

# Evaluation of the Positive and Negative Effects of Social Media Ban on Adolescents

Australia passed the social media ban legislation in December 2024, making social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, liable for fines of up to 50 million Australian dollars for failing to prevent children's access. Despite the rushed passing of the legislation, it was positively accepted by Australians, yet it caused confusion and concerns among social media platform owners. Considering the negative influence of social media on children's mental and physical health, other countries may soon follow Australia's example, which can promote unwanted behavior and lead to long-term negative repercussions. Therefore, along with implementing the new social media limitations, society should develop effective ways to manage social media use, especially among children and adolescents. Mental health issues are among the most often cited negative outcomes of heavy social media use in adolescents. In a systematic review (Keles, McCrae & Grealish, 2020), higher levels of depression, anxiety, and general psychological distress are frequently associated with social media use. These negative outcomes result from various factors, including lower self-esteem caused by unrealistic representations of influencers' physical characteristics, cyberbullying, and the development of the need for external validation through likes, comments, and shares. Moreover, unrestricted access to short-form media, such as TikToks or Instagram Stories, affects the neural pathways and conditions users to become dependent on quick dopamine release while shortening the attention span and making children and adolescents incapable of focusing for long periods of time. The addictive nature of social media posts and validation is especially dangerous for young users, as it can have a significant impact on their still-developing brains and cause unpredictable changes that would have lifelong effects on their cognitive and reasoning abilities. Although some researchers (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017) found a positive correlation between moderate social media use and mental well-being, controlling and managing daily screen time limits is impossible for most families and schools. Therefore, a partial or full social media ban is an effective solution.

At the same time, social media's effect on adolescent behavior is more nuanced and complex. For example, studies (Viner et al., 2019) show that while social media can be used to support social connections and relationships, there is also a correlation between digital media consumption and exposure to risky behavior. Although social platforms generally monitor and censor user content to limit the spread of illegal and dangerous content, the regulations and policies are changing, and adolescents may become exposed to it despite precautions. Not only can perilous content traumatize children, but it can also promote delinquent and dangerous behavior, including underage drinking, drug use, public misconduct, as well as criminal offenses up to mass shootings. Although some of these issues can be resolved by moderating social media content or creating underage-friendly platforms, neither approach would prevent children from being exposed to dangers. Moreover, neither would protect them from becoming targets for sexual predators pretending to be children. Therefore, only a complete social media ban would prevent physical harm and risky behaviors. Still, it would also increase the chances of children being exposed to these risks through other channels, like school.

On the other hand, prohibiting adolescents from using social media could have the opposite effect. As the forbidden fruit is the sweetest, children would be tempted to find ways to overcome the ban, especially if they have already been exposed to social platforms. Looking for ways to circumvent the regulations would potentially expose them to even more harmful content and promote new modes of risky behavior. Moreover, transferring these risk-taking tendencies into their academic and daily lives could lead to unprecedented harmful consequences, like suspension or expulsion from school, unprotected sexual intercourse, or experimentation with substance abuse.

Additionally, without a proper introduction to social media and its appropriate use, adolescents newly exposed to social platforms would be more vulnerable to criminals, including sexual predators and scammers. Therefore, intensive training and mentoring should accompany the social media ban to ensure young adults are ready to engage in online social interactions without endangering themselves. In fact, the social media ban might not even be necessary if all children are taught about its dangers and trained to use it for good rather than harm from an early age. Much like the introduction of sex education into school syllabi reduces the number of teenage pregnancies and STIs, social media training could mitigate its negative impact while preserving its positive effects on children's socialization and digital literacy.

In conclusion, Australia's decision to ban social media for children under 16, as well as other countries' moves in this direction is grounded in decades of research and a desire to protect adolescents from the harmful impact on their psychological health and cognitive abilities, while also reducing physical risks. However, social media is also known to have a positive impact on children's socialization and mental health, especially when its use is moderate. Therefore, a complete social media ban can do more harm than good in the long-term perspective. Education, training, and content moderation could be a viable alternative that preserves social media's positive influences while mitigating the negatives. Still, its implementation would require additional investment and resources, making it a less desirable and headline-worthy solution than social media bans. For now, we can only speculate whether Australia's regulation will come into effect and what impact it will have on children, their parents, and tech companies.

## References

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