

30th July 2024

The Honourable Kate Thwaites
Assistant Minister, Aging, Social Security & Women
Chair,
Joint Committee on Social Media and Australian Society

Dear Assistant Minister,

Prevention United is a registered health promotion charity that focuses on the promotion of mental wellbeing and the prevention of mental health conditions. We work collaboratively with other mental health organisations on areas impacting the mental health and wellbeing of individuals and communities.

Given the current focus of Government on social media as a priority and In response to feedback on our recent Social Media Policy Brief written in conjunction with our youth advisory group (YAG), we have joined with eight partner organisations working with young people to produce a joint position statement: *Youth Mental Health and Social Media: A Joint Position Statement by Australian mental health focused organisations working with young people* (please find attached). This position statement will be released at 3pm by the signatories at 3pm on Wednesday 31st, July.

As a collective we are aware that social media can have a negative impact on mental health. However, social media can also be protective in facilitating connectedness and sense of community. As a collective we believe that age-based social media bans are unlikely to be effective and could have potential negative consequences. This position statement therefore outlines key areas for consideration by policy makers which seeks to balance the concerns of families and communities with the needs and priorities of young people.

We welcome further discussion and engagement with yourself and other decision makers in order to create meaningful policy solutions.

Yours sincerely

Suzanne Dick,
CEO Prevention United

Youth mental health and social media:

A Joint Position Statement by Australian mental health focused organisations working with young people.

“When creating policies, you need to work with young people to see whether they actually agree with it and whether it would work for them.”

Prevention United YAG Member

30th July 2024

Social media can have a negative impact on mental health, however the current narrative blaming social media for the youth mental health crisis is overly simplistic and fails to address other important factors associated with poor mental health in young people. These include, but are not limited to, childhood maltreatment, family violence, poverty, climate change, the current cost of living crisis and future uncertainty. These areas should be considered high priority in any policy decisions that aim to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people. Given the use of social media and other digital technologies is ever evolving, to keep young people safe and promote mental health and wellbeing we must actively engage them in defining the problem and collaborating on effective policy solutions.

Social media can be protective in facilitating connectedness, storytelling, engagement, creativity and sense of community. These protective effects can be even greater for young people living in regional and remote areas, and populations at higher risk of mental health conditions such as neurodivergent or LGBTQIA+ youth, but there is emerging evidence to suggest those protective factors can extend to young people who use social media to seek information, connect with friends and find inspiration.

Mental health organisations are dedicated to keeping young people safe and are working hard to ensure that young people can access appropriate information online and receive the support they need. The signatories to this position statement have therefore come together to request that the following be considered by policy makers:

- Age-based social media bans are unlikely to be effective and may have unintended negative consequences (e.g., isolating young people who may be searching for mental health information, or exposing young people to the same harmful information in even less regulated spaces).
- The online world can be unsafe and young people and their families need support to use social media safely. Social media companies need to work in partnership with Government, policy makers, those engaged in mental health and wellbeing initiatives focused on young people, and across jurisdictions to make the online world safer for young people.
- There is no established evidence-base or research that shows that social media bans for under 16's will improve mental health. In practice, some vulnerable groups may lose important connections and sources of support.
- The way that young people access information and connect with friends and the world has fundamentally changed and social media is an important enabler of this. Ultimately, young people want to access social media, but also want these platforms to be safe. We encourage policy makers to engage young people in defining the problem and the solutions, and to continue to address other factors associated with poor youth mental health.
- Unintended outcomes from restricting access to social media in cases where it is protective requires substantial consideration, planning and further research.
- Social media can play a major role in positive mental health solutions that empower young people with information and support. Mental health organisations and education initiatives can and should play an important role in outlining potential solutions.

We invite Government and policy makers to work with us to continue the conversation, ensure the voices of young people are heard, and develop evidence-based solutions to ensure that young people are safe online.

