

AYAC & eSafety - Consultations with children and young people on the social media minimum age

Summary report

By Dr Dean Farquhar, Nellie Wotherspoon & Krushnadevsinh Ravalji

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To all the children and young people that took part in the consultations, we are hugely thankful to you for giving up your time to share your thoughts and experiences with us. We hope to have done justice to your words.

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters, and culture. Most often, we work on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today. As the national peak body for young people, we also acknowledge First Nations young people as the future custodians of this land. We stay committed to supporting the Uluru Statement from the Heart, and to supporting the leadership and self-determination of First Nations young people.

Introduction

Social media age restrictions for Australians under the age of 16 are due to take effect on 10 December 2025. The age restrictions will be implemented in line with the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024.

The new law requires age-restricted social media platforms to take ‘reasonable steps’ to prevent children under 16 from having an account on their platform. This report aims to support eSafety to develop guidelines about those reasonable steps. As such, the focus of the report is not on the content of the Social Media Minimum Age Act. Rather, its primary aim is to shine light on children and young people’s insights to ensure effective implementation.

To ensure that the development of the guidelines considers and takes into account the voices of children and young people, the eSafety Commissioner engaged AYAC to lead consultations with children and young people. This report summarises virtual consultations with 53 children and young people aged 13-23 in July and August 2025. It reflects the children and young people’s perspectives and words as much as possible. It will be used by eSafety to support their work to find the best way to implement social media age restrictions for children under 16. It will also inform the development of communications and resources, and relevant insights will be shared with other government stakeholders and external partners where appropriate.

The consultation explored children and young people's views on the implementation of the social media minimum age legislation, focusing on its potential benefits, challenges, and impacts on different groups. It also examined preferred age assurance technologies, concerns around privacy and enforcement, and how best to communicate the changes. Participants discussed what should happen to underage accounts, how to support children and young people in reporting harms, and ways to ensure fair and transparent appeals processes. Finally, the consultation sought input on effective communication strategies and priority areas for action, with participants offering practical ideas for outreach and engagement.

The consultation process

A total of 53 children and young people participated in consultations. The consultation process consisted of 2 stages. Stage 1 involved organisations within AYAC's networks nominating members from their Youth Advisory Groups (YAGS) including the eSafety Youth Council to take part in the consultations. A total of 17 children and young people from organisations across Australia participated. Stage 2 involved recruiting through AYAC's networks to ensure a broad cross section of children and young people were recruited from across Australia. A total of 36 children and young people were engaged.

Stage 2 consultations comprised 2 sessions. Session 1 gauged the views of those 13-15, while Session 2 considered the perspectives of those aged 16-23. This allowed for possible differences in opinion between those children and young people whose access to social media is more likely to be restricted following the implementation of the legislation, to be distinguished from those who are less affected in this regard.

Representation was secured from all states and territories. Young women, young men and young people that are non-binary participated. Participants included young First Nations Australians; those who are LGBTQIA+; those from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds; those who live in regional, rural and remote areas; young people living with a disability; those identifying as working class; and young carers. Children and young people with diverse lived experiences were included in the consultations.

Across all consultations notetakers were present in each group to record participants' contributions as accurately as possible. The evidence cited below are not direct quotes but the best effort of the notetakers to record participants contributions as accurately as possible.

Children and young people's top priorities

During the consultation children and young people were asked for their views on the implementation of the legislation. At the end of each consultation group discussion, participants were asked to identify their key priority areas that they believe are most urgent for eSafety to consider. We used these key priorities to identify key themes. It was striking that similar themes appeared across the groups in each consultation. These key themes are outlined below.

Although many of the themes below were mentioned multiple times across the consultations, by far the most common theme was the need for effective communication with young people prior to the implementation of the legislation. This reflected a sense among participants that young people are not prepared for this significant change to their lives, signalling a need for awareness raising alongside responding to some more practical and technical concerns raised by young people.

The key themes were:

- There are possible benefits and negatives to restricting access to accounts on certain social media platforms among those under 16.
- This will be a significant change, and young people will need time and support to adjust.
- Effective communication with young people is needed during the implementation of the legislation:
 - When is it happening?
 - What platforms are affected?
 - Why is it happening?
 - What happens with the account data when accounts are closed?
 - What happens with the data collected through age assurance processes?
 - How can accounts be restored if wrongly deactivated?
 - That children and young people won't be punished under the legislation.
- This information should reach all social groups, and there should also be information targeting parents, schools, youth and community groups, and sports clubs.
- Alternatives to the affected platforms need to be explored to maintain social connection among young people – we need to make sure that young people don't turn to less regulated platforms that are more unsafe. Messenger apps were highlighted as preferred alternatives for communicating.
- Big tech companies need to take responsibility by ensuring Safety by Design.
- Age assurance should respect privacy, and the data shared should be used responsibly, safely and deleted in a timely fashion. Trust needs to be built with young people around data use.
- Young people should have a choice around whether their accounts are deleted or suspended until they reach 16. They should have some say over their data.
- Given some young people will try to circumvent the age restrictions, there should be strategies for supporting them if they need help or encounter harm. They should know they won't get into trouble if they go on age-restricted social media platforms.

The next section delves deeper into the key themes and insights shared by participants and captured by notetakers throughout the consultation. It outlines their views on the implementation of the legislation, explores concerns and suggestions around implementation, and highlights ideas for how best to support and communicate with young people as the legislation is rolled out.

eSafety's implementation of the social media minimum age obligations

Discussions around this topic gauged participants' views on possible positives and negatives of the legislation. Participants were also asked whether certain groups would be impacted more than others.

Summary of the discussions

Potential benefits

When asked, participants were offered the option of saying that there are no potential benefits to the new social media minimum age obligations. However, across all groups, some potential benefits were flagged. These reflected a sense among participants that social media presents harmful content to young users:

Participants identified a wide range of harms linked to social media use by young people, including disrespect, cyberbullying, racism, gender-based violence, nudity, harmful body image content, and online grooming. They felt that restricting access for under-16s could help reduce exposure to these risks and create a safer, healthier online environment:

- **The age restrictions can be a barrier that prevents young people from exposure to inappropriate content.**
- **Social media can be pretty full on, especially for younger ones. There's a lot of stuff that's not age-appropriate, mentally draining or just straight up dangerous.**
- **As a young man, I've been exposed to a lot of explicit photos and videos through social media. This generation of young men is being exploited by being fed harmful content about masculinity, and I think we are seeing impacts, especially with violence against women and girls.**
- **It might help stop bullying or make it less normalised.**
- **Younger people won't be exposed to photos that show harmful body image and unattainable body standards, they will be protected from seeing that on social media.**
- **Grooming and sexual assault. There are lots of children who do experience that from social media and being able to take that away would be big benefit.**

Participants raised that tackling these harmful aspects of social media would be beneficial to promoting positive mental health and wellbeing among young people. In relation to mental health and wellbeing, participants further mentioned the possible positives of reducing addictive behaviours and 'doomscrolling'. Participants recognised

that there is a responsibility on the part of social media companies to mitigate these harms:

- **It might encourage young people to socialise with each other and meet in-person.**
- **A benefit might be less time spent on social media. You can waste so much time scrolling on social media taking away from other activities.**
- **The responsibility to prevent young people from accessing harmful content is on the social media platforms. The technology to detect which content is harmful is available, these are technologically advanced companies that are more than capable of this.**
- **The restrictions could be good if they place pressure on tech companies to have better safeguards.**

Participants also flagged a need for a more proactive approach to digital literacy education:

- **The ban limits literacy for young people and implies that at a certain age, they can suddenly access platforms at 16 when they may not be as prepared for social media. It also doesn't address larger issues regarding social media. There needs to be more education about who we give our data to – and how to increase our privacy on these platforms.**

Potential challenges

However, participants also voiced concerns about some of the potential downsides of restricting social media accounts for those under 16, particularly around the loss of social connection, creative expression, and access to support. They worried that young people might be cut off from exploring their interests, communities, and identities, especially if offline environments are unsafe or inaccessible. There were also fears that limiting access could reduce opportunities for youth advocacy and self-expression, as well as hinder access to mental health resources shared online. Participants supported maintaining access to messaging apps, emphasising their importance for sustaining friendships and supporting young people's mental wellbeing.

- **It could cut off young people from exploring their interests, communities and identities, especially if it isn't safe for them to do so offline.**
- **There could be a loss of adults hearing kids' voices. Think about how young advocates use social media for their issues.**
- **It might reduce young people's ability to access mental health content and access to resources.**

In relation to maintaining social connection among young people, participants expressed their support for ensuring messenger services remain available to young people:

- **The good thing is the definition of social media doesn't mean that all messaging apps are restricted.**

- **We should keep options to message your friends because that is really important for mental health, especially for young people.**

Participants raised concerns that restricting social media accounts for under-16s could disproportionately impact certain groups of young people. They felt those in rural, regional, and remote areas may face increased isolation, as social media often serves as a vital tool for connecting with peers and accessing opportunities not available locally. They highlighted young people with family overseas or interstate could struggle to maintain relationships, while those from communities facing discrimination, such as trans youth, those from CALD backgrounds, and queer communities, may lose important avenues for connection and support. Additional concerns were raised about homeschooled young people, disabled or chronically ill young people, and those using social media to cope with bullying, loneliness, or mental health challenges. Participants noted that for many, social media is a key source of connection, expression, and emotional support, and its restriction could leave them more vulnerable.

- **In regional areas it can be hard to connect with people who have similar interests which is where social media fills a gap. Social media is a way to connect with friends and find out about events that can benefit you.**
- **Young people with friends and family who live overseas or interstate. It will be really hard to connect with them and still feel like part of their lives. It's easier to send a message to keep in touch, rather than call.**
- **People of CALD backgrounds and those in the queer community often find their identities online. They may be more impacted by the legislation.**
- **People who are homeschooled could be more affected as it might be their main platform to socialise with other people.**
- **There will be a loss of social interaction, especially for disabled or chronically ill people, as social media is an important source of social interaction for us.**

Finally, participants noted that those who are on the cusp of turning 16 might feel especially impacted as they may feel they are getting cut out of socialising with friends.

- **People similar in age but not all falling within the legislation will be affected. Those under 16 who have friends aged over 16 for example, won't be able to as easily connect with each other on social media. The friends who are under 16 will be left out of social activities, connection and interactions.**

Communicating with children and young people about the changes

Discussions around this topic gauged participants' views on the level of current understanding among young people about the legislative changes and the impacts the new social media minimum age obligations will have on them. During discussions, participants provided insights into what they believe young people need to know and how this can be best communicated.

Summary of the discussions

Differing levels of understanding among young people

Participants noted that young people have varying levels of understanding regarding the social media minimum age obligations. Although some suggested that young people have a good understanding of the legislative change, most participants stressed a lack of knowledge and understanding around what the change will mean in practice:

- **The new law isn't being talked about at school, so it's likely that young people under 16 aren't aware of the changes coming.**
- **Young people don't really understand the law behind the minimum age for social media.**

What young people understand about the changes

Even among those that demonstrated an understanding of the changes, there was a strong sense that many details around implementation are unclear:

- **Young people don't actually know about the details of the legislation. They should know what age they can use social media and why the age restrictions are being implemented.**
- **It's mentioned briefly among young people, but most conversation is around the thinking that it probably isn't going to happen or work.**
- **One problem that could come up in the future is rumours and incorrect information being spread.**

How to communicate with young people about the changes

Participants signalled the importance of clear concise guidance in plain language that explains the rationale of the legislative changes and their impact on young people:

- **There needs to be clear communication, so young people understand why it's happening, and they're not just feeling like they're being locked out or punished.**
- **Over 16s will also want to know what they will need to do to access social media. Will they need to prove their age and is there anything they need to do to manage their social media accounts.**

- **The messaging should be clear. It should be accessible for everyone.**

Participants believed that equipping schools and families with relevant information to raise awareness is most important but identified a need to broaden awareness raising efforts through involving the youth sector, wider community groups and sports clubs. Maximising the scope for trusted adults to play a role in supporting young people to navigate the ban was a key concern:

- **Parents have a role to explain the upcoming changes. They should focus on the fact that they will be law, as young people will take this more seriously.**
- **Emailing or mailing parents so they can tell their children about the changes.**
- **Hearing it in schools from teachers would be a good idea. If parents are talking to their children, the information might not be accurate, but teachers should have the right information. They might be the best way to pass on accurate information.**
- **Using schools as a pathway has issues as school attendance is dropping and not all young people are engaged in school. How do we access young people who aren't engaged in school?**
- **The best ways to communicate with youth would be during assembly at school as you can spread the message easily.**

Participants suggested a wide range of communication channels to raise awareness about the social media minimum age legislation, emphasising the need for clear, accessible, and youth-friendly messaging. Schools were seen as a key avenue through assemblies, newsletters, websites, and trusted staff alongside broader outreach to parents via official mail, email, and community talks. Participants also recommended interactive videos, centralised websites, and increased news coverage to explain the changes and their impacts.

Importantly, many highlighted the effectiveness of using social media itself to reach young people, despite the contradictions this would entail given the nature of the legislation. They proposed using platforms to share visual, engaging content and possibly featuring content creators to explain the law in simple terms and build understanding ahead of it taking effect.

- **Ironically, the best way to communicate this ban to young people is through social media, as most young people get their information there.**
- **Best place for young people to hear about the legislation would be social media and the news.**

More can be done to equip young people with the knowledge needed to navigate the implementation of the social media minimum age obligations.

Age assurance process

Discussions around this topic were wide-ranging, covering participants' preferred arrangements for those whose accounts might be deleted or deactivated, as well as what an effective appeal processes for those whose accounts are wrongly deleted, deactivated or suspended might look like. Participants were also asked how the reporting of harms by young people who may be on restricted platforms might be best encouraged. Participants concluded the discussion on this theme by unpacking some of their concerns around the efficacy of age assurance mechanisms and potential unintended consequences of the legislative changes.

Summary of the discussions

Ideas about age assurance

Participants raised concerns about the effectiveness, fairness, and privacy of age assurance measures for social media. Many doubted enforcement would work, and some were sceptical of facial analysis due to perceived accuracy issues and racial bias. There was low trust in social media companies handling personal data, with strong support for quick deletion of any collected information.

Some participants proposed a government-run age verification system that would issue secure codes or certificates to users over 16, allowing access to accounts without sharing personal documents directly with platforms. This approach was seen as safer and more trustworthy.

Overall, participants emphasised the need for age assurance processes that are respectful, reliable, and protective of young people's privacy.

- **An AI face check could be wrong or inaccurate. It might think you are younger or older than you are.**
- **Many age verification systems are trained on white people, rather than people of colour.**
- **There's a big trust issue with these companies. How can we know their system works and ensure there's transparency?**
- **Young people are also concerned about what tech companies will do with their personal information/IDs. Will they sell this data to third parties?**
- **The information should be deleted within a day or a week. Only use it once to verify age.**
- **Provide young people with a special code that is specific to an individual to open an account if young people want it. This would avoid having to have another form of ID to carry around. You also wouldn't have to link your personal details to it. There should be a way we can get verified by the government – already have MyGov and myID so why not use them for social media age verification.**

Deleting or suspending accounts

Participants emphasised the importance of giving young people control over their social media accounts and data if they are affected by the minimum age legislation. They strongly supported offering a choice between deleting or suspending accounts until the user turns 16, with clear, simple explanations of what will happen to their data. Many felt that suspending accounts would be less distressing than deletion, especially if users could later recover their content. Participants also called for transparent, easy-to-understand messaging, ideally in plain language with bullet points, to explain the process and reassure users about data privacy and recovery options.

- **There needs to be a clear message that includes links for support, such as when will I get my account back and how can I get it back? It can be confusing otherwise.**
- **Young people should be able to download all of their data, but they should also have the opportunity to delete all of their data to refresh their digital footprints. Young people should have complete control of their data.**
- **Give the reason why the account was deleted or deactivated. Be fully transparent about it.**
- **The messaging definitely needs to be in easy English as it can be hard to understand big words for people under 16. For example, bullet points are really easy and clear. If it's a big paragraph it might be stressful to read. Bullet points are sharper and more straightforward.**
- **I want to know how the data is being handled, whether I choose to preserve it on the platform and wait until I turn 16. What happens to my data if I choose to delete the account and steps to get data off completely?**

Reporting harms

Participants noted that the lack of penalty for young people under 16 for having social media accounts is not widely understood among their peers. They stressed the need for safe, anonymous, and empathetic reporting pathways that reassure rather than intimidate. Participants suggested that support services should be easy to access, non-judgmental, and clearly communicate that young people will not get in trouble for seeking help, even if they were using social media underage.

- **Not everyone knows they will not be penalised. They need to be educated to know more about the legislation and its details.**
- **They should have an anonymous helpline as the 'anonymous' part helps young people voice their issue and they can report their experience without feeling scared.**
- **Provide a video with a scenario of what could happen if a young person is on social media underage... and that even if they find something harmful, they will not get in trouble.**

- **Offer something that's reassuring, not accusatory, not hostile. Use reassuring language.**

Appeals processes

Participants wanted a quick and effective appeals process, expressing a preference for personal interaction during appeals over interfacing with chatbots.

- **I would want to talk to a person, not AI. It's preferable over the phone. These things are stressful. And if your appeal gets rejected, say why.**
- **It can be stressful trying to get your account back. We need an easy and simplified way of getting it back, either over the phone or in person.**
- **Most social media platforms have an option to temporarily disable your account before it is completely deleted from their end. You could use this option so the young person can't use the account but will still have time to notify and appeal if there's been a mistake.**
- **Young people should be told exactly why their account was flagged, how they can appeal, what evidence is acceptable, and how long the process will take.**

Circumvention

Participants elaborated on their concerns regarding the efficacy of the age restrictions, citing the use of VPNs; the use of friend and relative accounts; and fake IDs as *possible* ways age assurance mechanisms might be circumvented.

- **They could use VPNs to bypass the process, especially if it relies on the user's location. The verification might not apply to the user if they use a VPN to change their locations.**
- **Older siblings may provide support to their younger siblings to access social media underage.**
- **People will hand their phones to their parents to help fill out or scan things.**
- **People might create fake IDs as that has been pretty predominant when it comes to getting into bars, clubs and adult games.**
- **It'll probably be a human way of getting around it. As soon as your friend has an account, they can give you their account and make another one.**

Unintended consequences

Participants raised that young people moving to less regulated platforms owing to age assurance on certain services could be a harmful unintended consequence of the legislative changes requiring careful attention.

- **If young people are locked out without proper education around why without access to safe alternatives, they might look at riskier parts of the internet.**

- **Young people will move to using ‘sketchy’ websites or access other apps that weren’t considered in the social media ban.**
- **They could move over to an alternate, less regulated social media platform. These unregulated platforms have even more explicit content.**

They suggested actions should be taken to build young people’s confidence around how the age assurance process will work in practice.