

SAFE and SMART

Keeping children safe online

January 2026

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Social Media - banning under 16's

Across the world, governments are debating whether children under 16 should be allowed to have social media accounts. Australia moved first with a law that took effect on 10th December 2025 and since then other countries (including the UK) have begun exploring a similar approach.

Australia's approach is where platforms must take "reasonable steps" to stop under-16s from creating or having accounts on social media. However, it isn't all social media. To begin with it is 10 specific platforms which are:

- Facebook
- Instagram
- TikTok
- Snapchat
- X (Twitter)
- YouTube
- Reddit
- Twitch
- Kik
- Threads

Why is this legislation being considered?

Governments and regulators usually point to three overlapping concerns:

- **Exposure to harm**, such as bullying, sexual content, hate, coercion and more.



- **Persuasive design features** that encourage heavy (compulsive) use, for example infinite scrolling, streaks, autoplay, algorithmic feeds, and persuasive notifications.
- **Wellbeing and development** concerns about sleep, concentration, anxiety and body image — alongside broader frustrations that platforms haven't become "safe-by-design" quickly enough.

In the UK, public pressure has been rising, with government signalling that no option is off the table while it consults on next steps; and the House of Lords backed an amendment supporting a ban for under-16s on 21st January 2026.

What is to be gained from this?

Supporters argue a minimum-age rule could:

- Reduce exposure to the riskiest social spaces during early adolescence.
- Create a clearer line for platforms to enforce (instead of a patchwork of settings and parental controls).
- Force stronger age assurance and better safety design, because the legal duty sits with the platform, thereby taking the pressure away from parents.

What are the proposed positives?

Commonly the claimed positives include:

- Less time in highly “sticky” feeds, potentially supporting sleep and attention.
- Reduced contact risks such as strangers and predatory behaviour where accounts and direct messaging are key.
- A later start may mean children join with stronger critical thinking and resilience.
- A stronger push for safer design, because platforms must demonstrate ‘reasonable steps’ to keep under-16 accounts off age-restricted services.
- Already in Australia, some young people have welcomed the ban, stating that they feel free to do other things without feeling the pressure.

On the flip side others say they have lost a lifeline and a means of support.

Are there unintended consequences?

A big worry is displacement: if access is blocked on major platforms, some children may move to less moderated or less familiar

services, including apps that schools and parents know less about.

This is already being seen in Australia with previously less well known social apps suddenly appearing at the top of the app charts.

Another concern is children bypassing age estimation technology. Again, this is already happening in Australia because even the best age-assurance systems have limitations. In practice age bypass can happen through:

- Lying about date of birth (still very common).
- Using an older sibling or parent account, shared devices, or borrowed phones.
- Workarounds that exploit gaps in how platforms detect age signals.

Australia’s framework expects reasonable steps, not perfection, and crucially it also means users may be asked to prove their age, raising privacy and practicality questions.



Is this ban too simplistic?

Anything that aims to mitigate or prevent harm to children should be looked upon positively. Many researchers, charities and other organisations agree

that something needs to change, but argue that a blanket ban can oversimplify a complex reality, for example:

- Social media can be harmful but it can also be very beneficial for connection, identity and community, support.
- The scientific picture is mixed: experts note limited causal evidence and little robust, peer-reviewed evidence on the real-world impact of banning under-16s specifically.
- A ban risks becoming a headline solution that distracts from the harder work such as platform accountability, safer defaults, and meaningful enforcement.

Will banning children really prevent harm?

There is no single 'solution'. It may reduce certain risks, but it won't remove harm entirely. There is plenty of harmful content that can still be encountered, many online harms occur across games, group chats (messaging apps), video platforms and

forums to name a few. Experts also warn we don't yet have strong evidence showing that removing social media access produces clear mental-health benefits for most young people, and we need careful evaluation of Australia's outcomes and any unintended consequences.

So, the more realistic question may be: which harms might reduce, for which children, and at what cost?

Is this pushing responsibility onto parents (and false hope)?

There's an important nuance here. In Australia, the onus is intended to be on platforms, not parents or young people. But in day-to-day life, families will still carry a lot of the burden such as supporting children through peer pressure and the emotional impact of exclusion ("everyone else has it").

The biggest risk is false reassurance or false hope that a ban is a solution. Much like a content filter can only reduce the likelihood of seeing inappropriate or illegal content, it cannot guarantee that children will not see it.

We're in changing times, it will be interesting to see how this develops.

You'll often hear people say that children are "tech savvy", but what does tech savvy mean?

For most it refers to the fact that children were born into a world of technology where they can fly around apps, create accounts, join group chats, level up on their games and much more, all with apparent ease.

But as a parent, it's worth considering what that phrase can accidentally imply, especially when it comes to online safety: being good with technology is not the same as being safe online.

Consider this: according to the latest research from Ofcom adults spend around 4.5 hours a day online. By comparison children aged 8–14 average just under 3 hours a day, rising to around 4 hours a day for 13–14-year-olds.



The biggest services for 8–14's tend to be YouTube and Snapchat which together account for just over half of their time online, which equates to roughly an hour and a half a day.

Importantly, a meaningful portion of time on major services happens at night across platforms like YouTube, Snapchat, TikTok and WhatsApp. Ofcom reports around 15–24% of children's time can be between 9pm and 5am (with 4–10% in the late-night hours of 11pm to 5am. This does not include gaming time.

So whilst tech savvy often means *fast fingers, it definitely doesn't mean safe judgement. Most serious online harms aren't technical problems solved by knowing where settings are.

Why does that matter?

Because children's brains are still developing the skills that support safe decision-making, especially under pressure. These skills develop from childhood, through adolescence and often into the mid 20's and includes things like:

- Impulse control.
- Long-term thinking.
- Risk appraisal.
- Staying calm and decisive when something feels urgent or scary.

Even very confident children can struggle in the moment, particularly when they're tired, anxious, or worried about something.



You should have known better!

Another reason the phrase can be problematic is that it can create a storyline where a child 'should have known better'.

More often than not this is unintentional where we can slip into: "Why didn't you block them?" "Why did you reply?" "Why did you send it?"

Even when those questions come from fear or frustration, they can sound like blame, and blame creates fear, which

is one of the biggest reasons children don't tell an adult early when early support could prevent things from escalating. That feeling of blame also heightens one of the biggest fears of children - their device being taken away from them, another reason why they might not tell their parents.

There's nothing wrong with referring to our children as tech savvy, as long as we are referring their ability to use and navigate technology with relative ease

This isn't about judging parents, parenting in a digital world can be really difficult. It's about recognising that early exposure, mixed-age spaces, and algorithmic feeds can

create risks that young children may not understand or be able to manage on their own.

What can we do?

When we use the term tech savvy, it can sometimes, subconsciously, put us on the back foot, e.g. "he's tech savvy, he knows much more than I do, I don't do tech". This gives a feeling of helplessness.

But the reality is you don't need to be an expert in every app and game. It is very useful to have an understanding of the apps your child is using and the games they're playing, but the most

protective things are often simple, consistent habits:

- Treat “tech skills” and “safety skills” as different things. Your child might be brilliant at using an app, but still need help in understanding pressure, manipulation, and what to do when something doesn’t feel right.
- Make it easy to tell you early. A helpful line to practice is, “You’re not in trouble. I’m glad you told me. Let’s sort it together.” Not always easy if you’re angry or frustrated, but this single tone shift can change everything.
- Focus on the moments that matter most. Talk about situations like:
 - Someone asking to move the chat to another platform.
 - Secrecy (“don’t tell anyone”).
 - Flattery and pressure.
 - Threats, urgency, or money demands
 - Being added to groups with older children/strangers.
- Protect sleep and quiet hours. Night-time is when judgement drops and emotions rise. Even small changes help: charging phones outside bedrooms, agreed cut-off times, and a calm routine that doesn’t turn into daily conflict.



- Try to keep a “no shock, no shame” response. If your first reaction is panic or anger, that’s completely human, but try to pause. Children watch your face and tone before they hear your words.

So are children tech savvy?

Yes and no. It’s true that they are confident users of technology, but we need to be careful if we are implying that they are cognitively and developmentally aware of risks and consequences. It’s a more accurate mindset to think of children as digitally fluent, but still developmentally vulnerable.



On January 16th 2026 TikTok announced that they are updating the way that age-appropriate experiences are enforced in Europe and the UK. Currently they use multiple methods such as age-gating (input your own date of birth) and other 'signals' that someone may not be 13 or over. If someone gets refused and they try to create a different account using the same device they are refused.

TikTok have now stated that, in the coming weeks, they will start to roll out enhanced technology that can make a prediction based on information an account holder provides about themselves, such as their profile information, the videos they publish and quote other on-platform behaviour unquote. If the technology identifies that a user may be under 13 it will be handed off to a human moderator to make a decision.

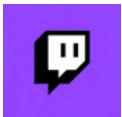


Did you know that TikTok has over 50 preset safety, privacy and security features automatically turned on? These include that users must be at least 16 to use direct messaging, every teen under 18 has a screen time limit set to 60 minutes by default and won't receive notifications after bedtime. Further content filters are automatically applied to under 18 accounts.

Common Apps

This is not an exhaustive list, but tends to be the more popular apps used by children and young people.

Age requirements are set within the terms and conditions of the app provider, don't be confused by ratings in the app stores which can be different.

| App | Age | Comments |
|---|-----|--|
|  | 13 | Discord - is a voice, video and text chat app that's used by tens of millions of people aged 13+ to tap and hang out with communities or their friends. Parental settings can be found HERE . |
|  | 13 | Instagram - is a photo and video sharing app where people can upload photos, videos and messages to share with others. Parental settings can be found HERE . |
|  | 13 | Snapchat - is a very popular app that lets users swap pictures and videos (Snaps) with others which are meant to disappear after they are viewed. There is also a messaging feature. Parental settings can be found HERE . |
|  | 13 | TikTok - is a social media app that allows users to create, watch and share short videos shot on mobile devices or webcams. Parental settings can be found HERE . |
|  | 13 | Twitch - is where people come together to chat and interact live. Think YouTube, but it is live rather than pre-recorded. Parental settings can be found HERE . |
|  | 13 | WhatsApp - is a messaging app which uses text, images, video and voice record features to connect with others. Parental settings can be found HERE |
|  | 18 | Reddit - is a network of communities (called subreddits) where people can share information, their interests and hobbies. Reddit is an 18+ app, there are no parental controls. |