Drawing a line in digital spaces:
Age-based restriction of social media

POLICY NOTE   APRIL 2025

This note highlights key considerations for legislators, policymakers, and other stakeholders considering an age-based limit for social media. Due to the variety of legislative and regulatory proposals, this brief does not provide detailed analysis; specific proposals and their implementation will require further consideration informed by evidence and children's views.

Background

Social media – broadly defined as digital platforms enabling user interaction and content sharing – plays an integral role in many children's daily lives. It can provide avenues for learning, connecting, play, and self-expression, all of which are essential to the realisation of children's rights.[i]

Alongside opportunities, there are serious risks of harm that need mitigation – a challenge that is increasing as technology evolves and connectivity expands worldwide. The threshold of 13 years of age for consent to process data from children set by the US Children's Online Privacy Protection Act has shaped industry practices and global trends.[ii] However, its enforcement has been inconsistent in practice. Over the last few years, some countries have moved to restrict social media access for children.[iii]

These recent developments reflect growing dissatisfaction with the status quo, particularly the perceived failure of social media companies to self-regulate effectively and weak enforcement of terms of service. Supporters of age restrictions emphasise concerns about children's safety, including risks of sexual victimisation, exposure to harmful content, and mental health impacts. However, debates continue over the evidence regarding risks and harm, with some suggesting that 'bans' oversimplify the complex impacts of social media on children. Others worry that age restrictions may drive children toward less-regulated online spaces and do little to hold technology companies accountable for considering children's rights in the design and operation of their platforms. Nevertheless, recent proposals reflect a broader global shift towards regulatory interventions in social media, with age-based restrictions emerging as one potential component of a robust approach to protecting children online.

The challenge

Maximise the opportunities of social media while minimising its risks for children: To create a safer and more empowering digital environment for children, regulatory efforts should not only mitigate risks of harm but also enhance the positive aspects of their digital experiences. The growing dissatisfaction with the current landscape should drive stronger policies and regulation to incentivise innovation in developing digital experiences that prioritise children's rights, well-being, and developmental needs. While age-based restrictions may play a role, they are unlikely on their own to bring about the necessary changes in the technology industry to support children's rights and safety online.
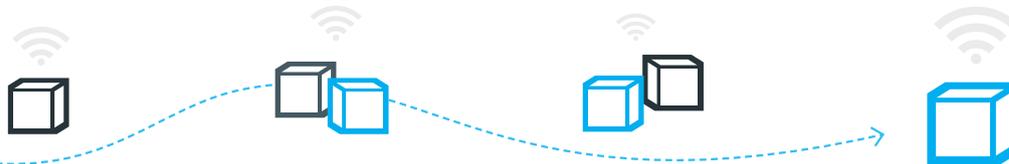
Key policy considerations

*The systematic process of a **child rights impact assessment** should be used by policymakers, starting as early as possible in the process, to examine the potential direct and indirect effects of any proposal for age-based restrictions on children and the enjoyment of their rights. As part of this process and in addition, legislators, policymakers and other stakeholders should:*

Incorporate children's perspectives: Children's and adolescents' perspectives must be meaningfully incorporated into policy development to ensure that any measures address their views, needs, and lived realities, and deliver on their rights.

Establish clear objectives: The main objective for introducing age-based restrictions should be clearly defined so that any measures implemented remain necessary and proportionate. It is crucial to identify the specific harms or concerns any restrictions aim to mitigate, such as:

- Online bullying
- Sexual victimisation
- Exposure to harmful content
- Mental health impacts.

Define scope: 'Social media' covers a broad range of digital spaces, each differing in platform design, user interactions, and risks. It is necessary to clearly define what constitutes social media and whether age thresholds should apply to entire platforms or specific functionalities such as direct interactions. A one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to be effective.[iv]

Guard against unintended consequences: Age restrictions may have unintended negative consequences, potentially undermining children's rights. These include:

- Limiting children's access to information, such as educational or health resources, and supportive online communities.
- Reducing incentives for companies to invest in systems and resources to improve children's online experiences, provide age-appropriate products and services, and design and operate safe spaces for all users.
- Disproportionately impacting children in rural or disadvantaged settings and children most discriminated against who rely on social media for resources and opportunities.
- Driving children to unregulated, less safe online spaces and discouraging them from seeking help if something goes wrong.
- Restricting opportunities for children to develop digital skills and resilience needed for the digital age.

The choice of age assurance and verification solutions and enforcement mechanisms may also negatively impact children's rights to privacy and data protection, reduce company accountability for harm children experience online, and potentially shift the onus to parents and caregivers.

Use research to inform age-based thresholds: Minimum age thresholds should be informed by research, including on child development, opportunities, and risk exposure. There is not yet consensus on the psychological, emotional, and cognitive factors that should be prioritised when considering the appropriate age for access to social media. Age limits may also fail to account for the diversity among children, their evolving capacities, and their varying characteristics and circumstances.

Drive systemic and comprehensive change: Setting a minimum age for accessing social media alone will not eliminate risks of harm. Keeping children safe requires interventions at the **family**, **school**, and **community** levels. Additionally, regulations should require systemic measures regulations should require systemic measures to improve children's safety on social media. The introduction of age restrictions must not reduce incentives for companies to invest in safer platform design and effective content moderation for all users. Regulation must compel companies to take responsibility by proactively identifying and addressing any adverse impacts on children's rights. This includes by conducting robust child rights due diligence, including child rights impact assessments in relation to the digital environment.[v]

Introduce digital literacy from a young age: Children need education and mentorship on digital literacy, critical thinking, and online safety from an early age. This is essential regardless of the minimum age for accessing social media.

Invest in parental and educational support: Parents and educators can play a critical role in guiding children's digital engagement. They should be equipped with accurate information and the resources needed to carry out their roles.

Address implementation challenges: Enforcement of age restrictions presents implementation challenges, including privacy concerns. Stakeholders must collaborate to develop **rights-respecting, technically viable solutions** for age verification and assurance.

Monitor and evaluate impact: Metrics and evaluation frameworks must be developed to assess how well age-restrictions (and other measures) meet their intended goals and outcomes. This could include, for example, tracking behavioural changes, reported incidents of harm, and broader social outcomes to determine the effectiveness of such measures. Businesses should report material impacts, risks, and opportunities related to child rights in the digital environment in their most relevant mainstream public financial filings, management reports, and/or sustainability reports.

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[i] Including as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the interpretative guidance of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in General comment No. 25 on children's rights in relation to the digital environment, CRC/C/GC/25, 2 March 2021

[ii] The threshold of 13 years of age set by COPPA is often misinterpreted as an age restriction for digital access, when in fact it pertains to parental consent to process children's data. For further detail on the 'digital age of consent' and the complexities of applying 'milestone birthdays' to the digital environment, see: Sonia Livingstone & Kim R. Sylwander (2025) There is no right age! The search for age-appropriate ways to support children's digital lives and rights, Journal of Children and Media, 19:1, 6-12, 7-8.

[iii] For example, calls for an EU-wide restriction for children under 15, and Australia's passage of the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024 limiting access to certain social media platforms for children under 16: Mathieu Pollet, 'Danish PM calls for 15+ age limit for social media in EU', Politico, 27 May 2024, https://www.politico.eu/article/danish-pm-calls-for-15-age-limit-for-social-media-in-eu/; Parliament of Australia, Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024, https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Bills_Legislation/Bills_Search_Results/Result?bId=r7284.

[iv] Age restrictions are being proposed for various areas, including access to smartphones and gaming. This note specifically focuses on social media.

[v] See UNICEF Guidance on conducting child rights impact assessments in relation to the digital environment, https://www.unicef.org/childrightsandbusiness/workstreams/responsible-technology/D-CRIA.