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President Biden Highlights Online Safety for Children in State of the Union Address

ChildFund applauds President Biden and his administration for highlighting in last night's state of the union address the importance of tech platform accountability for keeping children and youth safe online. In his speech, President Biden outlined his Unity Agenda, which included tackling the mental health crisis, particularly among children. He acknowledged the toll that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on young people "whose lives and education [have been] turned upside down," but noted that children were struggling before the pandemic with "bullying, violence, trauma and the harms of social media." He then recognized Facebook whistleblower Francis Haugen, who was in attendance and was given a standing ovation for her courage in standing up to Big Tech. Biden stated, "We must hold social media platforms accountable for the national experiment they are conducting on our children for profit. It's time to strengthen privacy protections, ban targeted advertising to children, and demand tech companies stop collecting personal data on our children."

The administration released a detailed fact sheet ahead of the address to outline further details of its strategy to keep children safe online, including "... prioritizing safety by design standards and practices for online platforms, products, and services." The fact sheet also states, "The President believes not only that we should have far stronger protections for children's data and privacy, but that the platforms and other interactive digital service providers should be required to prioritize and ensure the health, safety and well-being of children and young people above profit and revenue in the design of their products and services."

ChildFund continues to lead the fight against the online sexual exploitation and abuse of children (OSEAC). Each day, more than 175,000 children go online for the first time, and reports of online sexual exploitation and violence have skyrocketed in the last few years. This crisis has been further exacerbated by the pandemic that forced millions of the world's children online for education and social interaction during lockdown and ongoing school closures. In 2021, there were [29.3 million reports of online child sexual abuse materials, including nearly 85 million videos](#), files and images. Children are online more and with less supervision than ever, and it is imperative that tech companies take responsibility for the platforms they have created, which are designed to be addictive and, in many cases, heighten online dangers from cyberbullying and harassment to child sexual exploitation and trafficking.

The U.S. lags behind other countries such as the U.K. and Australia, which have already instituted strict data and privacy restrictions and strong legislation around internet safety. The time is now for decisive action and leadership in the fight against OSEAC.

ChildFund’s senior director for External Engagement, Erin Kennedy, says, “We welcome the commitment from President Biden last night. The online abuse of children has been ignored for far too long. When young people learn how to drive, we support them with instructions and adult-supervised practice to learn how to safely navigate a vehicle. But when children go online, we have no such guardrails. Illegal and exploitative images that show or encourage child sexual abuse continue to traumatize child victims and leave parents scared and confused. I hope this is the start of a national commitment to raise awareness about OSEAC and hold the technology companies and platforms enabling this horrific abuse accountable.” Kennedy stresses that while regulation is one side of the solution, it is also important to work with parents, children, teachers and communities to raise awareness of this crime in all spaces where children and caregivers gather.

These words from the president and the outlined agenda are a positive step in the right direction toward the ultimate goal of ending OSEAC for good. The U.S. Congress should follow the lead of the president to center children’s health and safety online. ChildFund fully supports these and any future measures the administration takes to keep children safe online. Children all over the world have been victimized and are suffering – inaction can no longer be tolerated.

For more information about OSEAC and how ChildFund is responding to this threat, visit <https://www.childfund.org/oseac/>.

About ChildFund

Founded in 1938, ChildFund works throughout Asia, Africa and the Americas — including the United States — to connect children with what they need to grow up healthy, educated, skilled and safe, no matter where they are. Last year, we reached 16.2 million children and family members in 24 countries. About 200,000 Americans support our work by sponsoring individual children or investing in ChildFund programs. Find out more at www.ChildFund.org.