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Social Media Age Restrictions

Youth Experts by Experience Group Submission

Submission to the Victorian Government’s Inquiry into Proposed Changes to Social Media Age Limits

31 Oct 2024

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# Language Note

The remit of the Social Media Age Restrictions submission covers the experiences and opinions of WDV’s Youth Experts by Experience Group. At the time of the submission, our group consisted of four young women with disabilities aged 21-27. One member grew up in a regional area, another in the state of Tasmania, one member is queer, and two members are from a culturally and linguistically diverse, (CALD) background, including one woman who is a person of colour and Muslim. The submission reflects group members’ experience of social media. Our submission will reflect the overlapping experiences of some other marginalised young people. However, the social media experiences of marginalised groups warrant specific and direct exploration.

This submission uses ‘person first’ language (women with disabilities). We acknowledge people describe their experience of disability in different ways, and for many people, ‘identity first’ language is a source of pride and resistance.

# Acknowledgment of Country

Women with Disabilities Victoria (WDV) respectfully acknowledges Aboriginal people as the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters on which we work, rest, and continue to benefit from, particularly the land of the Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung people of the Kulin nation, where group members called in from during the consultation. We pay our respects to the Elders, past and present, of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities across Victoria and acknowledge that their continued strength and resilience is built upon more than 60,000 years of history. The WDV community is committed to honouring the unique cultural and spiritual relationship Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have with the land and waters, and their rich contribution to society.

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# About the Authors

[**Women with Disabilities Victoria**](https://www.wdv.org.au/) **(WDV)** is a not-for-profit Disabled People’s Organisation (DPO) representing women with disabilities in Victoria. The organisation is operated *by* and *for* women and non-binary people with varied disability experiences. WDV has a diverse membership of people from different backgrounds. Women with disabilities face intersecting forms of structural gender and disability discrimination. WDV actively advocates for our rights to safety and respect, with particular emphasis on disability policy, health services, violence prevention, workforce development, and leadership. WDV envisions a world where all women are respected and can fully experience life.

**Youth Experts by Experience Group** is a group of young women with disabilities aged 21-27, who all live in Melbourne. They use their lived experience to create resources and events to empower young women and non-binary people with disabilities.

# Executive Summary

Women with Disabilities Victoria’s Youth Experts by Experience team meet regularly to create resources and events to empower young women and non-binary people with disabilities. They met in October 2024 to contribute to the Victorian Government’s inquiry into proposed changes to social media age limits, as they thought their lived experience of using social media as young women with disabilities offered important insights into the online safety of young people.

The group discussed the benefits of the Victorian Government’s proposed changes. Key topics included how social media is particularly important for helping young people with disabilities find community, particularly people of colour and members of multicultural and multifaith communities, and young people living in rural and regional areas.

The Youth Experts also discussed the limitations and negative consequences of the proposed changes. Key topics were sketchy adults manipulating younger people online, how kids can easily access inappropriate content, and that there is no way to escape bullying with social media. They also came up with a list of key recommendations to implement to keep young people safe online.

# Social Media’s Impact on Young People

* What impact does your group think social media has on young people (under the age of 18) today?

### What (if any) are the benefits for young people?

Our group discussed a range of benefits of social media for young people in general. These included connecting with family and friends, finding community, networking, and learning about and staying connected with world news, and international events.

Our group also discussed the significant benefits social media can have for young people from regional areas, young people of colour, young people from multicultural backgrounds and young people part of the LGBTQIA+ community, and particularly for young people with disabilities. We said that, for isolated young people from regional and rural Australia, it allows them to make friends who have similar interests online (as there might not be a lot of other young people with similar interests in their area).

For young women and girls with disabilities, it allows them to connect with other young people with similar disabilities – when they might not have any people with disabilities, and especially similar type of disability, in their local community. For some members of our group, the first person we met with the same disability as us was through connecting with others online and through social media. These were really important connections and have led to ongoing friendships.

We also said that social media was important for finding information, reassurance, and relatability about disabilities. It provides a means of problem-solving things you have going on. E.g., you can scroll through Reddit or Facebook groups and find others who have gone through the same thing and find out what they have done in response. It can be a good supportive space at times. There are plain language versions of disability experiences explained/expressed in social media groups that particularly resonate with us, and at times that we had not seen represented before. These groups and connections have helped us grow in confidence and understand our identities and who we are.

### **Direct quotes from our conversation include:**

#### On identity and community

*“(Social media is) important for young people with disabilities to find the community that they don't get in their everyday life and in their local community.”*

*“It can make a world of difference in a person's mental health state, to find that community and connection in those different ways.”*

*“For young people on social media, it’s a really great space to find self-understanding. Especially when it comes to communities like queer and disability community.”*

*“From the disability perspective as well, I was the only short statured person in my area and surrounding town so it's nice to have that connection online.”*

*“Finding community, especially growing up in a rural town there wasn’t always people who liked the same things as I did.”*

*“For communities of colour and multicultural and multifaith communities, social media can be very powerful, particularly when finding groups and people representing these specific intersections, and disability… It helps communities feel seen and represented and can be a safe space for people to share experiences and feel like they belong.”*

#### On finding information and being informed and connected.

*“(Social media is) very important for young people with disabilities to find community and to find answers that family might not have the answer to.” (Parents are often learning themselves, they might not have the answers about disability or know the right things to research)*

*“It gives young people autonomy as well, like with private and personal things that you don’t want your parents to look at.”*

*“I think it has a great benefit for people under 18 to connect with friends and family, to find community, to learn and to stay on top of everything that’s going on around you.”*

*“(Particularly for communities of colour and multicultural and multifaith communities) it can offer the opportunity to see the work others with similar identities and experiences are undertaking, whether that be advocacy, professional work, or just day to day documentation of one’s life.”*

### What if any are the risks or concerns for young people?

While acknowledging the benefits of social media, our group expressed mixed views and concerns. We said that while social media can be good for connecting with others who have similar experiences to you, there are a lot of sketchy and creepy people who try to manipulate younger people online.

Kids can also come into contact with inappropriate content, and this is very hard for parents and schools to regulate. Questionable content and ideas, and information that does not help broaden one’s perspective, can also be reinforced through repetition, often exacerbated through algorithms.

We also shared that there is no way to escape bullying with social media – in the old days, people would get bullied at school, but they were able to escape it at home. Now, with cyber bullying, you can’t escape bullying at home.

We also discussed the dopamine mining that comes with getting likes/comments on posts (e.g. Taylor Swift now refuses to look at social media, because having people like her/like her posts feels good. But keyboard trolls comment rubbish/mean comments and your mind only focuses on the one bad comment). This also leads to body image issues due to ‘fitspiration’ posts, which can lead to eating disorders.

### **Direct quotes from our conversation include:**

*“There are a lot of sketchy creepy people out there who, you know, try to manipulate younger people to get them to do things that are very very wrong. I think there’s a huge risk in terms of safety for young people using social media when they are a kid, especially because you don't really know what to trust yet. And social media can be a really sketchy place at times.”*

*“I feel like sometimes potentially online bullying can be possibly worse than in person in some ways because you literally can't escape it and it's always jumping out at you… You can go to school, and you can get bullied, and you come home, and you can’t escape it. It’s just there when you get home because they can just do it online.”*

*“It’s concerning the way social media impacts young people's mental health with body image and trying to copy trends.”*

*“Having access to screens such as iPads every day, in every single situation, can impact social skills and other aspects of development. I would go so far as to say it is almost a precursor to addiction, if not an addiction.”*

*“Although social media can be a safe space, the way in which algorithms work, means you only see content that is familiar to you. There is a risk of being in a bubble, and not being exposed to experiences and perspectives, and even news, outside one’s own community. It can also mean that experiences of racism and xenophobia can occur, which is difficult to deal with at any age and life stage but can have significant detrimental effects on the mental health of younger people, who may not even be able to identify such encounters. There are no regulations to help address and deal with this.”*

# Age Restrictions for Social Media

* What thoughts and feelings does your group have about having age restrictions/limits in place for social media usage?
* What might be the pros of age restrictions, if any?
* What might be the cons of age restrictions, if any? What if any are the benefits for young people?

One of our members expressed that “It’s bizarre to have the criminal age of responsibility to be 10 and then restricting social media for kids up to the age of 16. It doesn’t weigh out in terms of responsibility.”

We were concerned that, while age restrictions sound like an easy solution, they will be impractical to impose, easy for young people to get around them, and therefore they won’t work. Or in some ways, don’t go far enough, when other areas of the internet that aren’t age restricted, also pose similar risks. We were also concerned that age restrictions deny young people the advantages associated with social media. Age limits won’t enable kids to build connections and gain knowledge they otherwise could and will deprive them of community – especially for those with lived experience of marginalisation; and that, once you get through the age barrier, all the dangers/problems/safety risks still exist.

Members discussed “In an ideal world, if it did work then it would be better because people would have a lot less screen time and go outside more and talk in person more.” And there would be “less risk of being cyber bullied, so that would be good.”

### **Direct quotes from our conversation include:**

#### On the ineffectiveness of setting age limits

*“It's too easy to get around age restrictions. I don’t think age restrictions work – you can lie!”*

*“People also always find a way around limits and restrictions, and such limits and restrictions will lead to young people being exposed to more harmful and dangerous content and spaces on the internet.”*

*“If you have to prove parental consent that will be hard for kids who don’t have someone to do that for them.”*

*“Kids can still access other websites/dangers/ways to be manipulated. There’s no age restriction on accessing content on the internet… age limits are pointless unless you have it on the entirety of the internet.”*

*“If you had age restrictions, you'd have to have them everywhere for kids, which isn't realistic... There's always going to be a new social media platform showing up out of nowhere, different things becoming popular. It's impossible to regulate absolutely everything, especially with our evolving world with technology and AI and everything.”*

*“There’s no age restriction on accessing inappropriate content for children on the internet. You can literally just Google search something and it will come up.”*

#### On cons of having age limits:

*“Missing out on connections that could be potentially life changing, especially if they’re from rural and regional areas.”*

*“A lot of people can feel very alone and misunderstood, and social media bridges that connection.”*

*“Age restrictions will mean that disabled people of colour, or from multicultural communities, including those who fall at this intersection and who may be queer, will miss out on finding community, and finding safe spaces. They will not have an opportunity to ask questions, or find support online, where you can find more people who fall into multiple intersections, and not just those who share just one of your identities. This will have a significant impact on the mental health of young people, and will exacerbate the marginalisation they experience, but also, with no place to turn to, when such experiences occur.”*

# Application of Age Restrictions

* How does your group think these age limits should work?
* What is the suggested age that limits should apply to? And why this age?
* Are there any types of information, groups of young people or companies where these limits should not apply (any exemptions to the age limits)? What are these and why?

Members of our group said that, rather than entirely blocking kids access to social media through age limits, kids' versions of these apps should be created. E.g., There’s a kids’ version of Facebook Messenger, and parents need a FB account to let their kids have Messenger. The kids’ version also limits how you add and connect with people (the kid has to add you, you can’t search for and find the kid yourself). We said that there should also be a kids’ version of Instagram, TikTok, etc. Influencers can then choose what age brackets to post content into. We thought that age restrictions should apply to sites like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, etc. However, we also discussed this is not a perfect solution, particularly with new platforms and apps that come out.

We also discussed gaming as parallel to social media but concluded it should be treated separately.

Some members of our group said that kids’ friendly apps should be for kids between the ages of 10-15 and that general social media accounts should be from 16 onwards. Others felt that, like getting your driver's license, general social media should be from 18 onwards.

We worried that, when kids age out of the kids’ version of social media, they might decide to stay using the kids’ version which could be dangerous for other kids. On the other hand, if your account automatically ends when you age out of the kids’ account, this might be hard for people who are one of the oldest within their friend group. We wondered whether, if there was a kid version/age limit, would there be a crossover period? E.g. kid friendly 10-16 and adult (14+) so if people have friends who are younger older/they can still connect with them.

We noted that:

1. In general, kid friendly apps seemed the best compromise in terms of age limits.
2. There needs to be much more education about online participation and safety.
3. The role of parental guidance and support can go various ways. If parental consent is required some parents/guardians may unfairly deny access. Or alternatively don’t care and actively support children younger than the age limit to access adult accounts.
4. Even if there are ID checks, there are always going to be ways around it.
5. People could use VPNs to get around Australian laws.
6. The Government could use MyGovID as a proper way to verify age, but this may cause barriers, such as for those where accessing identity documents may be harder.
7. There are kids’ phones which have limits – limited apps (can message their friends, etc.), and to consider this technology when discussing this topic.

# Key Recommendations

* What do families, schools, government, and social media companies need to do to keep young people safe online?

### Government should …

We said that the Government should have better rules/policies/regulations on protecting children online and who the onus is on if something goes wrong. The Government should run safety campaigns and give schools the funding to provide internet safety education. When creating information, it needs to be accessible for people with disabilities, as well as culturally safe and accessible. The government should also have better laws, regulations, and policies about protecting children online with clear responsibilities for parents if something goes wrong for children online.

We noted that Facebook/eSafety commissioner needs to do a better job at protecting the disability community. E.g., ‘Midget spotting’ FB group was set up earlier this year by a FB user. Multiple people uploaded photos of people with short stature in public without their permission and several of those were people under the age of 18, with the intention to mock them. Multiple people reported it to FB, and FB said it wasn’t their problem, reported it to the eSafety commissioner who then said it wasn’t her problem, and then had to make a formal submission to the eSafety commissioner board.

### Parents should …

We felt that parents should be predominantly responsible to monitor and protect their children, better educate kids on how to use the internet safely, monitor screen time more, and be a better example to their kids. They need to share relatable information and tips with their children. And need to be accountable for content their children are accessing.

### Tech companies should …

We said that tech companies should be protecting children on the content that they see and that they should take responsibility for the content that children can see. They should create kid friendly versions of sites/apps, and have firmer policies about what is considered ‘acceptable’ content, not only in terms of age, but more broadly, such as content that inappropriately represents people with disability, who are queer, from a CALD background etc.

### Schools should …

Schools should educate kids on how to use the internet safely, how to spot scams, awareness on grooming, who to go to if they need help/support etc. They should have better programs and implement them into the curriculum regularly. These programs need to be more relatable rather than just throwing terrifying information at kids. They should be run internally rather than by external staff who only come in when something has gone wrong. Running classes internally also means that kids will have regular access to information and people that they can confidently speak to regularly about issues.

We said that the scare approach isn’t the right approach – schools must focus on relatable content and have people that students can anonymously and safely report concerns to so that young people will actually feel confident/safe to report concerns.

### Young people and children should …

We said that young people and children should be responsible for the content they post and the way they interact with others online. They should also call out their friends’ negative behavior and encourage them to do better.