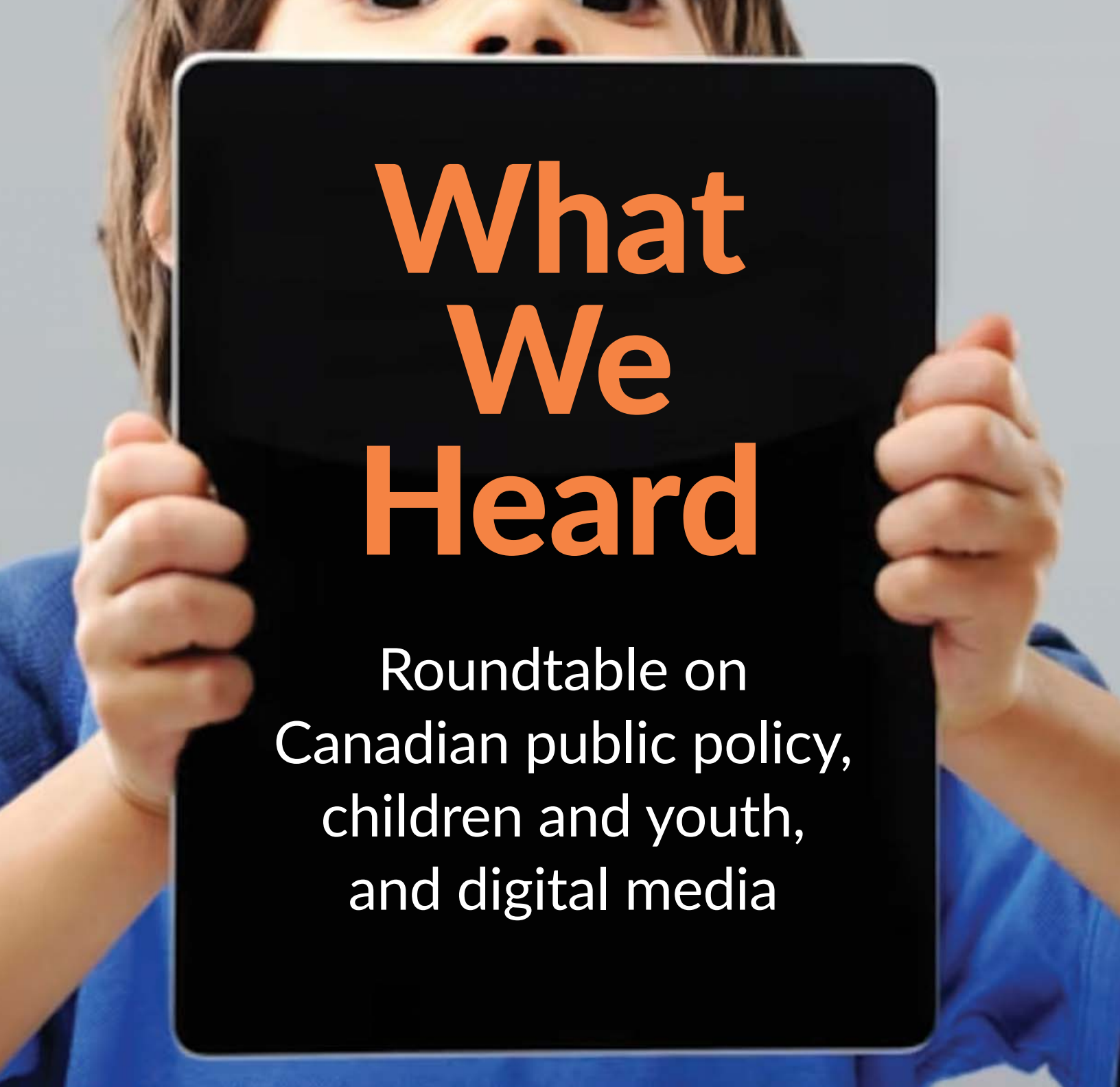


A child with long brown hair is holding a black tablet with both hands. The tablet displays the title 'What We Heard' in large orange letters and the subtitle 'Roundtable on Canadian public policy, children and youth, and digital media' in white letters. The child's face is partially visible at the top of the frame.

What We Heard

Roundtable on
Canadian public policy,
children and youth,
and digital media

June 2025



**Centre for Healthy
Screen Use**
AT THE CANADIAN PAEDIATRIC SOCIETY



Canadian
Paediatric
Society

WALTONS
TRUST



Background

The Canadian Paediatric Society (CPS) launched the Centre for Healthy Screen Use (CHSU) in 2025 with support from the Waltons Trust to help health professionals, policymakers, and families make evidence-informed decisions about how children and youth navigate digital environments.

Screen use by children and youth is no longer just an issue for individual families. Decisions and actions by governments and corporations have real consequences for kids' online experiences. That's why a key priority of the new CHSU is public policy advocacy. Working with like-minded collaborators who are also concerned about child and youth safety and well-being, the CPS is advocating for policy that minimizes the negative effects of screen use on kids' physical, mental, social, emotional, and developmental health and puts their best interests first.

To support this work, the CPS hosted a roundtable in Ottawa in June 2025, bringing together experts in research, advocacy and paediatric health to identify priorities and opportunities for collaborative action.

To open the discussion, participants explored questions about the opportunities and challenges for policy action on digital health, considering the lessons learned from other countries and jurisdictions. Then, participants worked in small groups to develop policy recommendations on five key themes: strengthening platform accountability, tightening advertising rules, strengthening age assurance, improving algorithm transparency, and expanding content reporting and support.

This report summarizes the consensus points of the day's discussions and will be used to help shape the Centre's policy and advocacy priorities for the coming months and years.



Roundtable consensus

Participants agreed that CPS advocacy on screen use and digital health policy should focus on child and youth development, supported by current, high-quality Canadian evidence. An approach centred on paediatric health and development also ensures long-term impact and relevance even in the context of rapidly changing digital, corporate and political environments.

Through knowledge sharing, group discussion and priority-setting, roundtable participants identified the following policy recommendations:

1. The federal government should create an independent regulator with the mandate and enforcement powers to ensure online platforms and services operate in the best interests of children and youth.
2. Online platforms and services must be required to divulge to an independent regulator the information necessary to enforce regulations, including the use of personalized algorithms, data handling practices, and derived user data.
3. The federal government should create policy and legislation that upholds children's right to privacy and need for special protections in digital spaces by holding tech companies accountable.
4. Federal legislation should establish a minimum age for users on digital media platforms and apply financial penalties to companies that fail to appropriately enforce this age minimum.
5. The federal government should enact legislation that prohibits social media companies from displaying any advertising on their platforms for users under the age of 18.



Discussion

How can Canadian public policy support and protect the health and development of children and youth in digital environments?

What are the key concerns about online platforms and services?

Participants outlined two pressing issues with online platforms and services that call for urgent change to ensure safe spaces for children and youth:

- **Addressing harmful design practices:** Participants agreed that the business model of online platforms and services is intentionally designed to keep kids online and maximize advertising profits. As such, they recommended policy solutions focused not just on content, but on the design features of digital platforms to ensure an upstream, proactive, and consistent approach to regulating current and future technologies that prioritizes the best interests of children and youth.
- **Improving platform transparency:** Participants emphasized the need for increased transparency around platform operation, use, and design to support improved research access, effective policy enforcement, and informed consumer knowledge. They highlighted the need for platforms to prominently display clear, easy-to-understand and age-appropriate information on their algorithms, operational practices, and data and privacy policies.

What can governments do?

Participants concluded that three principles are essential to meaningful government intervention to strengthen digital health and screen use in Canada:

- **A rights-based approach:** Leveraging Canadian commitments under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and following international examples of rights-based digital legislation, participants agreed that policy solutions and CPS advocacy should be rooted in upholding the fundamental rights

of children and youth. A rights-based approach would align with existing national and international commitments and ensure children's well-being is appropriately prioritized in ongoing policy discussions on online harms and platform accountability.

- **Comprehensiveness and flexibility:** Policy and legislation must be flexible and agile to ensure their applicability as technology changes. Features of this type of “future-proof” legislation include risk assessment requirements, wide definitions of design and privacy features (rather than focusing on specific platform types), and duty-of-care responsibilities placed on platforms.
- **Safeguards for marginalized communities:** Participants said all advocacy and policy solutions must be intentionally developed to ensure youth from marginalized communities can access safe and private community spaces online and are not disproportionately impacted by online safety legislation.

What can advocates do to bring about change?

Participants assessed how like-minded actors in this field could best collaborate to spark change. They agreed that Canadian advocacy should focus on:

- **Disrupting profit incentives:** Participants expressed the belief that platforms' interests in monetizing children's time and data are a key consideration behind potentially addictive platform designs. Keeping children and youth online for as long as possible allows digital platforms and services to maximize advertising profits and to gather greater amounts of valuable personal data. Participants called for policy solutions that deliberately disrupt these profit incentives—and create financial or legislative disincentives—to make children and youth an “unattractive market” for digital platforms and services.
- **Collaborative advocacy:** The need for collaboration and cooperation between advocates and across jurisdictions was highlighted by participants, including the need for consistent public messaging to build coalitions and demonstrate broad support for meaningful action to promote the digital health and safety of children and youth.

What can the CPS do?

Participants discussed the unique perspective the CPS and other paediatric health experts can bring to advocacy on screen use. They agreed on four objectives aligned with this expertise and credibility:

- **Focus on health and development:** Participants agreed that as an organization of child and youth health professionals, the CPS should translate, elevate and share Canadian evidence about the immediate and long-term impacts of screen use on child and youth health and development.
- **Adopt a holistic view of screen use:** While many conversations about child and youth screen use focus on what happens “on screen”, a holistic perspective would allow the CPS to explore “offline” impacts of screen use on children, including: sleep, emotional regulation, play and physical activity, family relationships, and use in educational and healthcare settings
- **Take a harm reduction approach:** Participants frequently discussed the need for the CPS to take a harm reduction approach in its recommendations and drew comparisons between substance use and screen use.
- **Support digital literacy:** Participants recommended that the CPS should support digital literacy initiatives by government and civil society organizations, connecting parents and healthcare practitioners with evidence-based, reliable information on digital literacy through the CHSU's webpage.



Where we go from here

Recognizing the ubiquity of screens in the lives of children and youth and the profound effects on their health and development, all participants in the CHSU's Advocacy Roundtable recognized the urgency in developing policy solutions to help families and communities navigate these challenges.

The priorities described in this report, and the consensus reached during these discussions, point to a need for a radical shift in policy and practice to ensure digital platforms and services fully uphold and protect the rights, safety, health, and development of children and youth.

Working together, the CPS and its partners are committed to bringing a focus on health and development to Canadian public policy discussions, including through advocating for the establishment of an independent regulator with the mandate and enforcement powers to ensure online platforms and services operate in the best interests of children and youth.

Participants

We are deeply grateful to the roundtable participants who made this report possible through their wide breadth of expertise, knowledge and experience. We would also like to thank Tanya Gracie for her expert facilitation of the roundtable and aid in planning this meeting, and Cathy Lewis, for her support throughout the planning process.

Dr. Patricia Conrod, Professor of Psychiatry and Tier 1 CRC, Université de Montréal

Marie Adèle Davis, Executive Director, Canadian Paediatric Society

Dr. Emma Duerden, Associate Professor, Western University

Dr. Gary Goldfield, Senior Scientist / Psychologist, CHEO Research Institute

Samantha Grills, Manager, Government Relations, Canadian Paediatric Society

Dr. Johanne Harvey, Paediatrician and Adolescent Medicine Specialist, CIUSSS Saguenay-Lac-St-Jean

Haley Hinkle, Policy Counsel, Fairplay

Matthew Johnson, Director of Education, MediaSmarts

Dr. Natasha Johnson, Paediatrician and Adolescent Medicine Specialist, Department of Paediatrics, McMaster University

Ness Kenalty, Program Director, Early Childhood Development, Waltons Trust

Dr. Sheri Madigan, Professor, University of Calgary

John Matheson, Canada Lead, Reset Tech

Jamie McCourt, Policy Coordinator, Canadian Paediatric Society

Dr. Charlotte Moore-Hepburn, Medical Director, Child Health Policy Accelerator, Hospital for Sick Children

Elizabeth Moreau, Associate Executive Director, Strategic Priorities and Communications, Canadian Paediatric Society

Marie-Ève Nadeau, Head of International Affairs, 5Rights Foundation

Kris Perry, Executive Director, Children and Screens, Institute of Digital Media and Child Development

Dr. Michelle Ponti, Paediatrician, Schulich School of Medicine and Dentistry at Western University, Child and Parent Resource Institute and Canadian Paediatric Society

Dr. Anne Rowan-Legg, Paediatrician, Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO)

Rajender Singh, Senior Policy Analyst, The Dais at Toronto Metropolitan University

Dr. Jhanahan Sriranjani, President: Resident's Section, Canadian Paediatric Society

Lindsay Thistle, Manager, Knowledge Translation, Canadian Paediatric Society

Dr. Tracy Vaillancourt, Professor and Tier 1 CRC, uOttawa

Dr. Sam Wong, Director of Medical Affairs, Canadian Paediatric Society

For more information

[Canadian Paediatric Society, Centre for Healthy Screen Use](#)

[Children and Screens, Institute of Digital Media and Child Development](#)

[Child Health Policy Accelerator, Hospital for Sick Children](#)

[The Dais at Toronto Metropolitan University](#)

[Determinants of Child Development Lab](#)

[The Developing Brain Lab](#)

[Dr. Tracy Vaillancourt](#)

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