



Catholic School Parents WA thank the Joint Select Committee for the opportunity to provide additional input into this very important conversation. Our input is provided below.

A number of young people and their parents have raised with me the positive opportunities for social media where a young person has, for instance, neurodiversity or they identify as queer, are seeking support for a mental illness including eating disorders, have a particular interest or hobby, or live remotely or regionally, or are isolated in some way.

- (i) What impact do you think an age ban on social media will have on young people who use it to connect with others in a positive way?*
- (ii) What would you suggest is put in place as an alternative for those particular young people?*

There will of course be an adjustment period, but we need to have alternative options available for these young people, whether it be online forums/closed groups that they can access, in addition to online counselling opportunities. We know that online counselling and Telehealth (an appt via the phone or video call) already exist so we need to look at ways to expand and advertise these options to young people predominantly through school but also as part of a national campaign including TV.

The internet will continue to be a source of information for young people and their families through groups and organisations who are qualified to assist and provide support. Until we are sure that children and young people are educated to know the difference between fact and information which is based on opinion only, social media is not the place for them to be seeking help.

Organisations such as Beyond Blue and Reach Out can provide opportunities for young people to reach out to others with similar diagnosis or lifestyle through their websites and this would provide a much safer place for children and young people, including those from diverse backgrounds. Parents we have spoken to about this, think the benefits of delaying access to social media far outweigh these potential risks, as many young people are self-

diagnosing through what they see on social media, and consequently can be open to online bullying and harassment based on how they identify.

Young people could also be encouraged to communicate through other medium such as Facetime or Zoom. This provides the added advantage of encouraging them to actually communicate face to face which is known to be much more effective in building productive and effective relationships.

Families in regional and remote areas should be able to access all these alternative methods of communication as easily as possible, and mechanisms need to be in place to ensure this. Services like Telehealth consultations and online counselling could be bulkbilled in order to ensure access and to remove barriers for young people in regional, rural and remote areas in accessing services they need.

The government also need to continue to work on ensuring all communities, regardless of their postcode, have access to internet services.

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

Yes absolutely, and in the context of this enquiry, particularly children and young people who have the right to feel safe and be safe. If a child were to harm themselves on a piece of faulty equipment in a playground, it is very likely that the playground would be closed until the issue were resolved. Any other organisation, including schools, have a duty of care to their people and would be liable if they caused harm to them. Social media companies are organisations doing business in Australia and as such owe a duty of care to their users, particularly to our children and young people.

“I would feel cautious about leaving my 13-15 year old in the care of someone I didn’t know, for extended periods of time, but yet they can be online in a private capacity for hours and we as parents have no idea who they’re talking to and what they are seeing, and we rely on having controls in place to allow them that freedom, so we expect a duty of care from these companies”. Quote from parent of Yr 6 and Yr 8 children.

Many parents do try to act responsibly by utilizing parental controls but many don’t for a variety of reasons. Parents rely on social media companies to provide safe virtual playgrounds for their children and young people. It is unfair to place responsibility on them for the management of inappropriate content across these platforms, and so a key element of reform needs to ensure social media companies are required to take responsibility for ensuring that content is both age appropriate and suitable for public consumption. To date this is the very opposite of what social media companies are doing.

Although your submission does not explicitly mention age verification, do you believe age assurance mechanisms could be part of the solution to regulate and restrict children's access to social media?

Yes definitely. We already know that there are many children accessing social media platforms although they are not at the current recommended age of 13! We are sadly aware that in some of these situations, parents are providing false information about their children to open the accounts. This is not in the best interests of children and so age verification would go some way to protecting all children including those who may be living in vulnerable circumstances.

Age verification is therefore something that must be addressed. We acknowledge that this technology is not yet available and we do have concerns about some of the suggestions such as facial scanning and about the data collected being recorded and stored by social media companies. However, it is technology that needs to be investigated, as part of a multifaceted approach to the challenges of social media and young people.

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?

Education is key. Literacy and Numeracy along with Digital Literacy are the three key components of education today. We place a huge emphasis on these subjects and rightly so, because without competency in these three areas, our children may struggle to flourish.

Digital literacy needs to commence in schools before we give our children autonomous access to devices. As they move through, this subject needs to be embedded in the curriculum, not just the ability to use a device but the ethics, values and responsibility associated with technology. It is also part of the conversation around Respectful Relationships.

The language could potentially move from 'banning' to 'delayed access'. We are not telling our children that they can never have access to social media, but rather that we as the adults have to be certain that they will be engaging within safe environments once they do get access. We have also spoken with quite a few young people who would see this as a huge relief themselves as many cite social media as a key part of their anxiety and stress.

Year 7 is a particularly important year as young people move from primary to secondary schools. It is paramount that good habits are developed as early as possible and parents need to be vigilant about what their young people may be accessing online. Many children are given phones on entry to secondary school and they will also make new friendship groups so it is important for parents to find ways to engage with the school. They should also be strongly encouraged to attend the cyber safety presentations that many schools organise in year 7 (and ensuing years). Sadly, we too often hear that the attendance by parents at

these evenings is problematic. Parent engagement in the secondary school environment is vital and it is important for schools to find ways to encourage parents to engage in their child's learning of Digital Literacy.

You recommend developing educational programs for parents about digital environments.

- *What key topics should these programs cover, and how can the government ensure they are accessible and effective for parents of varying technological literacy levels?*

The educational resources for parents need to be developed alongside the curriculum and in consultation with parents. Whenever a new topic is being taught/discussed there should be a resource developed for parents as well. This could be 'tip-sheet' with links to further information and assistance. It could be one page, short and to the point around the various challenges associated with that particular topic.

Topics for consideration should include but are not limited to:

- Applications (apps) and what to be aware of
- Respectful relationships online as well as offline
- The importance of understanding one's digital footprint and how some information can never be 'unshared'
- Importance of privacy settings – whether we like it or not many employers now look at the social media pages of applicants as part of the recruitment process
- Impact of sharing personal information including photos
- Sextortion
- Pornography and its impact on desensitising our children
- Pornography and its potential link to domestic violence
- Legal ramifications around sharing/receiving nudes
- How to spot a scam
- Grooming and what that looks like
- Consent – this could include a conversation around whether parents should be posting photos of their children on social media
- Algorithms and how they work
- Information that hackers can use to access your accounts
- Alternative places that children and young people can go to for support, such as community organisations, school counsellor/psychologist/social worker, Lifeline etc
- Assistance for parents around having conversations about social media without breaking the lines of communication with their young people, particularly in the teenage years

The responsibility of keeping our children and young people safe lies with everyone, schools, families, communities and government.

- Children and young people are hearing the same message from the important people in their lives and are therefore more likely to heed the messaging
- Children who live within vulnerable families may not hear the messaging in the home, this is why schools need to be part of the solution
- Schools know the context of their own communities and can provide useful information around how best to engage their families

- Even when families want to, many of them feel lacking in capacity to engage knowledgably in the conversation around social media
- Workshops in local libraries, both during the day and after hours
- Webinars with Q&As
- Tip sheets in various languages
- Consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, immigrant and refugee families
- Consultation with families of students with disability and those who are neurodiverse
- Consultation with families whose children identify as queer
- Consultation with families whose children are living with mental illness.

Parent engagement in learning is paramount to the success of these initiatives. Many parents feel and are lacking in capacity around social media and the harms it can do to our children and young people. When developing the curriculum around the world of social media it would be great to see easy to access, age appropriate resources made available for parents to use with their children.

It should be noted that there is already a lot of good information out there for families to access particularly from the Office of the eSafety Commissioner. This information could be disseminated and used as part of the national campaign which should include TV.

One would think that the conversation will be quite robust should the age of access be raised, this would be the time to advertise the information that is already available for parents but also for education departments to use the extra years to provide curriculum embedded resources such that our children are better prepared when they are deemed old enough to access social services.

Finally, and importantly, none of the above should relieve the social medial companies from their responsibilities regarding cleaning up their platforms. The reality is that there are many vulnerable adults out there who would not be bound by age verification processes – how do we protect them?