

Questions on notice | Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society

At Bully Zero, we stand alongside parents whose children have tragically lost their lives or faced severe mental health challenges because of harmful online experiences. The digital world, while offering connection and opportunity, has also become a space where many young people face overwhelming pressure, harassment, and exposure to harmful content. Our focus must remain firmly on prevention - creating environments where kids can be kids, free from the damaging effects of online abuse.

Do you think that Social Media Companies owe their users, participants, partners, and content creators a duty of care?

We believe social media companies owe a clear duty of care to their users, participants, partners, and content creators. Children and young people are vulnerable to manipulation, addiction, and harm through these platforms. Social media platforms must be held accountable for prioritising user safety and mental health over engagement metrics and profit.

In recommending that social media platforms limit addictive features, what specific platform design changes do you suggest, and how can these be regulated and monitored effectively by the government?

To reduce social media's addictive nature, platforms should introduce features that limit continuous scrolling, encourage periodic breaks, and reduce algorithm-driven exposure to harmful content. These changes could include time limits for younger users, simplified privacy settings, and notifications prompting users to engage in off-screen activities. These measures should be regulated and monitored through independent oversight bodies, with governments enforcing compliance through legislation that ensures transparency in platform algorithms and design.

Many parents face pressure to allow their children to use smartphones and social media to stay connected with peers.

How do you propose the government support parents in navigating societal pressures and setting healthy boundaries for their children's technology use

Parents face immense pressure to allow their children to use smartphones and social media to stay connected with their peers. Government support can come from widespread public education campaigns, providing parents with tools, resources, and training to set healthy boundaries. Clear guidelines on age-appropriate usage, digital literacy programs, and easy access to mental health services should be promoted, helping parents confidently navigate societal pressures.

Let's take a step back and look at the bigger picture. On one hand, we want to see a cultural shift away from screen-based childhoods which is very admirable. However, our society, economy, and community are only becoming more digital, more automated, and more technologically connected.

How should government counteract the economic and social pressures which normalise and in many cases, demand online participation?

We understand that the digital world is becoming increasingly integral to society's functions. However, balancing digital participation and preserving childhood experiences away from screens is essential. The government must ensure that offline experiences - such as outdoor activities, creative arts, and in-person community engagement - are promoted and funded. Offering incentives to educational institutions and workplaces that support reduced screen time and offline alternatives can help counteract the pressure to participate online continuously.

e.g. Life. Be In It Campaign

The Life. Be in It campaign was one of Australia's most iconic public health and wellness initiatives. Launched in the late 1970s and gaining significant traction in the 1980s, it was created by the Australian government to promote physical activity, healthy living, and overall well-being among Australians.

During the 1970s, the Australian government recognised an increasing trend in sedentary lifestyles, mainly due to the rise in desk-based jobs and modern conveniences that reduced physical activity. This shift in behaviour was contributing to rising levels of obesity, heart disease, and other lifestyle-related health problems.

The campaign was initiated to combat these emerging health issues by encouraging Australians to adopt more active lifestyles as part of a broader public health effort to reduce the burden of preventable diseases.

Objective of the Campaign

The main objective of the Life. Be in it campaign raised awareness about the importance of regular physical activity and healthy living. The campaign specifically aimed to:

1. Encourage Australians of all ages to engage in more physical activities, regardless of their fitness level.
2. Promote healthy habits like exercise, outdoor activities, and balanced diets.
3. Make physical activity fun and accessible by emphasising recreational sports, family activities, and non-competitive play.
4. Increase public awareness of the long-term health risks of sedentary lifestyles like heart disease, diabetes, and obesity.

The Campaign's Approach

The campaign was widely recognised for using a friendly, humorous, and relatable character named Norm. Norm was a middle-aged, overweight, and sedentary figure who represented the average Australian at the time. Norm was featured in various television ads, posters, and promotional material, urging Australians to get off the couch and start being active.

Norm's humorous portrayal helped make the campaign memorable, with the slogan "Life. Be in it." becoming a catchphrase throughout Australia.

Impact of the Campaign

1. Public Awareness and Cultural Impact

The campaign became a massive cultural phenomenon in Australia. Norm was a beloved character, and the campaign resonated with Australians of all ages. "Life. Be in it." became part of everyday language, and the phrase "Be like Norm" was widely recognised as a call to action.

2. Increased Physical Activity

While complex data on direct changes in behaviour is limited, anecdotal evidence suggests that the campaign successfully raised awareness about the importance of physical activity. It inspired people to engage in more recreational sports, family outings, and exercise in parks and public spaces.

3. Long-Term Health Impact

The campaign helped set the stage for more structured public health initiatives in later decades. By promoting the idea that even small changes in daily activity could lead to better health outcomes, the campaign laid the groundwork for subsequent health promotion efforts in Australia, many of which built on the success of Life. Be in it.

4. Continued Influence

Even today, the legacy of Life. Be in it. endures. The campaign continued in various forms well into the 1990s and beyond, with schools, communities, and public health bodies using its messages to promote active lifestyles.

Conclusion

The Life. Be in it. campaign was one of Australia's most influential public health initiatives. It aimed to tackle sedentary lifestyles and promote physical wellbeing in a fun, engaging, and culturally resonant way. Its impact was both immediate in terms of public awareness and lasting in terms of its contribution to health promotion in Australia. It remains a fondly remembered part of Australia's public health history.

Life. Be In It. Version 2.0 - Getting Off Devices and Getting Back into Life!

Reason for the Campaign

In today's digital age, screens dominate our daily lives - from work to entertainment to socialising. This increase in screen time, especially among children and teens, has been linked to numerous physical, mental, and social health concerns, such as poor posture, eye strain, reduced physical activity, anxiety, and isolation.

The rise of digital platforms, while connecting us in new ways, has led to a concerning disconnect from real-world experiences. Returning to face-to-face interactions, outdoor activities, and movement is more pressing than ever to protect our health and wellbeing.

Objective of Life. Be in it. Version 2.0

The campaign aims to promote a healthier, more balanced lifestyle by encouraging people of all ages to reduce screen time and get back into life. Our focus is on:

1. Reducing reliance on digital devices and promoting active, offline lifestyles.
2. Encouraging physical movement and exercise through fun, accessible activities for all fitness levels

3. Reconnecting with family, friends, and the outdoors to improve mental health and social wellbeing.
4. Raising awareness of the long-term health benefits of less screen time and more real-world engagement, such as improved fitness, mental clarity, and stronger relationships.

Key Campaign Messages

1. Get off the screen and back into life! - This message emphasises the importance of stepping away from screens and engaging with the world around you.
2. Move more, feel better, live more! - Highlighting the positive effects of physical activity and movement on both body and mind.
3. Digital balance for a healthier future - Encourage people to balance their digital lives, limiting screen time while prioritising movement, face-to-face interaction, and outdoor activities.

Approach

Like the original campaign, Life. Be in it. Version 2.0 will utilise a relatable, humorous character to capture attention. This modern version will feature a tech-savvy but screen-addicted character (perhaps named "Sam" or "Jess") who learns the benefits of stepping away from their devices and rediscovering the joys of real-life activities.

The character will highlight daily scenarios that many people experience: endlessly scrolling social media, binge-watching shows, and missing out on real-world experiences. As the campaign progresses, Sam/Jess will gradually embrace more physical activities - like hiking, cycling, playing sports with friends, or simply enjoying nature - showing the fun and fulfillment of engaging with life outside screens.

Platform Design Changes and Calls to Action

1. Digital Detox Days - We'll promote community-wide challenges that encourage families, schools, and workplaces to go device-free for a day (or even just a few hours) and engage in outdoor or social activities.
2. Screen Time Awareness Apps- Partner with developers to create or promote apps that track and limit screen time usage, offering rewards for meeting screen-time reduction goals.
3. Offline Activity Kits - Provide resources for families and schools with ideas for screen-free activities, such as outdoor games, DIY crafts, and fitness challenges.
4. Active Living Hubs - In partnership with local councils, create community spaces and events for group exercise, outdoor sports, and social interaction, making movement fun and accessible.

Health Benefits of Reducing Screen Time

1. Physical Health - Less screen time leads to more time for physical activities, reducing the risk of obesity, heart disease, and other lifestyle-related illnesses. Movement enhances cardiovascular health, improves muscle strength, and boosts overall fitness.
2. Mental Health - Reduced screen time can lead to lower stress levels, improved sleep, and decreased anxiety. Engaging in outdoor activities and face-to-face interactions can also combat feelings of loneliness and depression.

3. Social Benefits - Face-to-face communication and group activities help strengthen relationships, promote teamwork, and improve social skills - skills that may be diminished by excessive screen time.
4. Cognitive Development - Less screen time can mean more time for creative play, problem-solving, and intellectual growth, especially for children.

Support for Families and Schools

1. Parent Resources - Offer guides and workshops that help parents set healthy screen-time boundaries for their children, emphasising the importance of balanced technology use and encouraging real-world engagement.
2. School Programs- Introduce school screen-free days, during which students are encouraged to play sports, engage in art or music, or participate in outdoor learning activities.
3. Government Collaboration - Advocate for government-backed programs that provide communities with accessible outdoor spaces, recreational facilities, and funding for physical activity initiatives.

Counteracting the Digital Push

While our economy and society are becoming increasingly digital, Life. Be in it. Version 2.0 stresses the importance of balance. We recognise that screens are a necessary part of modern life. Still, we encourage finding moments to step back and engage in offline experiences that enrich our mental and physical wellbeing. The government can play a role by promoting public health initiatives that focus on digital balance, mental health awareness, and access to outdoor activities.

Beyond Screen-Time Restrictions

Life. Be in it. Version 2.0 supports:

1. Digital Literacy Education - Teaching children and adults how to use technology responsibly and healthily, emphasising the importance of moderation and balance.
2. Incentivized Movement - Partnering with fitness apps or creating reward systems that encourage people to reduce screen time and engage in physical activities.
3. Community Involvement - Encouraging local councils and community organisations to hold events that promote outdoor play, social interaction, and physical movement.

Measuring Success

Success for Life. Be in it. Version 2.0 will be seen through:

1. Increased community participation in screen-free events and physical activities.
2. Improved public health outcomes, such as lower rates of obesity and mental health issues linked to screen addiction.
3. Feedback from families, schools, and community groups who feel more empowered to set screen-time boundaries and promote a healthier, more balanced lifestyle.

Conclusion

Life. Be in it. Version 2.0 builds on the legacy of the original campaign but reimagines it for the digital age. It encourages all Australians to step away from screens, get moving, and reconnect with life. We can create healthier, happier communities by balancing technology with physical activity, social engagement, and real-world experiences.

Aside from raising the minimum social media age and banning smartphones in schools, what other alternatives or preventative measures would you support to mitigate the harms of social media, especially for children who already use these platforms?

Raising the minimum social media age and banning smartphones in schools are essential steps, but we also support the following preventative measures:

- Mandatory Digital Literacy Education - Schools should provide ongoing education about online safety, empathy, and responsible social media use.
- Stronger Parental Controls - Social media platforms must introduce enhanced parental controls that allow parents to monitor and regulate their children's activity.
- Mental Health Support Systems - Accessible, child-friendly mental health services should be embedded into school and community environments, offering support for children who are impacted by negative online experiences.

In cases where platforms, through negligence or intentional decision-making, fail to remove harmful content or comply with age restrictions or other mandatory measures, would you support criminal liability for company executives?

When platforms fail, through negligence or intentional decision-making, to remove harmful content or comply with mandatory measures such as age restrictions, we support holding company executives criminally liable. Social media platforms have an immense responsibility to safeguard their users, especially children. Failure to uphold these responsibilities must have serious consequences, as lives are at stake.

Why do you propose raising the age of social media access to 18 years old – what is the evidence that this is more effective than 16 years of age?

Raising the minimum age of social media access to 18 years old is a protective measure rooted in evidence that children's brains are still developing, making them more susceptible to emotional harm, addiction, and manipulation online. Research has shown that excessive screen time and exposure to harmful content can severely impact mental health, leading to anxiety, depression, and even suicide. By raising the age limit, we are giving young people the chance to develop critical thinking skills and emotional resilience before engaging with these platforms.

At Bully Zero, we believe our primary goal must be preventing harm. By focusing on positive mental health, supporting parents, and holding social media companies accountable, we can protect our children and ensure they grow up in a safer, healthier world.