SAFEGUARDING AND IMPROVING YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH IN THE DIGITAL ERA

A Call to Action

From the President of the Child Mind Institute

Child Mind Institute

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CHILD MIND INSTITUTE

The Child Mind Institute is dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families experiencing mental health and learning disorders through excellence in science, care, and education. We've become the leading independent nonprofit in children's mental health by providing gold-standard evidence-based care, delivering educational resources to millions of families each year, training educators in underserved communities, and developing tomorrow's breakthrough treatments.

HAROLD S. KOPLEWICZ, MD
FOUNDING PRESIDENT AND MEDICAL DIRECTOR
CHILD MIND INSTITUTE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

One in five children and adolescents worldwide struggle with mental health challenges. This generation is the first to grow up fully immersed in digital environments that fundamentally shape how they live, learn, and connect. While digital technologies — from smartphones and social media to AI-powered platforms — offer remarkable opportunities, they also introduce documented risks that demand immediate, coordinated action.

Based on our independent clinical experience, rigorous research, and deep engagement with young people and their families, the Child Mind Institute has developed a comprehensive position on technology's impact on youth mental health. This report translates our findings into concrete recommendations for stakeholders across sectors — guided by our framework for **Next Generation Digital Therapeutics (NGDT),** a model pioneered by the Child Mind Institute that emphasizes **responsible-by-design development, rapid-cycle evaluation, scalable reach, youth-centered solutions, and a guiding principle of "do no harm."**

Seeding this next generation of solutions requires large-scale investment in institutions like the Child Mind Institute's NGDT program, with sustainability achieved through public-private partnerships, commercialization pathways, and reimbursement mechanisms that ensure long-term access.

FIVE CRITICAL REALITIES

1 Clear evidence of harm justifies immediate action

Excessive screen time, algorithm-driven engagement designed to promote habit formation, cyberbullying, and unsafe platform design significantly harm youth well-being. Existing evidence is sufficient to warrant protective measures now.

2 Innovation outpaces protection

Technology development — particularly in artificial intelligence — advances faster than the research and regulatory safeguards to protect young users. We must implement precautionary safeguards while accelerating targeted research using rapid-cycle, adaptive evaluation models.

3 Industry partnership is nonnegotiable

Technology companies possess unparalleled behavioral data essential for evidence-based improvements. Transparent data sharing with appropriate privacy protections must become standard practice, not a nice to have.

4 Youth voice is essential, not optional

As digital natives, young people possess unique insights. Meaningful youth participation in research, policy development, and platform design is crucial for creating effective, practical solutions.

5 AI amplifies both opportunities and risks

Generative AI is amplifying both the opportunities and vulnerabilities in digital life. It can catalyze creativity, connection, and learning — but also magnify harmful behaviors, risks, and inequities. Comprehensive, ethical governance frameworks are urgently needed.

WHAT IS NGDT?

Next Generation Digital Therapeutics (NGDT) is a new model pioneered by the Child Mind Institute for developing youth-focused digital mental health solutions. NGDT ensures digital therapeutics are grounded in science and satisfy the needs of youth before they reach the marketplace. Here are its main principles:

Responsible by design	Privacy, safety, and mental health impact are built in from the start.
“Do no harm” as a guiding principle	Interventions are designed with safety first, acknowledging that inaction carries its own risks. NGDT uses real-world testing, expertise, and lived experience to continuously weigh costs and benefits.
Protected pre-commercial space	A science-first incubation model shields innovations from premature commercial pressures.
Rapid-cycle evaluation	Tools are tested and refined in real-world contexts within months, not years or decades.
Scalable and broad reach	Tools are validated across diverse populations, delivered in multiple languages, and readily usable across high- and low-resource settings.
Youth-centered	Young people are active partners in design and evaluation.
Cross-sector convening	We unite public, private, philanthropic, and youth voices to set standards and accelerate impact.
Sustainable pathways	Innovations are backed by large-scale investment and commercialization strategies that preserve scientific integrity while ensuring long-term access.

THE CHALLENGE: **MENTAL HEALTH MEETS DIGITAL REALITY**

Mental health challenges among young people have reached crisis levels, with one in five children and adolescents experiencing significant difficulties worldwide. This is not merely a domestic phenomenon — youth across cultures and continents face similar struggles as digital technologies reshape childhood and adolescence globally.

The stakes could not be higher. Digital technologies now fundamentally shape neural development, social learning, and emotion regulation during the most critical periods of human growth. And the phenomenon is global, with youth across cultures and continents facing similar struggles. Protecting young people's digital environments is not merely a technology issue — it is a public health imperative that transcends national borders.

In our clinics, we see adolescents whose sleep cycles are disrupted by late-night social media use, leading to cascading anxiety and academic struggles. We also encounter young people struggling with depression deepened by cyberbullying, and attention difficulties exacerbated by constant stimulation. Yet we also witness technology's power to connect isolated youth, provide crucial mental health resources, and expand access to care for underserved communities.

Technology is only one piece of the puzzle — it intersects with broader social determinants such as poverty, discrimination, and access to care. The NGDT model is designed to complement, not replace, systemic efforts to address these issues.

OUR POSITION: **EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS**

SOCIAL MEDIA AND DIGITAL PLATFORMS

While social platforms can foster connection and provide lifelines for marginalized youth, the evidence of harm is undeniable: disrupted sleep, social comparison, compulsive use, cyberbullying, and exposure to harmful content. We see these patterns daily in our clinics.

Following public health precedents, the Child Mind Institute supports precautionary safeguards on technology that are justified by current evidence. We need:

- Age-appropriate design standards with stronger protections for users under 18
- Algorithm and platform transparency requirements with independent audits
- Mandatory mental health impact assessments for new features targeting young users — the core NGDT principle of responsible-by-design
- Technology literacy initiatives that make it clear what a given technology, tool, or platform *is* (and what it is not), so families, educators, and young people can make informed choices

TECHNOLOGY IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

Early evidence indicates that unrestricted phone access in classrooms impairs learning, increases distraction, and may heighten peer stress. We recommend schools adopt evidence-informed phone policies limiting access during the school day, especially instructional periods, implemented fairly so all students benefit. Just as important, further research is needed to clarify impacts and guide best practices, alongside mental health literacy curricula that teach healthy technology relationships.

HARNESSING DATA FOR GLOBAL GOOD

Digital devices generate insights into youth behavior that could revolutionize prevention and care. We call for:

- Privacy-first governance with family consent at the center
- Independent research access to industry data under strict protocols
- Rapid-cycle evaluation in real-world environments

RESPONSIBLE INNOVATION IN PRACTICE: **NGDT v1.0**

By implementing its NGDT model, the Child Mind Institute has developed technologies aligned with the principles we propose. Projects such as **Mirror**, an AI-enabled journaling platform that transforms self-reflection into scalable mental health screening and personalized feedback while detecting distress and initiating crisis support when needed; **Kandoo**, a gamified, AR-enriched digital companion for behavioral activation therapy that aims to support engagement and measurement through a continuous loop between youth and clinician, with caregiver updates to reinforce progress; and **Curious**, a no-code platform for creating and deploying evidence-based digital assessments and interventions (e.g., ecological momentary assessments [EMAs], single-session interventions [SSIs], and cognitive tasks) at scale, enabling rapid innovation and real-world testing, demonstrate how technology can expand access while maintaining scientific rigor.

Together, they mark the transition of NGDT from a research incubator to an enduring, applied ecosystem — responsibly scaling innovations from laboratory prototypes to sustainable tools that expand access to care.

All three are being advanced within the Child Mind Institute's NGDT model, which emphasizes:

- **Validation through rigorous testing** — Mirror has undergone extensive synthetic and real-world journaling entry evaluations; Kandoo is in active iterative testing for usability and therapeutic engagement; Curious is being validated through online platforms, open competitions, and deployment in major research studies such as the Child Mind Institute's Healthy Brain Network and NKI-Rockland Sample II
- **User research across diverse youth and family populations**, grounding design in lived experience
- **Multi-language, multi-setting deployment** so tools are accessible globally, across schools, homes, and health systems
- **Integration into care systems** to complement — not replace — the human relationships central to mental health support

Together, these projects exemplify NGDT's protected pre-commercial model: Innovations are incubated, stress-tested, and refined without premature market pressures. The spinout of Mirror underscores how the NGDT pipeline responsibly shepherds tools from research to scale, while Kandoo and Curious continue to advance as next-generation interventions and infrastructure for digital mental health.

They also map to a stepped-care approach: Lightweight, scalable tools like Mirror can serve as **entry points** that identify need and provide immediate support. **Mid-intensity interventions** like Kandoo engage families in structured behavioral activation. **Flexible platforms** like Curious enable deployment of validated assessments and interventions across schools and clinics. This layered model helps ensure the **right level of support at the right time**, while conserving scarce clinical resources for those with the highest needs.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE GOVERNANCE

Young people increasingly interact with AI systems through chatbots, recommendation algorithms, and personalized content, risking significant harm to them when there aren't proper safeguards. The rise of general-purpose AI tools being used for therapeutic advice underscores the urgency: Millions of young people are already turning to systems that were never designed or validated, or regulated for mental health care. These tools may provide short-term comfort but lack developmental safeguards, crisis protocols, and clinical grounding — creating the possible risk of deep harm.

The Child Mind Institute's position is clear: Youth mental health requires **fit-for-purpose AI applications**, developed within a science-first framework, not adapted from systems designed for unrelated purposes. These systems must be aligned with the developmental needs and lived realities of children and adolescents — closing the gap between what technology can do and what young people actually need in mental health support. This is the role of the NGDT model — to build, test, and refine digital therapeutics specifically for young people's needs before they reach the marketplace.

WHY FIT FOR PURPOSE MATTERS

General-purpose AI was not built for mental health. Fit-for-purpose applications developed through NGDT are:

- Scientifically validated before scaling
- Developmentally appropriate, with safeguards matched to age and context
- Crisis-ready, with escalation to human support when needed
- Designed to complement, not replace, human care

Fit-for-purpose AI developed within NGDT helps bridge the growing care gap by extending clinicians' reach and supporting early identification, triage, and follow-up for young people who might otherwise go unseen.

Essential safeguards must include:

- **Age-informed design and usage** — AI interactions should align with developmental stage, with stricter protections for younger children and graduated autonomy for adolescents, always with clear consent frameworks
- **Age verification and protection standards** to prevent unsafe or exploitative use
- **Safety filters** for harmful or inappropriate content to reduce exposure risk
- **Transparency requirements and independent audits** of training data, system behavior, and decision-making
- **Crisis protocols** that escalate to human support when risk of self-harm or other emergencies is detected
- **Educational resources that demystify AI tools** — clearly explaining to children and adolescents what the tools are, what they can and cannot do, their limitations, and when to seek help from adults

The Child Mind Institute calls for international coordination to align AI safety standards across borders.

PRIORITIZING WHAT WORKS NOW

Not all digital applications carry the same risk or reward. While the idea of autonomous "AI therapists" captures the public imagination, these systems are among the most complex, least validated, and riskiest use cases.

The Child Mind Institute's **NGDT** model emphasizes a more responsible path: **prioritizing "low-hanging fruit" applications that deliver immediate, scalable value with lower risk profiles**. Examples include:

- **Supporting providers in assessment and intervention** — augmenting clinical judgment with AI-assisted tools that flag risk signals, standardize scoring, and ensure evidence-based practices
- **Improving efficiency of clinical workflows** — reducing administrative burden by automating documentation, screening, and triage, so clinicians can spend more time on direct care
- **Lowering skill thresholds for delivery** — enabling schools, community programs, and paraprofessionals to administer validated assessments or structured interventions with confidence and fidelity
- **Enhancing training and supervision** — using AI to provide structured feedback loops for new providers, helping raise baseline quality across diverse and under-resourced settings

By focusing on these "low-hanging fruit" applications first, we can:

- Deliver population-level benefit faster, expanding access despite the severe shortage of youth mental health professionals and services.
- Protect against overreach in unproven, unsafe areas like unsupervised therapy chatbots
- Build trust with families, educators, providers, and policymakers by showing that digital tools can raise the floor of care quality while preserving the irreplaceable role of human relationships

This disciplined prioritization reflects NGDT's core commitment: **fit-for-purpose, responsible-by-design digital therapeutics that meet urgent youth needs safely and effectively.**

MEASURING IMPACT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The Child Mind Institute's NGDT approach is built not just to innovate but to deliver measurable impact. Success must be tracked across multiple dimensions, with an emphasis on prioritizing high-value, lower-risk applications before scaling more complex tools.

KEY METRICS OF SUCCESS

- **Uptake and access:** Number of youth, families, schools, and providers reached; evidence of equitable access across income, geography, and language groups
- **Impact on well-being:** Demonstrated improvements in youth outcomes (e.g., reduced anxiety and depression symptoms, improved sleep, earlier connection to care)
- **Safety and safeguards:** Reductions in harmful exposures (e.g., unsafe design features, unmoderated content) when NGDT-aligned safeguards are implemented
- **Efficiency gains:** Documented improvements in provider workflows — less time on administration, more time on direct care — and evidence of raised baseline quality through training and supervision support
- **Global reach:** Deployment of validated tools across diverse cultural and resource settings, with adaptations tested in international contexts
- **Policy and systems change:** NGDT principles codified into legislation, platform safety standards, and educational policies
- **Continuous evaluation:** Regular rapid-cycle reporting to refine interventions in real-world conditions within months, not years or decades

CLOSING THE EVIDENCE GAP

Most technology companies cannot run rigorous, youth-focused clinical trials — yet this kind of testing is essential if digital tools are to be trusted and scaled responsibly. The Child Mind Institute has shown how this can be done, using resources like the Healthy Brain Network, the Youth Mental Health Academy (YMHA), and NGDT pilots to pair digital innovation with large-scale data infrastructure and clinical expertise. This example demonstrates how scientific evaluation can and should be embedded into the development of youth digital tools across the field.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY

NGDT tracks not only the creation of new tools, but also the order in which they are deployed. Early emphasis is on fit-for-purpose, low-hanging fruit applications that:

- Strengthen the quality and efficiency of existing care systems
- Lower barriers for underserved communities
- Build trust among families, educators, providers, and policymakers

Above all, NGDT operates under a guiding principle to do no harm. This means balancing the risks of innovation against the costs of inaction, with ongoing cost–benefit analysis grounded in research, clinical expertise, and lived experience. Though it must be acknowledged that even the most responsible innovation cannot be perfect. Our commitment is to identify and address missteps quickly, learn from them openly, and continuously improve the systems that young people depend on.

CALL TO ACTION: GLOBAL IMPERATIVES

STAKEHOLDER	PRIORITY ACTIONS
Policymakers	• Pass digital safety legislation • Mandate algorithmic auditing and transparency • Establish AI safety standards for youth • Require reporting on youth safety metrics • Fund accelerated digital therapeutics research
Technology companies	• Commit to transparent data sharing and co-develop solutions with independent researchers • Adopt safety-by-design principles • Implement youth safeguards, such as age-appropriate defaults and crisis protocols • Submit to regular independent safety audits
Researchers and funders	• Accelerate rapid-cycle, youth-participatory research • Ensure open and reproducible standards; share data responsibly • Translate findings into practice quickly through collaborative convenings • Large-scale investment in NGDT-model programs is essential for seeding and moving research innovations into enduring, applied systems of care — sustaining them through public-private partnerships, commercialization, and reimbursement pathways
Educators and families	• Implement evidence-based phone policies in schools • Integrate digital literacy and mental health curricula • Model balanced technology use • Advocate for safeguards that protect youth online and offline
Young people	• Be empowered as partners, not subjects • Co-design solutions; advocate for safer platforms • Hold adults accountable for building transparent, protective digital ecosystems

THE CHILD MIND INSTITUTE'S COMMITMENT

As a leading voice in youth mental health, the Child Mind Institute commits to advancing rigorous research that informs evidence-based policy and practice. We will continue elevating the voices of young people and convening stakeholders across public, private, philanthropic, and youth sectors to accelerate collaborative solutions. Our experience leading **youth-empowering learning initiatives** such as YMHA — where young people gain skills, collaborate with researchers, clinicians, companies, and communicators, and help shape emerging programs and priorities — demonstrates how equipping youth with real influence strengthens both the solutions and the systems designed to support them.

Our work developing innovative interventions harnesses technology's potential while mitigating risks. **Guided by a commitment to do no harm**, we will ensure every innovation is tested, refined, and evaluated transparently — recognizing that the cost of inaction can also harm young people.

The NGDT framework creates a **protected pre-commercial space** where digital therapeutics can be developed, tested, and validated without premature commercial pressures — ensuring solutions are grounded in science and youth needs before they reach the marketplace.

CONCLUSION: THE TIME IS NOW

We stand at a crossroads. The decisions made today will shape current and future generations' mental health outcomes worldwide. Digital technologies present both unprecedented opportunities and significant risks. We cannot afford to wait for perfect certainty while young people suffer. These challenges transcend borders, requiring coordinated international action and shared standards for youth protection.

The next steps require **courage, patience, collaboration, and an unwavering commitment to youth well-being**. By working together — across sectors, disciplines, cultures, and generations — we can create digital environments that support rather than undermine the mental health of every young person, helping to close the widening gap between the growing demand for care and the limited workforce available to provide it.

The Child Mind Institute stands ready to lead this critical work. **Our children deserve nothing less than next-generation solutions — designed responsibly, evaluated rapidly, scaled broadly, implemented sustainably, and always guided by the principle to do no harm.**

Child Mind Institute

New York City
215 East 50th Street
New York, NY 10022
212.308.3118

San Francisco Bay Area
2000 Alameda de las Pulgas, Suite 242
San Mateo, CA 94403
650.931.6565