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Social media minimum age obligation, roundtable discussion: Parents and carers

Parenting Research Centre

Acknowledgement of Country

The Parenting Research Centre acknowledges and respects the diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of this country and the Elders of the past and present.

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Social media age restrictions for children in Australia under the age of 16 are due to take effect by 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 holding an account on their platform. eSafety has conducted a broad consultation process to inform the development of guidelines about those reasonable steps. **The consultation was not about the contents of the Social Media Minimum Age Act, as that has already been passed by Parliament.** Rather, it was about how eSafety implements its functions under that Act.

To ensure that the development of guidance reflects the needs and experiences of families, the eSafety Commissioner engaged the Parenting Research Centre to lead targeted consultations with organisations representing parents and carers. The purpose of this engagement was to support eSafety, industry, and government in implementing the legislation in ways that are responsive to and supportive of families.

The Parenting Research Centre organised and facilitated two round table discussions to capture parent-based insights to inform eSafety's implementation of the Social Media Minimum Age (SMMA) obligation. Across two 90-minute sessions, the roundtables were attended by 30 participants, all of whom were experts representing a range of sectors including:

- youth service and advocacy
- parenting and early childhood support
- disability advocacy
- child protection and family support
- out-of-home care
- education and school community engagement
- academia
- First Nations organisations.

Participants involved in the consultation discussed the experiences of parents and carers across a wide range of child-rearing roles, including biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers, stepparents, legal guardians, and informal parents. Throughout this report, the term 'parents' is used inclusively to reflect the diversity of adults involved in caring for and raising children and young people.

In collaboration with the Parenting Research Centre, the consultation was guided by four key focus areas identified by the eSafety Commissioner. While the thematic areas were determined by eSafety, the specific consultation questions were developed collaboratively to ensure they reflected the most current and pressing issues facing parents and carers. The four focus areas were:

1. eSafety's implementation of the social media minimum age obligations
2. Attitudes toward the use of age assurance technologies and processes
3. How the changes might impact how children and their parents currently use social media
4. How to support children's online safety and wellbeing through the changes.

Findings

This report details the themes of the discussion in relation to each focus area: 1. eSafety's implementation of the social media minimum age obligations, 2. Attitudes toward age assurance technologies and processes, 3. How the changes might impact how children and their parents use social media, and 4. How to support children's online safety and wellbeing through the changes.

eSafety's implementation of the social media minimum age obligations

When participants were asked about the benefits of the implementation of the SMMA obligation, there was broad support for the legislation. Many highlighted the reliance parents would place on these changes, viewing regulated access to social media as a way to create a more level playing field among children.

> *"...parents now have a powerful story that empowers them to say 'not yet' to their kids...you take away that fear of missing out...that story...does a lot of heavy lifting day to day for parents..."*

However, when exploring the potential consequences of the obligation, participants raised several concerns about its practical implementation at a family/household level. A key issue was the impact of applying the delay as a blanket rule, for all children. Participants expressed clear support for delaying access for children not yet using social media but voiced apprehension about the disruption it would cause for families with children already engaged on these platforms, noting that these children might experience a sense of injustice. One participant suggested a grandfather clause, allowing older children already using social media to stay on the platforms. Another participant shared:

> *"...families told us unequivocally that they were concerned about social media...but I worry that there's not going to be necessarily that linear effect between these restrictions and then improved mental health..."*

This was echoed by others who feared that children, especially specific groups of children who rely on social media for community and connection, could feel grief and loss. In alignment with parent feedback, there was a strong call for a more holistic, community-based approach, supported by resources, to help adults, including carers in out-of-home care contexts, in navigating the introduction of the changes.

> *"Highlighting children who are neurodiverse... worried about the withdrawal of those connections... we understand the intent about protection for our young people. We still believe that there is a lot of work to do."*

> *"...parents calling for a public health campaign on this issue...spreading the message through multiple channels..."*

Importantly, framing the legislation as a delay rather than a ban was seen a valuable opportunity to educate children and parents, before children gain access to social media. The potentially preparatory period was seen as a chance to equip children with digital literacy skills, for safe engagement later.

> *"...benefits to parents of having that 'not yet' message...but also the 'not yet' conversation to how do we build literacy and capacity..."*

While participants discussed opportunities for education and improved access to information, they also reflected on the current realities and challenges faced by parents. Although the responsibility and onus were recognised as being placed on platforms, some parents are approaching the changes from a place of low confidence in both potential new practices and in government, and a degree of mistrust in institutions.

> *"Parents are not all that confident about how they're going to tackle this task, and I think advice, guidance and support would be really valuable at this time."*

> *"…not to overestimate how much parents actually understand what this will mean and when it will come into effect. And don't be surprised when there's mass shock...pennies starting to drop about what it will mean."*

Attitudes toward age assurance technologies and processes

During the roundtable discussion on the use of age assurance technologies to prevent children under 16 creating social media accounts, participants expressed a mix of support, confusion, and concern.

There was widespread confusion about how age assurance technologies would function in practice, especially around the mechanisms of implementation, type of data required, and responsibilities of platforms.

> *"There's still a lack of understanding about how platforms will be doing that. And then some of the concerns…what will that look like, what kind of information will be needed from, not just from kids, but from all users as well."*

Doubts were raised about the effectiveness of these technologies in genuinely restricting underage access. Participants highlighted circumvention tactics and particular workarounds, such as parents creating accounts on behalf of their children, and questioned whether platforms could reliably detect such tactics.

The margin of error in age estimation technologies was also highlighted, raising questions about false positives and negatives, and how these could affect equitable access, particularly for legitimate users who may be wrongly excluded. The conversation also addressed how age assurance might disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, including children with intellectual

disabilities, those in remote communities, and neurodivergent children. These groups may face additional barriers or unintended consequences.

> "It's an estimation and you're going to have measurement error. And that's not what I've heard any discussion about. What happens to the 18- or 19-year-old who can't get access to it and legitimately should be able to. And what about, you know, if the technology, you know, yes, might be 95% but it still lets a 13-year-old through."

Privacy emerged as a major theme, with strong concerns about the collection and use of biometric and personal data. Participants questioned whether platforms could be trusted to handle sensitive information responsibly, especially given their commercial interests and history of data harvesting.

> "If the platforms aren't safe to start with, what makes them safe to hold our children's sensitive information?"

> "I suppose I just have a general issue, which is, you know, social media platforms or any digital platform is around data privacy fraud, so anything that's going to be requiring, particularly biometrics or any information from our kids, whether they're denied access or not, who's going to collect that? Will the platforms be collecting, will they be storing it and using it for when they do hit 16 so that they can mark it back to them?"

Beyond the technical aspects of age assurance, the discussion moved to reflect on the broader context of digital harm, mental health, and the role of social media in children's lives. There was consensus that age assurance is not a silver bullet and that education, community support, and systemic change are essential to creating safer digital environments.

How the changes might impact how children and their parents use social media

When discussing social media use and parental behaviour, participant responses coalesced around three key themes: parent attitude and agency, family dynamics, and conflict and resistance.

Participants noted that parents' reactions to age assurance measures varied widely, shaped by their own digital habits, their values, and their sense of agency. While there was suggestion that some parents would feel overwhelmed or uncertain how to manage the changes, others viewed the measures as a supportive tool to help set boundaries.

> "I think there are a variety of factors that might influence how sympathetic parents might be to the changes... It could also be related to parents own online behaviour, their values and beliefs around autonomy in this in this space... That's combined with a low sense of efficacy and agency about how to make that change occur or to do it in a way that it's going to not be simply something that creates, you know, overwhelming family conflict."

> "...parents are just so overwhelmed with parenting at the moment that they cannot put any more into that box of how the hell am I supposed to be the one that teaches my kid?"

> *"Support for them to reduce their own social media usage... Maybe this is something that conceivably it could help them have that conversation with their children... Let's look at our own usage of the platforms as well as our children's."*

The role of siblings, particularly older ones, was identified as a significant factor in how children might navigate or circumvent restrictions. Participants emphasised that the issue extends beyond the parent-child relationship to the broader family unit.

> *"A cohort that I have not heard anyone mention... is siblings, the role of siblings, particularly older siblings... co collaborators with younger siblings trying to work around some of these mechanisms... I just don't see any recognition that it's not just about a parent and a child - It's a family unit."*

Anticipated conflict emerged as a major concern, especially for households with teenagers already accessing social media, for children who split their time between two households, and for children in out-of-home contexts. Participants shared a fear of pushback, emotional distress (sense of grief) and loss of connection – and worried that children would seek workarounds to bypass restrictions.

> *"...some of the great concerns that we are getting for parents is about those children, teenage children already using these social platforms and the conflict that they think it might cause in their families."*

> *"Not every child has a consistent adult... I foresee it being semi punitive, another restriction on people whose lives are already over surveilled... Kids are going to get very inconsistent sorts of approaches and inevitably rely on peers the same way 16-year-olds get alcohol."*

How to support children's online safety and wellbeing through the changes

As the roundtable discussion drew to a close, participants focused on strategies to keep children safe in online environments. A strong consensus emerged around the importance of education and skill-building, both for children and their parents. Introducing digital literacy skills early was widely supported, alongside calls for practical tools and resources to facilitate meaningful conversations and informed decision-making within families.

Participants emphasised the need for consistent, clear messaging delivered through a community-wide approach, reducing the burden on parents alone. There were also suggestions that the messaging should come from trusted sources and generally avoid reliance on influencers or public figures. Crucially, the discussion focused on the need for the messaging to be timely, and to articulate a clear rationale behind the changes.

> *"To the extent that we can say that the evidence does support some action in this space and then being very clear about what is still unknown - because people do want to hear that in in the 'why' conversation, and then you can talk about the how. And I think in the 'how' space, it will be trusted peer voices… we need real voices to be part*

of this and that's only going to happen if the literacy is built up around the 'why' and the 'how' amongst a growing number of the population."

"We'd really like families to be having the conversations now... If we don't start having the conversations now, December will be here and then it will be hard to scaffold."

"A really interesting thing about how do we actually give kids the skill set to navigate these risks online, but also in the broader world, who's taking responsibility for that?... We're just saying hopefully by 16, you figure it out."

"...my main concern is that where we might be holding off the inevitable—that young people do need to be able to navigate these digital spaces. This isn't about not allowing them in the digital space. It's about making it a safer place for children to be because it is life."

Concerns were raised about the lack of evidence behind the selection of age thresholds and the need for credible, qualified voices to lead public education efforts.

"I think moving forward there also probably needs to be a decision about who are the faces that are put out to try and educate parents about this stuff... I think there is a lot of opinion-based stuff by people that have no training or qualifications, don't see these kids in clinic, research, whatever."

Importantly, the discussion acknowledged that not all children are equally positioned to benefit from the changes proposed. There was concern that the measures might not address deeper issues such as family conflict, mental health, or social isolation. Special attention was called for children in remote areas, those who are gender diverse, and neurodivergent children. The risk of unintended harm of taking away social media as a key support system, for whom social media may serve as a vital support system.

"Social media is a real lifeline... we really need to bear in mind those young people and be very thoughtful about how we offer alternative supports and support families who are supporting those young people."

"...never rely on any of this to solve all of the problems of all of the families, particularly where you've got significant pre-existing family conflict or it's occurring in the presence of family violence or serious mental health problems in children. This is not going to make those problems go away"

Participants also highlighted the role of children themselves in shaping attitudes and behaviours, and the need to empower them with digital skills and safe communication pathways. Establishing clear communication pathways was considered essential, particularly in recognition that some children may still find ways to access social media platforms, and in doing so, risk exposure to harmful content and experiences.

"Let's not underestimate the power of kids themselves to change the conversation... how the kids bring it home to their parents and can change their parents' attitude."

"...we need to also be aware of giving them the skills or helping them acquire the digital literacy skills that are going to be necessary for social media, but also kick in earlier... we need to provide open, safe methods of communication when they do come across things that they shouldn't be coming across..."

Finally, there was support for relatable, short-form content and role modelling to guide families through the transition, with a broader goal of fostering safe online environments.

"...we have short sharp videos and other messages that are very relatable... role modelling what it looks like when somebody is talking to somebody else about this delay... we also have a much bigger job that we're already started, I think in messaging, parents and young people and other carers about how we have conversations on all kinds of safety..."

Data-driven recommendations

The roundtable discussions highlight some key points for consideration around the complex developmental realities of children when implementing and communication age restrictions for social media. We have synthesised discussion input from expertise into concrete recommendations supported by the responses of expert participants.

Tailor approaches to individual readiness

- Recognise that children's readiness for social media engagement varies significantly based on their personal, social, and developmental contexts. Participants highlighted the importance of expertise and evidence-informed knowledge to guide practices, specifically in terms of educating children in digital literacy and the benefits and risk of social media use.

Address diverse needs across child populations

- Differentiated strategies are required that consider the unique experiences of neurodivergent children, children in remote or rural areas of Australia, and children in out-of-home care who face additional barriers or vulnerabilities.
- Participants expressed a need for understanding how social media is used for connection, self-expression, and access to services across diverse child populations. This understanding should inform supportive evidence-informed guidance for the changes.

Build digital literacy before children access social media

- Education plays a crucial role in reinforcing the 'not yet' message; while framing the restrictions as a delay can support parents' approach, it must be complemented by ongoing educational efforts.
- Participants were in agreement that the concept of a delay is an opportunity to teach children digital literacy skills for social media use, in recognition that children will eventually enter social media environments.

Recognise children as active agents

- Children's capacity to influence their environments can inform approaches that empower them to make informed choices. Participants noted that children influence parental attitudes and family dynamics around social media.
- The data underscores the importance of equipping children with digital literacy and safe communication pathways so that they can be empowered to make informed choices and navigate risk.

Support beyond technical solutions

- Participants called for transparent, privacy-respecting age assurance practices that had regulatory oversight to ensure there was minimal data collection and established clear boundaries on usage.
- Multiple pathways for age assurance were called for, including non-biometric options.
- Expert-led communication can build public trust through transparent and evidence-based messaging that is responsive to community need.

- Participants called for community-based programs that offer alternative pathways for connection and support, particularly for children who rely on social media for social inclusion are essential for child mental health and wellbeing.
- Systemic change is important, which could be achieved via the launch of a public health campaign that explains the rationale behind the changes and promotes shared responsibility across parents, schools and communities.

In summary, the consultation underscored the nuanced developmental realities of children and the importance of a holistic, evidence-informed approach to communicating and implementing social media minimum age restrictions.

Broad support for the changes recognised the welcomed reliance parents would have on the legislation, and the delay to 16 was identified as an opportune period for education, which emerged as a central pillar in supporting children and their parents through the transition. This framing can help parents navigate conversations with their children while reinforcing the importance of preparation.

The discussions recognised children as active agents in their digital lives. Children influence household dynamics and parental attitudes, and their capacity to make informed choices should be nurtured by equipping them with safe communication pathways and critical digital skills. Finally, discussions called for broader systemic support.

Expert-led communication can help to build public trust through transparent and evidence-based messaging. Without social media, communities need to offer alternative avenues for connectedness, especially for children who rely on social media for social inclusion and acceptance.