

Demystifying Australia's teen social media ban

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Introduction

This explainer provides an overview of the complex issue of social media bans for young teens, by providing the background and context surrounding calls for such restrictions. It explains the technical challenges of implementing a ban, the potential risks associated with it, and the specific concerns voiced by parents and carers. By exploring the everyday realities of young people growing up in a digital age and acknowledging the positive aspects of social media for this age group, this explainer aims to provide a balanced overview. Finally, it offers potential solutions and strategies for navigating the challenges and fostering a safe and positive online experience for young teens. Links to further reading and resources are also provided.



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Key takeaways

- Banning access to social media is not an effective solution to address valid concerns about children and young people having good experiences online.
- A social media ban will lead to more problems than it solves.
- We must shift our focus from protecting children *from* the digital environment to protecting them *within* the digital environment.
- Our goal as a society should not be to exclude children and young people from social media, rather, we should create and facilitate high-quality experiences for children online, which may include social media that provide age-appropriate experiences.
- Policies that seek to exclude youth from social media should be overturned in favour of investing in developing Australia's capacity as a global leader in producing and supporting free high-quality online products and services for children, including age-appropriate social media experiences.

The recommendations listed in the *[Principles for a better Children's Internet](#)* document provide clear guidance on how the government can take realistic and measured steps to improve and support children's experiences online, without resorting to an overly blunt ban.

Key information

1 | Context

In late 2024, the Australian Government introduced new legislation that enacts a minimum age of access to social media platforms. The legislation, called the *Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum 6 Age) Act 2024*, is widely understood by the public as a ban on social media for children under the age of 16. The legislation intends to support the wellbeing of children by stopping younger teens from creating social media accounts. The onus of developing the technically challenging mechanisms to implement the ban have been placed on the social media platforms, who have until the end of 2025 to take reasonable steps to prevent under 16 year olds from having accounts.

We agree that something needs to change: social media platforms have failed to consistently put the best interests of children front and centre in their design choices and decision making. But this change should come through effective regulation that is supported by robust evidence, developed through consultation with children, young people and their families about their everyday use and experiences.

This means recognising the risks alongside all neutral and positive experiences young people have online. **Banning access to social media is not the solution that the government or parents and carers are looking for to address their valid concerns about children and young people having good experiences online.** Our goal as a society should not be to exclude children from social media, rather, we should create and facilitate high-quality experiences for children online, which can include social media that provides age-appropriate experiences. We must shift our focus from protecting children from the digital environment towards protecting them within the digital environment.

The government's decision to exclude under 16 year-olds from creating social media accounts has been introduced to acknowledge a very valid concern of parents, families, and educators; namely, the desire to keep our children safe and support their well-being and development. It is extremely valid for parents and carers to feel that social media platforms are not doing enough to create safe, fun, ethical, educational, and supportive experiences for teens. But banning young people from social media is not supported by evidence.



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Key information

The Australian Government's own report, *Social Media: The good, the bad, and the ugly*, which involved reviewing hundreds of inquiry submissions, interviewing experts, and conducting consultations with young people, **did not recommend** banning young people from social media. Indeed, key concerns have been raised about:

- 1) the definition of social media, or which children's digital experiences 'count' as social media;
- 2) the likelihood that young people will seek out even more risky online alternatives to the mainstream social media platforms;
- 3) young people will be cut off from their online support networks; and
- 4) the privacy requirements related to proof of age.

Some researchers are supportive of a social media ban. For instance, research coming from specific psychology and neuroscience disciplines claim correlations between technology use and young people's wellbeing, based on limited analysis of statistical data sets. In early 2024, the controversial book *The Anxious Generation: How the great rewiring of childhood is causing an epidemic of mental illness* by Jonathan Haidt, tapped into 'parental anxiety' by drawing on statistical research. The book, which has been critiqued within academic circles for 'cherry picking' research, has been used by media personalities and political players in Australia, to call on government to legislate the ban.

Statistics and reference to brain science can seem highly persuasive because they purport to be based in science, and these fields are often drawn upon for 'hard evidence'. However, findings about young people and technology within these fields continue to be highly contested rather than settled or definitive. See the article *Ten Myths About the Effect of Social Media Use on Well-Being* to learn more about how research on technology use and wellbeing is contested.

Research in the humanities and social sciences is often sidelined in policy-making. But creating better online experiences for children and young peoples requires diverse expertise, including from areas such as media and communications, education, and cultural studies.

Research from these disciplines on the subject of young people's experience of social media helps us understand the complex and often positive social connections fostered through social media use. For example, enhancing young people's civic engagement, and creating a sense of belonging and social connectedness.



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2 | What are the technical challenges of the social media age ban?

The technical capabilities to enforce an age restricted ban are under-developed, and the majority of current mechanisms infringe on everyone's privacy.

Existing age estimation software is not close to successfully distinguishing between people who are under and over 16 years old. While it remains a common refrain in computer science that such systems simply require better training data, more sophisticated algorithms or other incremental improvement, a recent analysis by DMRC researchers showed that age estimation solutions from facial scans cannot ever be expected to achieve acceptable levels of accuracy. In 2023, the eSafety Commission announced that the age assurance market was immature with significant gaps, citing feasibility and technical concerns, and instead recommending media literacy and education, which we support.

Moreover, prominent child rights researchers have explored the implementation and challenges of age assurance systems to protect children online, focusing on the European context. They investigated the legal requirements for age assurance and examined the effectiveness of these systems in practice. Professor Sonia Livingstone from the London School of Economics and colleagues argue that current age assurance methods often fail to protect children adequately and may infringe on their other rights, such as privacy and non-discrimination.

They also noted the impact of age assurance on family life, showing that parents and children often found alternatives and could circumvent these systems. They recommended developing age assurance systems that prioritise children's rights, suggesting that a balanced approach is needed to ensure both protection and access to digital opportunities.



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Key information

3 | What are the risks of a social media age ban?

Teens will likely seek out other online spaces to connect with peers.

Banning children and young people from mainstream social media will push them into less known alternative social media platforms and digital spaces as teens reclaim the lost connections, learning, and play that was once facilitated by these major platforms. Parents and carers will be forced to do more work to understand and monitor their children's online activities, in the face of less known and less familiar, and quite possibly less safe, digital spaces.

In the legislation, the government has defined social media as any electronic service where the sole or significant purpose of the service is to enable online social interaction between two or more end-users; the service allows end-users to link to, or interact with, some or all of the other end-users; and the service allows end-users to post material on the service. But the ban is said to exclude specific services from the definition of age-restricted social media platforms if they are a messaging app, online gaming service, or services that primarily support health and education.

This overly broad definition complicates the intended purpose of the legislation as the issues driving the ban, such as bullying and harassment, are known to occur through, for example, messaging apps and online gaming. This is raised not to say that messaging apps should be banned as well, but rather to underscore that some of the concerns driving the ban will not be resolved by excluding children from creating accounts on social media platforms. Bullying – digital or otherwise – is a cultural challenge, one that needs to be addressed holistically, and won't be solved or even meaningfully addressed by banning a narrow range of social media services.

Banning social media access will increase the burden on parents and carers as they contend with an ever increasing number of platforms and services that rely on 'parental controls'. It is likely that as platforms seek to be exempt from the ban, they will develop 'age-appropriate' versions of their services that over-rely on parental controls and child and parent negotiation regarding which features they are allowed to use.



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Key information

4 | Why are parents and carers concerned?

It is understandable that parents and carers are concerned about the potential harm social media use has on their child/ren's well being, but the solution comes in managing risks.

Parents and carers are concerned about data breaches and cyberbullying in addition to other online concerns of predatory and inappropriate behaviour towards young people and the risks of child grooming. Yet, whilst understandable, and such risks exist, concerns about young people's understanding about social media are misaligned.

According to the Telstra Foundation Australia Youth Digital Index, 94% of young people surveyed feel safe online, say they understand what online safety means (92%), and most know where to find support if they need it. Similarly, Reach Out Australia found that 73% of young people regularly use social media to search for mental health information, or have done so in the past, and that teens demonstrate an 'awareness of the risks' of being online and have the ability to make good choices.

A balanced approach combining education and appropriate regulation is necessary to protect young people online. This involves not only teaching media literacy skills but also implementing policies that safeguard young people's rights and well-being in digital spaces.

Just as we teach children to swim, or stay safe in society more generally, children need to 'bridged into' adult social media, not dropped in it at age 16. The Australian Curriculum supports both Media Arts and Digital Technologies from Foundation to Year 10, providing appropriate opportunities for media and digital technology education for children and young people.

In particular, Media Arts plays an important role in developing the critical media literacies that young Australians need to thrive in digital media environments. As such, Media Arts within the Australian curriculum presents an opportunity for innovation in how we can support young people navigate social media use effectively.



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Key information

5 | What are the everyday realities of being young in a digital age?

We should not compare contemporary children's experiences with those of children in the past.

Childhood has changed—children and young teens are growing up in an evolving digital world—and while this looks different to the past, it is not inherently worse and we have a duty, as a society, to help children have good experiences in the 'current reality'.

Since the start of 2024, the eSafety Commissioner found that 84% of Australian children between the ages of 8-12 have been using social media and messaging services. And a 2022 study by the Australian National University of 26,000 year 10 students across the country, found that 98% of teens regularly use at least one social media platform, and almost one in five (18%) were active users of social media by posting or sharing content at least daily. Social media is now part of the fabric of contemporary life and it is where young people not only connect with family and peers, but where they source information, joy, learning and inspiration for their lives now and into the future.

While the Internet was not created with children in mind, children have a right to be online. Under the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the UN General Comment No. 25 which takes the Articles of the CRC and applies them to the digital environment, children have a right to:

- access and share information (Article 13)
- meet and interact with other children and young people (Article 15)
- privacy, even from their families (Article 16)
- access to 'reliable information from the media' (Article 17)
- and relax, play and participate in leisure activities (Article 31), including socialising, gaming, and watching content online.

We, as a society, owe it to young people to create the practices, policy, and regulation that supports their wellbeing online. This means not excluding them from online spaces but doing the harder task of taking the reasonable steps to ensure that there are enjoyable, informative, and accessible spaces online that young people connect, learn, and play.



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6 | What are the positives of social media for younger teens?

Social media provide many positive opportunities for young people.

There are many positive outcomes with learning digital skills to navigate online and social environments. This includes more online activities and opportunities, such as social communication, information-seeking, and creative engagement. Such skills help young people seek credible information to enhance their learning, and overall general knowledge, and—importantly—such skills can improve a better understanding of privacy protection, and coping strategies for dealing with online risks.

For young people at risk of isolation due to where they live, disability, or social and cultural marginalisation, social media connects them to wider peer communities and social groups, in addition to staying more accessible to peers who live at greater distances. Therefore, alleviating the risk of isolation, and loneliness and contributing to better social and emotional well-being.

"The positive aspects of social media are often not as well publicised, particularly with respect to social connection and information seeking. Importantly, young people demonstrate a significantly higher level of a critical understanding of online and digital technology than what is commonly perceived."



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Key information

7 | What can we do?

We—the government, industry, educators, families—need to do the hard work to create better digital and online products and services for children and young people. We need to reduce risks while improving quality and standards.

Rather than banning young people's access to social media platforms, the Australian Government should invest, both financially and socially, in developing Australia's capacity as a global leader in producing and supporting high-quality online products and services for children and young people.

Researchers at the Australia Research Council (ARC) Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child have created the [Manifesto for a better Children's Internet](#) which outlines 17 actionable principles to improve 'the Children's Internet'.

The Children's Internet is made up of an array of digital products and services that are both intended for, and not intended for, children. The term acts as a unifying concept to remind us that children have a right to playful, exploratory, fun, entertaining, positive, educational, and safe experiences online.

The recommendations listed in the [Principles for a Better Children's Internet](#) document, provide clear guidance on how we can take realistic and measured steps to improve and support children's experiences online, without resorting to an underdeveloped and overly blunt ban.

There are **four overarching things we can focus on**, as a society, to improve children's online experiences. This includes supporting the development of:

- 1) Standards for high-quality digital experiences for children
- 2) Slow design and decision-making processes driven by consultation with children
- 3) Child-centred regulation and policy, and
- 4) Media literacy policy and programs.

This last point is important to underscore as developing media literacy is a lifelong skill. It is important for both children and adults to critically understand and navigate the fast moving media landscape, particularly given the pace at which digital media are constantly evolving and in relation to social media use. To gain these important and lifelong skills, children and young people need to have age appropriate opportunities in which to learn how to use social media. Education is imperative, and media and information [literacy empowers young people to think critically](#) and make informed choices in how they participate in digital environments.

In addition to learning the skills to navigate social media, tech companies themselves need to be accountable for what appears on their platform, and many Australians agree. A recent [YouGov survey](#) found that 75% of Australians support the introduction of a "digital duty of care" to hold social media companies accountable for protecting users from harmful content.

In regulatory terms, the government's plan to focus on a [Digital Duty of Care](#), which requires platforms to evaluate the potential risks of their tools before they release them, is a much more productive legislative direction, placing the initial burden on platforms, not parents.

The goal of creating better online experiences for young people will not be realised unless there is broad agreement among adults that we need to do the hard work—and not default to 'quick' solutions like a ban—to ensure that children have fun, productive, safe, educational, diverse, and ethical experiences online.



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Our researchers + about DMRC

Key QUT contacts for more information about this topic



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About the [Digital Media Research Centre](#)



The QUT Digital Media Research Centre (DMRC) conducts world-leading communication, media, and law research for a flourishing digital society. The Centre incorporates the QUT node of the Australian Research Council (ARC) Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making & Society (ADM+S), and more recently the GenAi Lab. The Centre also participates in the ARC Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child, headquartered in the Faculty of Education.

The DMRC works across four programs, which include:

- Transforming Media Industries and Cultures
- Digital Publics
- Computational Communication & Culture
- Creating Better Digital Futures

Find out more at www.research.qut.edu.au/dmrc/

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