to build healthy lifestyles, talk about how to introduce screens and then social media at a certain point in a general way, in order to reap the benefits and limit harms.

Of course, laws are guidelines, which brings me back to my starting point. Laws obviously work to regulate the industry, but also to convey information to parents. They receive information to indicate, for example, that this is bad before the age of 13 for reasons X and Y. It's also a way to raise their awareness. They are guides that adults, children and teenagers can grow up with and say to themselves, for example, that this has been defined by science, which says that from a certain age, there should not be such a feature.

There is this interaction between the three factors.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Champoux, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Martin Champoux: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Desrosiers, one of the recommendations you presented to the committee really strikes a chord with me. It's the one that consists of redistributing the proceeds from the proposed tax on digital services, the infamous DST, which the government withdrew in the hope of gaining advantages in its negotiations with Mr. Trump,

which came to nothing. The Bloc Québécois is proposing to bring back this tax in the form of a levy to help the media and culture sectors.

You are proposing it to the committee for a different purpose, I imagine.

We know that this tax could generate $1.2 billion or $1.3 billion in revenue per year. So it's an interesting tool.

How would you allocate the funds generated by this tax?

● (1245)

Guy Desrosiers: I would reallocate it to all the necessary actions. We talked about lifestyle habits earlier, but the funds could also be allocated to the media world, which is suffering greatly from the aspirations of the digital giants, who are sucking up the entire economy. There are the media, but also retail, among others. I think it's necessary for all of society.

I would go further and say that these funds could help change a social phenomenon, a health phenomenon. There is something called the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, which you all know about, since you are in Ottawa. According to the Ottawa charter, to address a phenomenon, we must educate individuals and take action on environments, laws and institutions. We have talked about education in schools and laws to regulate societies and empower individuals, both young people and parents. I therefore refer you to this model for action, the Ottawa charter, which is used around the world to address social issues.

Martin Champoux: You've also raised an interesting point, which is that the programs and initiatives that have been put in place are not well known. Perhaps they are not well publicized. We discovered this during our study. There are a host of very interesting initiatives that have been proposed to us by various groups from across Canada, including Quebec.

Translating tools is not a given, because it incurs costs. Organizations don't always have the means to undertake this translation work.

Beyond translation, how can we raise awareness of the tools you mentioned, such as MediaSmarts, a group that testified before this committee, as well as Media-Start and others?

Guy Desrosiers: Yes, there is also Cybertip, for example. There are indeed several solutions that exist, but they're not well known due to a lack of funding. The lack of funding also prevents some resources from being properly translated, since we don't rely solely on artificial intelligence for translation. When you're in the health care field, you must validate your content.

Earlier, one woman, whose name escapes me, gave a presentation that was every bit as interesting as all the others, and she said she was looking for tools for parents. I would tell her to visit the PAUSE website, pauseyourscreen.com or pausetonécran.com. There she will find resources for parents, educators and young people. There are quizzes, self-tests and references for people experiencing problems. These are all Canadian references that we try to put online as much as possible to help you.

Martin Champoux: In closing, I want to repeat what I said earlier to my colleague Mr. Waugh, who seemed much more pessimistic than I am about the usefulness of the data and information we're gathering in this study.

It's true that much of the work has not resulted in concrete legislative proposals. Some bills have died on the Order Paper, of course, but I am hopeful that what we have done as part of this study will be useful.

All of you should rest assured that your testimony has been extremely valuable and that we will certainly take it into account in the recommendations we make to our analysts for drafting the report.

This report will not be shelved, Mr. Waugh.

Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Ms. Thomas, you have the floor for five minutes.

Rachael Thomas: All right, my first question is for Josephine.

Josephine, you have the undivided attention of members of Parliament from the Bloc Québécois, the Liberals and the Conservatives. Our eyes are entirely on a screen in front of us, and you are on that screen. If there is a message you want to drive home today about young people using social media and what government can do to make things better for you and your peers, what do you want us to know?

Josephine Maharaj: Hello. I think what the government needs to know is that any sort of success with a social media ban or restriction or with having an Internet we are not beholden to would come from communicating with young people. Young people include children, teenagers and young adults. It's not just one group or category of youth.

Also, I think success for us would look like an Internet that is still there, that exists, as does social media, and it's going to continue to. A sentiment that has been repeated often today by the witnesses is that we're not looking to abandon the Internet or social media. It's here to stay.

Success is the ability to navigate it mindfully and to log off and live our lives, without it being easily accessible all the time. It's a tool, at the end of the day, and tools are meant to be put down.

In terms of sextortion, image-based abuse and CSAM, whether it's generated by AI or collected by predators, it has real-life consequences by those who commit heinous acts of harm.

I think that's what I have to say.

Thank you very much, MP Thomas, for the time to speak.

● (1250)

Rachael Thomas: You're very welcome. Thank you so much for answering the question. I know it can be a bit overwhelming in this group, but you spoke very well.

My next question is for Luna.

I was reading a number of things, and one thing that came up for me in my reading was that the amount of child abuse rose significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. I was curious whether you could comment as to why that might be the case and how Luna was able to respond to that.

Karen Orser: We saw a significant increase over time through COVID. Particularly as the pandemic carried on and kids were back in school, lots of abuse was reported.

It's hard to have a really clear, definitive answer. However, I would say that educators are often the number one reporting source.

During that time, when kids were out of school, we saw increases in abuse in the home. We saw an increase in sibling abuse. As the pandemic went along, we saw increasing reports near the end as those reports came in and kids started to get back in school. Then those reports and disclosures came forward. It was a staggering increase that we saw after COVID.

Rachael Thomas: Wow.

Karen Orser: School was a significant protective factor.

Rachael Thomas: Yes, that's an excellent observation. Thank you for sharing that.

One thing you also talked about in your opening remarks was that you're seeing an increase in the number of cases coming forward where some sort of online contact is part of the larger picture of abuse. Do you care to comment on that and what you're observing and why that might be?

Karen Orser: I think it's the vast amount of exposure that children have. We're not talking minutes; it's hours and hours a day. Kids are connected almost all the time. I did provide some stats in my brief on that.

At some point, the huge amount of increased exposure is increasing the probability that they're being contacted through these applications. Then we're seeing that those online instances are often translating to in-person, where kids are meeting offenders in public, in malls and in cars.

I will also re-reference the increase in sexual exploitation files that we're seeing at Luna. Those are related to ease of access to kids online.

Rachael Thomas: Thank you. I appreciate that.

Maybe I'll put my final question this way: What is the number one thing that we as legislators need to know as we're considering legislation?

Karen Orser: I don't know that I could say it any better than Josephine, Sara or any of the other witnesses. I think I've heard today that all of the answers are here and are very clear. It's also very clear that the complexity of this issue, like any other large, messy social problem, requires a multipronged approach. We need to do something.

I think somebody earlier on said that we can't wait till we have a perfect solution. Kids are being harmed every single day. In everything we do in working toward solutions and integrating our knowledge and the understanding we have of the severe, long-term social and economic consequences for children, their families and our society, we need to move forward every day with something. This is about educating children, parents and teachers. It is about holding platforms accountable. It is about engaging everybody in this without delay.

● (1255)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Myles, you have the floor for the final five minutes.

David Myles: Josephine, I'll go back to you for a second, because your testimony was really great.

You mentioned that it's a tool and I agree. I think part of what we're struggling with is whether it, as it exists right now, is too addictive or too dangerous a tool for people to use.

I think early on when we did this, we talked about cigarettes and the idea of who has access to them, how we regulate them and how heavily regulated they are now. We know that social media is super addictive.

Primarily, Josephine, I just wonder if in your mind, as a person who interacts with social media, you feel that it, as it exists now, needs to be regulated or changed given the way it behaves, the way you interact with it and how it interacts with you?

Josephine Maharaj: That's a big question.

I will only be able to answer it from the perspective as a teenager—not someone Zachary's age or even younger who is online.

When we engage with it mindfully and remember how powerful it is.... I think one common saying is that it's basically a rocket in our hands. That's one thing that was parroted to me when I was younger. When we engage with that mindset, it can be good. It can be used for good. It can be used to communicate with others and experience, or at least listen to, people's perspectives that are different from our own.

Originally, way back in 2000, the olden days—or not the olden days, but when it was originally presented to us—it was presented to us as a form of communication. At the end of the day, if we take the time to think about how we interact with it, it can be used for that intent. Obviously, it can also be used as a form of harm, as we've heard today from the witnesses and as I'm sure you've also heard in the other committee hearings.

I'm not sure if that answers the question exactly, but that's my own experience of it. It can be good if we're mindful.

David Myles: It absolutely does. It's so great to hear you speak. I feel like this is a voice that we've been missing in this committee, and it is really valuable to have you express it so clearly. Thank you very much.

I'll ask a question of Sara Austin, if it's okay.

I have a question about regulations and regulating big tech. Now that we're seeing it happen in international environments, what do you see as the probability...? How does that go down?

I understand there are lots of lawsuits in America, but what are we seeing internationally in terms of getting under the hood and regulating big tech?

Sara Austin: Canada has an opportunity now to look to other countries. Canada has already been studying this for years. We know that our government, the Department of Canadian Heritage and the Department of Justice have looked at models in Europe and around the world. They've looked at the best practices.

They obviously had a false start last year with Bill C-63. There were flaws in it. We know that the current minister of heritage has been working on new legislation. This committee has been hearing from numerous experts on this topic. There's clear consensus from a wide range of experts that an online safety act needs to include core elements around the duty of care, independent regulations, safety by default, age-appropriate design and public interest research so that data can be accessible in order to measure the harms and have AI systems in scope.

There is a clear consensus from leading experts across Canada on this topic. We can't look at a social media ban alone. We need to look at online regulations that look at the full scope of digital harms affecting children.

We're urging the government to get this legislation tabled and for all members of Parliament to work together, to find consensus and to work quickly. Again, it's not going to be the silver bullet, but we know what has worked in other jurisdictions. We can take the best-in-class examples, apply them here in Canada and amend the legislation as the digital landscape evolves.

David Myles: Quickly, are the big tech companies in these international experiences changing their behaviour in those circumstances?

Sara Austin: They're being forced to change behaviour and being held accountable when there are consequences and when they've caused harm. We know that in Canada the tech industry is funding a major effort to try to oppose this legislation. It should get all our spidey senses up.

We see Meta funding studies that support age restrictions, because it lets them off the hook. Meta will be off the hook if we impose age restrictions, because that doesn't force them to change any of their behaviour. It puts the onus back on Apple for doing the age verification.

We need legislation that looks at this in a robust way and that follows best practices from jurisdictions around the world. That's where we create a solution that really puts our children first.

● (1300)

David Myles: I think that's a really important point. Thank you very much for bringing that up.

The Chair: It's been really valuable testimony from everybody today. Thank you to Children First Canada for bringing young people who are wise beyond their years and to everyone else for your valuable testimony.

As Carol Todd mentioned at the beginning, she's already submitted a brief to this committee, which we will all read. If anybody else has something they didn't manage to get on the record today or further points that occurred to you afterwards, please don't hesitate to send us that detail in an email. We can include it in our report.

This is our last meeting on this topic. It's been really eye-opening.

Once again, I thank everyone for their participation.

Seeing that we're out of time, I consider this meeting adjourned.