



'We Want Children to Have a Childhood' Protecting Children from the Harms of Social Media

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'We Want Children to Have a Childhood' Protecting Children from the Harms of Social Media

The rise of smartphones and social media platforms has revolutionized how people, including children, communicate, learn, and entertain themselves. Social media provides numerous benefits, including opportunities for education, creativity, and social connection. Platforms offer educational content in engaging formats, helping children learn outside traditional classroom settings. Social media platforms are increasingly used to disseminate health education and health promotion for children and adolescents (Knock et al., 2024; Psihogios et al., 2024) and for reaching underserved populations (VonHoltz et al., 2018). Social media also allows children to express themselves creatively, develop digital literacy, and stay connected with friends and family. For children who struggle with in-personal communication, online platforms can provide a sense of belonging and an outlet for self-expression.

While the benefits are undeniable, the adverse effects on children's health and well-being are well known and have sparked widespread debate. Mental health difficulties and obesity are increasing worldwide among children and adolescents leading to widespread concern. Excessive use has been linked to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Platforms often present idealized versions of life, leading children to compare themselves to others, develop feelings of inadequacy particularly in relation to body image (Pescott, 2020). Cyberbullying is another pervasive issue, as online anonymity can encourage harmful behavior (O'Reilly et al., 2018) and depression among children and adolescents (Hamm et al., 2015). Moreover, social media can contribute to poor sleep hygiene and physical health problems. The blue light emitted by screens interferes with melatonin production, disrupting sleep patterns essential for children's growth and cognitive function. The sedentary nature of prolonged device use also discourages physical activity, contributing to obesity and related health concerns. Without access to social media, children might spend more time engaging in face-to-face interactions, physical activities, and hobbies that promote healthier development. Social media also raises privacy and safety concerns. Children may unknowingly share personal information, making them vulnerable to online predators and scams. The addictive design of many platforms further exacerbates these risks, as children may struggle to regulate their usage. In 2022, Archie Battersbee a 3-year-old boy, was found unresponsive in his bedroom with a ligature around his neck. It is believed that he had been participating in a TikTok online "blackout challenge" which has affected other children around the world (BBC News, 2023). In March 2024 Tommie-Lee Gracie Billington, an 11-year-old boy died while inhaling toxic chemicals in aerosols. The Sunday Times newspaper reported that his grandmother blamed the "chroming craze" on TikTok for his death (McDonald, 2024).

Many young children aged 8–12 years are heavy users of social media such as Snapchat and Instagram even though most platforms stipulate that users need to be 13 years and older (Children's Commissioner, 2018). There have been calls for social media organizations to address this underage use, yet the practice continues. To protect children from the "harms"

of social media, Australia on the 28th November 2024, passed a momentous law banning children under 16 from using social media (Ritchie, 2024). It was not the first attempt by a country to restrict children's social media use, but it caused quite a stir due to the high cut off age of 16. Anthony Albanese, the Australian Prime Minister stated simply that the law was passed as "we want children to have a childhood and parents to know we have their back." This statement resonated with many who feel that social media poses significant risks to children's health and well-being. The new law was welcomed by parent groups and particularly those whose children have died due to harmful activities promoted by other users on social media. Advocates for banning social media on children's phones argue that such a measure protects them from the aforementioned risks. A ban could reduce exposure to harmful content and cyberbullying, fostering a safer and more secure environment.

However, social media companies were quick to dismiss this legislation, arguing that it was unworkable and would prove ineffective. Some Australian youth advocates criticized the Government for not fully understanding the role social media plays in young people's lives. Others warned that such legislation could push children into less regulated corners of the internet. Implementing barriers and bans could erode the trust between children – those most at risk – and the adults who are in a position to help them (Phippen, 2024). This approach may inadvertently encourage children to internalize, rather than share, distressing content, or harmful experiences, making it more difficult for adults to provide support.

Enforcing such a ban on social media access is also a complex challenge. Children are resourceful and can find ways to bypass restrictions, such as using alternative devices or creating fake accounts. They might enter false ages when setting up profiles or manage multiple accounts-one for friends and another for parents. A blanket ban risks ignoring the nuanced ways children engage with technology, potentially limiting their ability to use it beneficially. Moreover, it could hinder the development of critical digital literacy skills that are essential in today's connected world. Social media also provides a platform for activism, global awareness, and civic engagement among young people (Oden & Porter, 2023). Many children and teenagers use these platforms to advocate for social causes, developing leadership skills and learning the impact of their voices. These benefits highlight that banning social media outright could deprive children of valuable opportunities for personal growth and learning.

Some would argue that social media is here to stay and instead of banning social media outright, a more balanced approach could involve education, regulation, and parental involvement. For example, teaching children how to navigate social media responsibly. Schools, school nurses and parents play important roles in educating children about social media safety techniques, recognizing harmful content, and understanding the effects of excessive screen time. Research with children aged 12–14 in the United States demonstrated that they had high media literacy, due to parents and teachers support and a positive school environment (Burnette et al., 2017). Parents had successfully passed messages about e-safety onto their children, in particular concerning known risks such as online predators.

Empowering children with the skills to critically evaluate social media is one way of helping them use these platforms more safely and effectively. Parents play a critical role in managing their children's social media use. Parental control apps allow monitoring and regulation of screen time, content access, and online interactions. Open communication between parents and children is equally important. By discussing the potential risks and benefits of social media, parents can build trust and guide their children in

making informed decisions. Parents having time limits on social media use is another means of helping children to manage social media use. Encouraging children to maintain a balanced routine that includes physical activities, hobbies, and family time can mitigate the negative effects of mobile phone use. Establishing screen-free zones, such as during meals or before bedtime, can improve sleep hygiene and promote healthier habits.

Social media companies must be held accountable for creating safer environments for children. They have a duty of care, which includes implementing stricter age verification, minimizing harmful content, and providing tools to help users manage screen time. Governments and regulatory bodies should collaborate with tech companies to establish guidelines that prioritize children's well-being. While banning social media on children's devices may seem like a quick fix, it overlooks the broader issue. A more balanced approach that weighs both the benefits and risks of social media will likely prove more effective. Additionally, it is essential to involve children and young people in conversations about how to use social media safely. By emphasizing education, fostering parental involvement, and holding social media organizations accountable, society can equip children with the tools to use technology responsibly. Addressing the wider effects of social media through comprehensive strategies will better protect children's health and well-being, ensuring they thrive in a digital world.

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