

Free to Be Safe Online: Youth Call for Action in Children's Mental Health Week

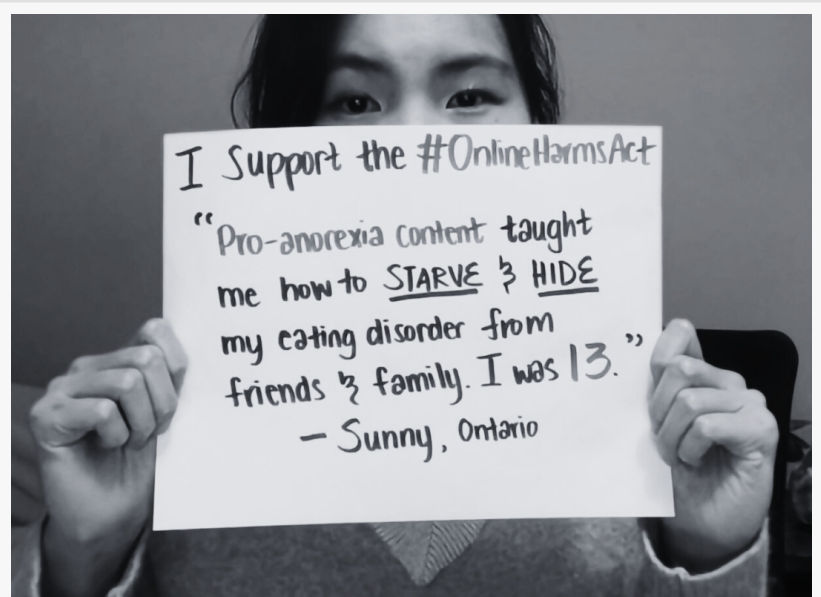
Youth across Canada support the Online Harms Act and demand the right to be safe from harm online.

TORONTO, ON, CANADA, May 8, 2024 /EINPresswire.com/ -- During Children's Mental Health Week, Myles Ahead, Advancing Child and Youth Mental Health, together with youth collaborators, launch their [#FreeToBeSafe](#) call to action in support of Canada's proposed Online Harms Act (Bill C-63).

For far too long, and with knowledge of the harms caused, 'Big Tech' has ignored recommendations to safeguard children and youth. And despite having the tools to detect, track, and prevent some of the most egregious, illegal, and harmful content, they have failed to implement

minimum e-safety standards. Bill C-63 will hold social media companies accountable for their services and content they market to children and youth. 'Big Tech' will need to proactively mitigate against seven types of harmful content, including child sex abuse material and content that induces a child to self-harm. Removal orders and significant fines for breaches will apply.

As a child and youth life-promotion organization, Myles Ahead remains steadfast in our call for enhanced online safety measures. We're deeply troubled by the proliferation of 'pro-suicide' platforms, operated by 'incels' and other radical extremist groups, preying on the most vulnerable members of society. Tragically, these platforms are linked to several deaths among young people in Canada and worldwide, directly contradicting established suicide prevention evidence and efforts.



You can demand a safer online world for children and youth!

#FreeToBeSafe #OnlineHarmsAct

Scan the QR code or click the description link to take action today.

Sunny, 24, on the impact of social media on her mental health

Yet, this is just the beginning of the trends that Bill C-63 aims to address. From sextortion to 'deep fakes,' revenge pornography, child abuse material, and algorithms relentlessly pushing self-harm and pro-anorexia content, these unregulated phenomena underscore a concerning global uptick in mental health challenges among young people.

Samantha, 26, reflects on her experiences when she first started to interact online: "I distinctly remember the first time I saw self-harm, suicide and eating disorder content online as a young person. I did not seek it out, but it immediately took its hold on me. I feel strongly that exposure to this online content initiated and maintained my own challenges with mental health over the next decade.

Social media normalized self-injury when I was only 11 years old. I wonder if I would have struggled with self-harm for over a decade if I had not been exposed to this content at such a young age. I was just a kid. Canadian youth deserve to feel safe in online spaces, and to have opportunities to connect with peers online without being targeted by malicious algorithms.

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Today, we #EndStigma about the real-life mental health impacts of the online world, and the urgent need to protect kids from harms online.”

Leslie Kulperger, CEO & Founder, Myles Ahead

Social media companies need to be held accountable in prioritizing wellbeing and safety over engagement on their platforms.”

Sunny is another young woman who shares these sentiments, revealing that at age 13, she learned online how to starve and hide her eating disorder from friends and family. Sunny and Samantha are part of a group of young people who are courageously sharing their insights through a Canadian study to better understand the rising trend of acute distress and eating disorder-related

hospitalizations since the onset of COVID-19.

In the group's collective experiences, they've identified the harmful impacts of social media on their mental well-being. As platform algorithms grow increasingly adept at targeting them with self-injury, eating disorder, and suicide-related content, Sunny, Samantha, and their peers find



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- ANONYMOUS, ONTARIO

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Samantha, 26, sharing her experience with social media

themselves trapped in what they describe as a “vicious cycle” of online engagement. Furthermore, emerging from the pandemic-induced isolation, they recount feeling “bombarded” and “targeted” by the relentless onslaught of harmful content.

Inspired to translate their experiences and the group’s research insights into concrete action, Samantha and Sunny joined forces with Myles Ahead and fellow young advocates across Canada to launch #FreeToBeSafe. By courageously sharing their stories, they hope to #EndStigma and shed light on the online dangers facing children and youth, underscoring the urgent need for reform.

Founder and Executive Director of Myles Ahead, Leslie Kulperger, emphasizes that endorsing Bill C-63 is a crucial step towards implementing a comprehensively integrated approach for suicide prevention. By addressing key factors contributing to the surge in children and youth mental health challenges, such as those highlighted by Sunny and Samantha, we can move towards a safer and healthier future for all.

"We know there are a combination of factors driving youth distress. Creating a safer digital world is one area that we have the power to address, and it has the potential to save lives. The research confirms that there is unprecedented pressure across our systems, particularly in our hospitals, and more is needed to prevent mental health crises and keep kids out of hospital. We also need to improve our responses to ensure young people get the care that will support their recovery. Our overstretched Emergency Rooms can be overwhelming, stigmatizing, and inadequate to meet kids’ needs. Myles Ahead developed the [SaFER Space](#) model to address the need for a calm, quiet, and therapeutic space with peer support for young people and their families -- a space where they can share their online experiences and interactions without blame, shame, or stigma. Developed with youth and families, the SaFER Space is about ensuring youth can develop appropriate solutions, including, importantly, the use of tools to support safety, interventions to address online interactions, and links to follow-up community supports once they leave hospital." — Leslie Kulperger, Founder & Executive Director, Myles Ahead

Leslie says that Myles Ahead's mission is for a child-centred world that ultimately prevents crises and saves lives: "As digital citizens, we all share responsibilities in creating a healthier online world. A groundswell of communities and professionals are sounding the alarm and need for urgent change. Ontario school boards are suing Big Tech for knowingly creating harmful addictive algorithms that are affecting kids and the classroom. Alongside parents, and healthcare professionals, they are daily addressing the fall-out from the failure to mitigate against harms to children online."

In sharing their experiences and hopes for a safer online future, young people are breaking the stigma, silence, and shame that surrounds the impacts of social media on their mental health. In the spirit of Children's Mental Health Week, they are asking the community to #EndStigma, by adding their name to #FreeToBeSafe, and ensure the Online Harms Act is ratified in Canada.

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