

MOLLY ROSE FOUNDATION

Spotlight on social media bans: A parent's guide

Many parents and campaigners are calling for a ban on social media for under 16s, and their concerns are entirely legitimate. Children have been exposed to worrying levels of harm online for far too long, made worse by design choices that push content through powerful recommendation systems.

We all agree that something must change.

So why are experts warning against a social media ban?

42 online safety charities, experts and bereaved families, including the Molly Rose Foundation and NSPCC have signed an open letter against a proposed social media ban. Whilst everyone agrees that action is needed, there is growing concern about the realities of a ban for children and families.

- 1. Bans will give a false sense of safety.** They work by blocking access to a select number of well-known apps which risks pushing young people to lesser-known apps with weaker safeguards in search of the connection and community they value. Effectively **hiding the harm rather than removing it**. This means whilst it's likely to feel like young people are safer at first, the reality is that **the onus will remain on parents** to manage what their child does online.
- 2. Unintended consequences for our most vulnerable children.** Bans are an overly blunt tool that do not recognise the complex role that online spaces play in young people's lives. While harmful content can have a devastating impact, many **young people have also built supportive communities and routines that help them to cope** and provide a vital lifeline.
- 3. Easy to work around.** Bans rely on age verification tools like age checks at sign-up, selfie checks and reviewing the content an account posts and engages with. These tools have been shown repeatedly to be ineffective and easily bypassed. **Young people are quick to adapt**, using false dates of birth, tactical searches, or simple tricks during selfie checks to sidestep controls.
- 4. Young people want action not punishment.** Many young people worry about the addictive design of social media, but **they often see bans as a punishment**. They already carry feelings of blame and shame about the harm they experience online. A ban could make this worse and close down important safety conversations between children and parents. It could also make young people **less likely to seek support if they are struggling**.
- 5. Lack of evidence.** There is **no evidence to show that bans will work**, and current calls for a ban risk taking action ahead of fully understanding the implications for young people.

What is the social media ban in Australia?

- Under 16s have been banned from using social media apps as of 10 December 2025.
- The law focuses on 10 user generated platforms which currently have the highest number of users. These are Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, X, YouTube, Reddit, Threads, Kick & Twitch.
- The law requires these platforms to take reasonable steps to prevent under 16s having an account.
- Under 16s cannot set up new accounts on the selected platforms and will now have existing ones deactivated if they are detected.
- Social media companies will face fines of up to A\$49.5m (£25m) for serious or repeated breaches.

5 things we can learn from Australia's ban in its first month

After just a few weeks, we cannot fully know how the ban will work for Australia. However, early signs show it has proved difficult to enforce and that children are feeling the adverse impacts already.

1. **4.7 million accounts deactivated** in the first week. There are 2.5 million children aged 8 to 15, but, just like in the UK, many will use several platforms and accounts at the same time. This means the numbers represent only a small amount of the total child accounts in Australia, showing there is still much more to do.
2. **Almost 100 calls** from young people in first few weeks to Australia's version of Childline, Kids Helpline. These came from children experiencing high levels of distress and suicidal thoughts, with the highest levels of emotional distress coming from younger children, girls and neurodivergent children. Children reported feeling cut off from support networks, including in one case a young person who had used social media as a support tool to manage self-harm urges.
3. **One in ten 12–15-year-olds** accessing Australia's youth mental health service, Headspace, reported the social media ban has been a factor in them seeking immediate help. This includes girls and young people identifying as LGBTQ+ were more likely to seek mental health support.
4. **Lesser-known apps accessed** by children already migrating from apps covered by the ban. These apps are typically those run by the parent company of popular apps suggesting young people are searching for familiarity and finding it on apps which are likely to have less safeguards in place.
5. **Children share tips for easy workarounds** which are allowing them to fool the detection systems into believing they are adult accounts using clever searches and tricks with selfie verification tools.

If bans are not the answer, then what is?

First and foremost, **a lack of a ban does not mean a lack of action.**

The reality is that harm exists across online spaces and until we legislate to design harm out and wellbeing in, we will always remain behind the curve.

Bans oversimplify the issues we are facing and overpromise on safety. Ultimately, they will underdeliver and leave the responsibility with parents.

We urgently need:

1. **An end to addictive design** across all platforms, including social media, chat apps, generative AI and video sharing platforms.
2. **Safety and wellbeing by design introduced** and platforms incentivised to adapt to risks and target safety to users.
3. **A stronger Online Safety Act** which brings in a duty of care on platforms to stop them claiming compliance whilst still exposing children to risk.
4. **Tougher action from Ofcom** to hold platforms accountable by introducing a harm reduction duty to track them as the **regulator against annual harm figures.**
5. **Evidence-led solutions** informed by the results of a large-scale evidence review into the impacts of social media and smartphones carried out last summer but not yet published by the Government.

We cannot ban our way to safety, but we can build our way to it. With better design, stronger duties, and empowering education, we can protect children now and for the generations to come.

Addictive by design

- Infinite scrolling
- Viral content led
- Gamification & rewards
- Push notifications
- Autoplay & content loops
- Colour choices to entice engagement

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Safety and wellbeing by design

- Natural pause points
- User chosen content
- Supportive engagement tools
- Age-appropriate content
- Risk-based age ratings
- Easy & effective reporting
- Informed user choices & experiences