



Australian Parents Council

Submission for the 2024 Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society

The Australian Parents Council ('APC') thanks the Joint Select Commission for the opportunity to participate in this review into the influence and impacts of social media on Australian society, and puts forth the following perspectives.

- **APC acknowledges whilst there are some advantages to social media, these are heavily outweighed by the harmful disadvantages such as mental health decline and reduced quality of life.**
- **APC believes that kids just need to be kids, and parents and Government need to advocate entirely for their online safety.**
- **APC strongly advocates for educating and supporting parents in this difficult task to change a generation of bad online habits in young people.**
- **APC strongly advocates for increasing the age limit when young people can access social media to age 18.**
- **The federal, state and territory governments must address, as one, the growing issue of social media impacting families, as we're all in it together.**

The Australian Parents Council is a representative body that bridges the gap between parents and government policymakers. We are on a mission to help all children thrive in non-government schools. To be successful in this goal, we need both sound government policy and empowered parents to ensure academic, social and emotional success in all students.

The Australian Parents Council has provided this service and provided parents with an avenue to participate by delivering a trustworthy voice on education policy for over 60 years. We are a non-denominational, non-party political organisation that advocates for parents with children in non-government schools (Independent) and for Australian parents more generally. We are an independent, diverse, and inclusive organisation of parents from all States and Territories of Australia.

The work of the Australian Parents Council over many years has contributed to the improvement of children's educational experiences and outcomes, progressive reforms in schooling, and investments in the social capital of school communities throughout Australia.

We welcome this opportunity to contribute our views on the 2024 review into the influence and impacts of social media on Australian society.

Kind regards,


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To prepare for this submission, the Australian Parents Council reached out to parents (Advisory Panel Member ("APM")), overseas experts, and relied on Australian as well as international research, to address the specific terms of reference for this inquiry.

Executive summary

The topic of social media impacting families is one of great concern, not just for Australians, but worldwide, and it's an issue that is now being addressed globally. Some might say "finally".

Research illustrates that, despite there being a few advantages to social media, there are, alarmingly, more disadvantages, showing how families are really struggling in this new tech world we all live in, trying to keep and/or regain control, in particular with young people, in the battle against phone usage, technology and social media. Some even say that "the positives of social media could often be negatives too".¹

As Australia considers its future and what urgent steps are required to tackle the beast before it gets out of hand any further, other countries, too, are in the midst of changing laws and policies to protect young children and their safety online, as a matter of priority.

Introduction

According to Cambridge University online, the definition of "social media" is:

*websites and computer programs that allow people to communicate and share information, opinions, pictures, videos, etc. on the internet, especially social networking websites,*²

which by its own definition, implies that social media can only be accessed via a computer, tablet device or mobile phone.

The origin of commercial computers³ and their initial purpose were intended primarily for use by adults. Common uses were word processing and programming, followed then by playing video games, which have been targeted at both adults and young children. However, since the early days of the 70s and 80s, technology has skyrocketed with there being no limit to how far one can build a new product / provide a service – and these are primarily marketed at people of any age. In other words, many new apps and social media platforms are considered open for all ages. There is no official rating or classification system (global or nationwide) set on any social media site or internet browser where a user's age can be easily verified.

Positive impacts

Technology has certainly changed. But has it turned out for the better?

There are some similarities using social media to how people used to do things 'in the old days'. Advantages are that it allows people (young and old) to communicate with their friends. Benefits include homes with one landline not being clogged up by one user only. – (APC APM)

Kids might not live in the immediate local area for high school, and have to travel from outside, so not as easily able to get together with them and to be able to go for a bike ride, talk to them, social media makes this much easier. – (APC APM)

It's cheaper than using phones, especially for international calls connecting with overseas family and friends – a huge benefit. – (APC APM)

Kids are connecting and relating to their friends, like adults themselves are doing in a similar way. – (APC APM)

The world has certainly changed. We don't send messages via pigeon or telegram anymore. In today's world, the quantity and quality of content, and speed, at which it is sent, would have been unfathomable just 100 years ago. These days, we are an incredibly powerful technological world. But with great power comes great responsibility. The key to accessing social media, for any human being, should include age-verification, moderation, self-control, responsibility and ethics.

The key point is that with anything, there needs to be limits, they spend all day together at school anyway – so everything in moderation – and it has to be healthy. – (APC APM)

Negative impacts

Notwithstanding any pros to using social media, research shows there are considerably many more cons that cannot be ignored any longer. Social media has in fact been around for about 27 years,⁴ and there are sufficient studies and reports from families to show the ill effects it is having on everyone. For young people, parents and older people alike.

An analysis by The Australian National University shows the declining mental health of our young people has been an area of concern for some time now, made much worse since the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵ During this time, mobile usage increased in Australia as people, young and older, were confined to lockdowns at home and struggling to keep themselves entertained. Phone usage spiked.⁶ It's abundantly clear that parents are now struggling with the use of that technology at home, with Facebook's "Parenting in a Tech World"⁷ group gaining over 506K members – and growing (+4,399 in the last week) – and with approx. 100 posts per day, there seems to be no end to drama-filled requests for help from desperate parents at home struggling with their young children and teens on their devices. Clearly, there is a lot to talk about.

I am terrified of what lies ahead for me and my family when it comes to my now 5 year old (who has been gadget-free since birth) growing up in a society that requires, and expects, children to have purchased for them, and primarily own, devices for their own personal use – with this trend starting as early as Foundation year in primary school in some instances – which will essentially end the innocent life he once had and knew, where ignorance is bliss. – (APC APM)

US-based policeman, "Officer Gomez", has a solid 4.8 Facebook rating on his page⁸ for topics on online security and what to do and what not to do with social media. He is at the forefront educating parents and kids worldwide, including Australia, about the many dangers of social media on electronic devices. Parents are reaching out to come up with best practice tips for themselves and their kids to stay safe and happy in a new world of digital citizenship. When it comes to social media, Officer Gomez reports there are platforms that are just no-go zones for young people, across the planet, no matter how much they beg to get on them, or try to prove to parents they are responsible enough to use.

Some of the worst social media platforms include TikTok, Snapchat (with its secret picture vault), Fortnite, YouTube, Roblox, Omegle, Instagram and Spotify, and any other platform with a chat feature or internet browser with a search box are just simply not safe. YouTube Kids is not 100% safe with videos found to have hidden, inappropriate, sexually explicit images or video content found throughout the site – a site aimed at children and which parents expect to be safe.⁹ Google Maps isn't safe either with locations having age-inappropriate photos and videos tagged to certain locations, e.g. Milk Island. Google deletes the photos about once a week but it starts over and it's impossible to ever keep up.

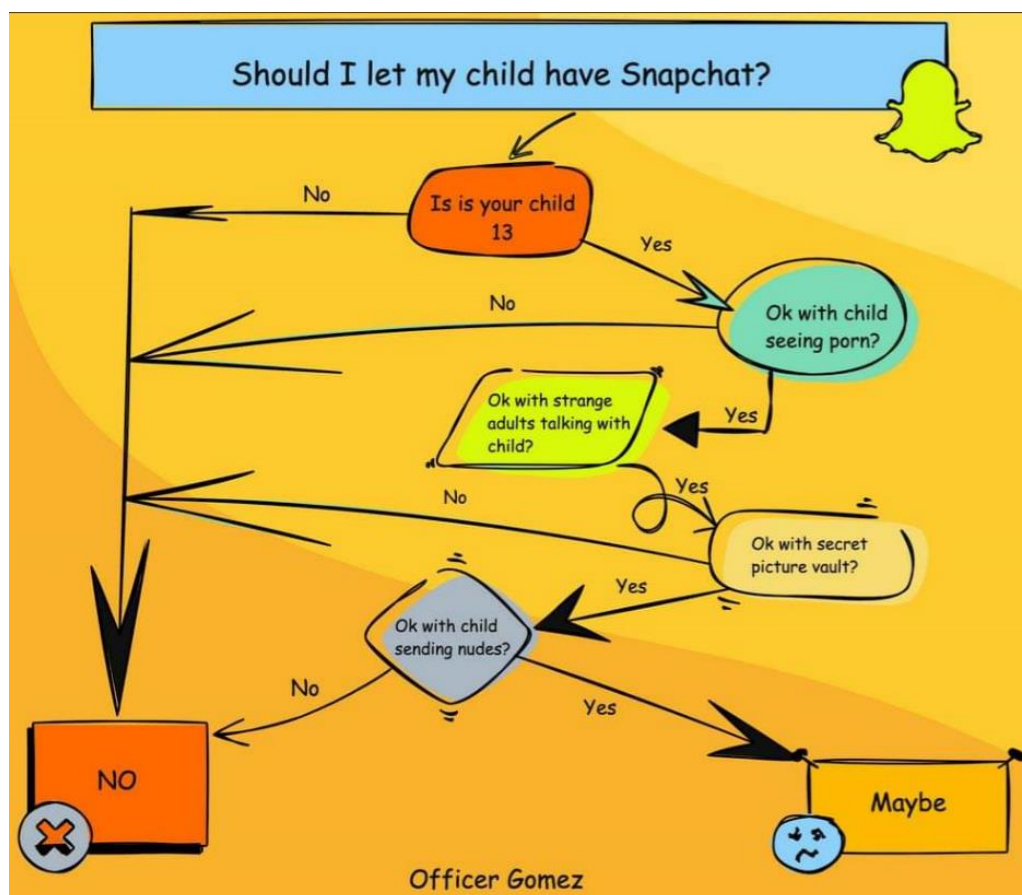
TikTok is not so much about what your kids post on there, but it's about what they see and get desensitized about. One doesn't need to add any friends to join, just isolate yourself in your room or with friends and watch videos all day long on violent, mean, unsafe and illegal activities, dangerous challenges – all for the

sake of giving and gaining likes. TikTok is harmful on so many levels and it is also showing children that it is important to have likes in your social world, so they end up also wanting to create similar time-wasting videos.¹⁰ TikTok is a harmful platform that spreads misinformation, and the more one views such videos, the more similar videos will continue to appear for that user.

My own experience looking at a particular topic on facebook and Instagram is that once you start to look at one or two videos, the algorithms get you and you get swamped with more content of a similar nature, be it from the same profile or similar. It's so easy to get carried away and fall into a rabbit hole (be it factually correct or complete misinformation), but either way, it's not good to be targeted like that as they can really take over your experience online. – (APC APM)

FB has the option to also report posts that are inadequate under various different options. I have reported posts that are highly sexually suggestive with nudity but get dismissed under the guise of breastfeeding. One thing is breastfeeding, which is done and is the wonderful act a mother can do to feed their own child, another is bring a baby into the mix of what would be considered sex and/or porn. I don't know if humans are assessing the reports or if it's a robot unable to tell the difference. I do not think it's right that such content is available on sites like FB and the effect it has on young people to see this. – (APC APM)

Here is a quick infogram on how Snapchat works.¹¹



Social Media has become the primary social communication tool. The disparity between open access and minimised internal controls leaves our children susceptible to age inappropriate content that can negatively influence the full spectrum of relationships they have now and in the future. Our children deserve to feel safe, to develop and grow in an environment that helps them

thrive, not leave them traumatised and uncertain about where truth starts and sensationalised content begins. – (APC APM)

The kids are always on chatting apps like discord and snapchat. This restricts their movement even within the home and they are glued to their laptops and PCs. They don't want to go outside, don't want to explore nature and also don't spend time with family. This is leading to a generation of kids who are always anxious and tired (mental fatigue). It is very easy for them to lose track of studies at this age with so much to explore over internet. – (APC APM)

General comments are that young people are struggling to just be themselves, sit down at the dinner table without their devices and have normal conversations with other family members. Many parents too, also sat hunched over their own gadgets. Device dependency across families is a real issue.¹² People seem to be losing the art of just finding time to think, have a conversation, and even be bored.

I worry about the impact of us going out as a family and my child seeing other young kids his age, younger or older, with their parents, all sat down at a table hunched over, staring at their individual phones and not conversing with each other. I worry that my child will think this is the norm and ask me when he will get his own phone. This has already started to happen unfortunately.

I worry about the impact on their little bodies to spend hours and hours sat playing with phones, hunched over, the damage to our fingers and hands. Young children should be out running around and doing exercise to burn off the food they are eating because they are growing. Obesity can be a real issue with young children that aren't encouraged to move around. – (APC APM)

Officer Gomez cannot be blunt enough – “At what age should I get my child a smartphone? When you are comfortable with them viewing pornography”.

Some might consider *that* age to be 16 years old. However, there are so many other areas of concern, either available from the internet, shared on social media, sharing dangerous challenges, dares, talking to strangers, being groomed by predators (targeted not just on personal devices but also school-assigned chrome books),¹³ being sextorted by strangers, humiliated and shamed for what they have done, not willing to share with their own parents their mistakes they have landed themselves in.

Social Media should be like print, film and other media, and have a similar classification system, coupled with the ability to restrict access, to ensure age appropriate exposure to the PG, M, R and even X rated material that can be found online. In addition, virtual crimes, such as emotional assault, sexual exploitation, stalking, impersonation, fraud (e.g. deep fake images) bullying and harassment, should be subject to the same regulatory processes and criminal accountability, as non-virtual crimes of the same nature. – (APC APM)

Young people are simply not mature enough to be given so much responsibility on online devices, with access to social media yet expected to 'do the right thing'.¹⁴ Teens in general seem to be making the same mistakes over and over. Can we blame them? They probably can't help it. The time may have come for adults to take over and take control again.

Alarmingly, 81% of parents with preschoolers have said their children use the internet, and, of those, 94% of parents reported their children were using the internet by age 4.¹⁵ These figures are extremely high. In an ever-increasing world where parents are struggling to manage their family homes and the demands of work/life balance, it seems giving in to kids' demands, or using devices as a babysitter, is sadly becoming the norm. Research shows, however, that the effects social media causes to children are far worse to them

than to any adult accessing it.¹⁶ The teen brain is wired to seek out the “happy hormones” generated by using social media and garnering all the attention and likes. The desire for young people to want and seek such social rewards makes using social media an absolute minefield to navigate for parents.

Social media has become a part of young kids and there is no filtering to the access of the information specially for teenage. I have a teenage boy and parental control are of no use with him. School projects need research and hence they need free flow of information. – (APC APM)

Empowering and educating parents (including teachers and caregivers)

Parents know they don't have all the answers with many going online to seek help. They know they have a duty of care towards the children, and Facebook is full of groups of parents seeking advice from the hive how to progress forward: removing devices fully, increasing parental controls, locking up devices overnight, setting up contracts between child and parent, amongst many others, some involving more dire and criminal situations. Whilst many parents are trying to do right by their kids, many are not aware of the dangers they are putting their children in, leaving them in unsafe situations, all happening under the “safety” of their own roof.

My concern is parents not having the knowledge of the dangers, or maybe will power, themselves to stop spending so much time online in front of their own children. Ultimately, it is parents who are the best role models for our kids. – (APC APM)

Even with the best parental controls in place, content can get deleted and would never be found by parents. Parents need the knowledge and tools to help support kids with their mental health, and letting their bodies develop without spending hours hunched over phones, keeping themselves active and rested, not awake all night on their devices when they should be sleeping, studying for school or playing with their friends outside.¹⁷

I am not sure about future sleepovers anymore, even playdates, at friends' houses and what my child may see on a device that does not have any parental control or supervision, without my knowledge (despite me being present at the play date) – (APC APM)

It is vital that parents are all on the same page so they can work together towards the same outcome. Government action will be vital in helping them achieve this goal. Young people who are going device-free are finding it increasingly difficult to stay so under external pressure.

I worry about my child feeling different, alone, excluded, because we are one of the few families to not succumb to buying their child a device, but then peer pressure or the feeling of isolation makes them demand one. – (APC APM)

Cyber bullying

The history of cyber bullying overseas started off as far back as the 1990s,¹⁸ where “classmates (and even strangers) subjected children and teens to cyberbullying in public chatrooms or on private messaging platforms”, and in Australia there were cases as early as 1994, when it started with a group of Year 8 girls harassing others on the internet.¹⁹

Cyber bullying continues to be a real issue in today's society, and it's every parent's worst fear their child will be the next victim. In Australia, over half of all young people have experienced cyberbullying.²⁰ Kids are particularly vulnerable to online hate, with many becoming depressed and taking their own lives, having never confided to parents of the bullying in the first instance.

Kids who have mental health issues, their issues are only heightened because of social media, they are the ones taking their own lives (a child we knew who took his life was 21yo, so even talking about increasing the age from 13 to 16, kids are still not mature enough). – (APC APM)

There are multiple stories on Facebook's Parenting in a Tech World where children are being harassed by friends to the point they won't leave them alone, their phones are pinging all the time, causing stress and anxiety on the affected child being targeted. Children need to be taught boundaries and respecting other people's space when communicating on online devices.

Governments need to ensure that all schools talk about bullying in schools, and have written policies that are being implemented and followed through, because whether a school wishes to admit it or not, there will be some element of bullying happening. They can also be held accountable if they have dropped the ball, are digging their heads in the sand not wanting to take responsibility, and not following through with policy.²¹

Impacts of social media in the classroom on teachers

A teacher's primary role is to help kids academically at school, but which has now been interrupted by having to deal with a whole host of problems caused by phone usage and access to social media, including class disruption, bullying, nude photos, stolen phones, suicidal kids, and threats made to schools. For some parents who wish to send their kids off to school with smartphones, they are oblivious to the drama created, disrupting a teacher's class, and which goes beyond their normal scope of issues to manage. However, there are many parents who understand the importance of not having social media accessible by young people at school.

Start tackling social media earlier than high school. Same Toolkits, talking points, given to student, parent, teacher to have the conversation together, to achieve no social media before 16. I believe in warnings before you get onto social media pages, like you do when going onto sites that serve alcohol. Develop a contract together with parents and child, regarding screen time and support families to stick with it. – (APC APM)

In the same vein, schools are also enforcing the use of devices to do research on at school, but these devices are not being totally monitored with correct parental controls, and inappropriate pranking between kids inadvertently occurs. It's almost impossible to keep up.

Let kids be kids

We've been ingrained since we were kids to never talk to strangers. Parents also wouldn't let their kids be alone on the streets and get picked up by strangers, but somehow it seems acceptable to let them be picked up by strangers online where they can start chatting freely, or start secret relationships with them. These are people parents don't know, nor what values they have, who might be spreading misinformation and dangerous ideologies to their kids. Kids are having access to phones and social media, but this world really is not for them.

Children are exactly what they are – children – and they must be protected from the dangerous world of the internet and social media platforms until they are old enough to understand the content without adult supervision. We don't let our children drink till they are 18. We don't let our children vote till they are 18. We don't let our children drive till they are 18. Why would we let them have access to the dangerous world of the internet and social media? We don't let them talk to strangers in real life, so why would we let it slip under our radar via their phones? – (APC APM)

Children or young people should also not be given the tools to take secret photos of themselves and send these to strangers (or even people they may know) via social media. On the other hand, receiving nude photos of minors is actually being in possession of child pornography. As a nation, if Australia doesn't act now and do something to stop this, it will be enabling this crime if we let kids continue the way they are sending nudies out. This error of judgment has created long-lasting harmful damage, sometimes fatal, to all families concerned.²²

Social media is ending children's innocent lives sooner than expected.

I just try to tell my kid don't be friends with just anyone, talk to anyone you don't know, even if it's a nice looking girl, because it could be anyone, an older person, who's going to try to get a picture of you and ask for money, and then if that happens you need to speak up and try and deal with it. Unfortunately, you can still tell them that, but they will still make mistakes, but that's the issue, kids are kids and they are going to make mistakes so why throw them in the deep water when they are going to struggle and some will inevitably drown. Some will come out with real life trauma. Some will make it out okay but not everyone. Surely we can do better than that, they've been given access to a world that they are not really able to control, handle or manage, their impulsive desire to respond and communicate with people, tempted by whatever. – (APC APM)

Kids are getting a lot of requests on social media as they get satisfaction from upping their numbers, it doesn't matter who you add on, people just want to have more friends, it's all about the number of friends/followers/likes, but we need to talk to our kids and say would you talk to them in the street, so do I really want them to see what's going on in my life? – (APC APM)

I have read many times by other parents who have said their kids will admit (who have had their phones taken away from them for not being responsible with it) that they thank their parents for doing that as they didn't like where they were going or what kind of person they were turning into. – (APC APM)

Social media can be inclusive but it can also be highly exclusive when you are posting events and tagging people highlighting that some weren't invited or excluded on purpose. Kids are sensitive to these issues and whether they were intentionally excluded or not, they will feel excluded. Instagram is all about photos and adding filters to alter the reality of what is being posted. Find the image of an apple in a mirror showing its best side but behind it is all rotten. – (APC APM)

Let's let kids be kids. It's crucial, however, to teach them about self-respect, privacy, knowledge to stay alert, not be gullible, be tech savvy, self-aware, and look out for phone security. It's not necessary to start early with phones. Computer literacy skills are learnt very quickly. If toddlers can learn how to play on social media, a young person can as well. Plus, technology is changing ever so fast, there's no real need to learn anything prior to high school. Smartphones are intuitive to learn and play with. A person can obtain a phone when they are older and still know what they need to do – if they are shown and trained beforehand by an adult correctly.

There will be dangers to people who have grown up with phones from childhood into adulthood. Phone addiction, though may not be a mental health issue, is an issue nonetheless.²³ "There isn't much long-term data yet on how smartphones affect the developing tween brain. However, what we see so far isn't promising."²⁴ Whilst social media can be helpful for certain groups of young people – such as racial, ethnic, sexual and gender minorities, who may use it to connect with peers and develop more confidence in their identity, there are the clear downsides linked to anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, body image issues and other mental health concerns – findings which "raise serious concerns about the risk of harm from

social media exposure for children and adolescents who are at a more vulnerable stage of brain development.”

International response and legislative action

In the US state of Florida,²⁵ major legislative change has just taken place, which will mean it will have one of the country’s most restrictive social media bans for minors. The law, which will take effect on 1 January 2025, will prohibit social media platforms from allowing children younger than 14 to have an account. For 14 and 15 year-olds, social media platforms must require parental permission before allowing them to set up accounts. For American lawmakers, addressing adolescents’ worsening mental health recently has become a top priority for school, district, state, and federal leaders, as young people struggle with record-high rates of depression and anxiety.

Across the Atlantic, the UK is considering limiting social media access for teenagers under the age of 16, to try to protect them from online harm, with reports suggesting a potential ban is on the cards.²⁶ The current minimum age for most social media platforms is 13. The proposed change would effectively shut out a significant portion of users under 16. Additionally, the government is considering a ban on under-16s purchasing smartphones, further limiting their access to these platforms.²⁷ Parents are being consulted on their views on the appropriate age limit, which is a much-welcomed opportunity for all to have their say on this very important issue affecting our young people.

Use of age verification to protect Australian children from social media

Currently, it is very easy for young people to get past age verification questions on internet browsers or social media sites as any date of birth can essentially be selected.²⁸ Determining what is inappropriate for children to watch is also not as easy as it sounds, and then to implement. In Australia, a push for a process that really works must be decided on if we are to protect kids’ wellbeing and mental health, and to fight the battle of underage children accessing age-inappropriate content. Whatever the process, it would need to protect their privacy and security. Potentially, AI scanners that take an image of a child to determine their approximate age could work if they were accurate,²⁹ but it would be essential that these software delete and do not store or keep these images on any server.

Conclusion

This is a long discussion and one that cannot be solved quickly or easily, but it is essential that Australia continues discussions and acts promptly to make the changes and stop causing long-lasting damage to young people. Unfortunately, 27 years of social media is a long time – a generation for some – it’s been ingrained in society long enough that there have been children born and who have grown up and never lived without technology at their fingertips.

Parents are clearly struggling with how to manage this issue as well and many are dropping the ball because it’s all become too much for them to try to control, especially coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Australia must trust its instinct on this and make urgent and substantial changes now to save its kids. Let’s let kids just be kids, for their sake, their own long-term safety and so we can give them a chance at growing up tech-free, to let their brains develop, to look after their mental health, to let them develop their friendships without fear of an online world lurking behind them and not knowing what lies ahead.

Australia, let’s not just follow suit with places like Florida and the UK, but let’s lead the way and do things one step better. We need the government to enact laws to curb social media access at home and in schools, and in particular to regulate cyber bullying. We need laws that don’t just change for individual

States that will protect some children but not others, we need this to be a change in all jurisdictions so everyone in Australia is protected from online harm caused as a result of having access to social media, this includes anxiety, depressive symptoms, body image concerns, and suicidality.³⁰

I worry about the damage to one's self esteem by spending too long on certain apps. For young people, these should be completely banned and apps need to be held more accountable to who they are allowing to have as users. They need to take more responsibility. – (APC APM)

Recommendation

Fact: Young people are still minors. Some may be more responsible than others. However, the general consensus stands that they must be protected from the whole array of online harm already discussed in this submission, as well as physical symptoms, including neck pain, hunched up bodies, eye strain. Our recommendation is that young people shouldn't have any smartphones until they are of a suitable age.

So as far as social media goes, it has its own pros and cons on kids – in my personal experience as long as the kid is responsible (which is a hard skill at this age), access to unlimited content is good, otherwise it can prove hazardous. – (APC APM)

Our recommendation is that non-smartphones can be made available to anyone under 18 years of age, with phone and text features accessible for anyone that wants or needs a phone. Parents can contact their kids on them if they wish to. By waiting till 18 for a smartphone, children get to enter “social media as a fully formed person rather than being formed by it”,³¹ they get to finish their school studies without being distracted by social media on a handheld device they would carry everywhere with them. By 18, they should also be more mature to handle a smartphone and social media.

Prior to 18, however, all young people need to be given the tools to be taught how to be tech-savvy and privacy literate. We need to start advocating for our kids now and preaching phones are not for children and there is a time and a place for everything. At home and at school they can be taught courses introduced into the national curriculum about the dangers of social media, scams and how to protect oneself online. We need to teach children via their school work stations and email addresses on the dangers of phishing and how to detect scammers. They can most definitely learn to be tech savvy before getting their own device.

Parents also need to be given full training and support to help push this program and learning across Australia for it to work.

We need the Australian Government to take action to protect our most vulnerable (Children) from the next pandemic. – (APC APM)

Unfortunately, culture has made it feel for some parents and young people that having a phone is a safety line, they have become so attached to them, they would prefer to stay home than be told they had to leave their phones behind. Unfortunately, this thought has been enabled by parents too.

Just one kid on a phone amongst a group who aren't, really disrupts the dynamics of the group and intended activities to do when there was no phone. Families are struggling if they want to have a family holiday that's device free when inviting friends over who want to bring their phones. – (Facebook user – Parenting in a tech world)

If we can't return back to basics for our kids to go tech-free till adulthood, then at least let's work towards a proposed ban of under 16s to access a smartphone and social media platforms, so as to encourage healthy online behaviours.

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