

An Open Letter from Members of Teen Online Safety, Wellbeing, and Youth Councils Around the World

We are teens from various organizations around the world. And, we are tired of watching adults debate our lives as if we are not in the room.

Across the globe, governments are moving fast to pass laws that would block young people from social media altogether.

In Australia, the government banned social media for our peers under 16. In the United Kingdom, the Government has committed to banning certain social media platforms for U16s, and intends to restrict certain features and functionality as a means of placating parents around the country. In India, policymakers are developing new online safety rules for minors. And across Europe and in other geographies, governments are advancing or considering similar restrictions. Too often, these debates are happening without the meaningful participation of the very people whose lives will be changed by them.

And who is paying the price for all of these rushed, but very consequential, adult decisions?

Let's be clear: teens did not create the current digital landscape. We did not design digital products. We did not write weak laws, delay reforms, ignore evidence, or treat our well-being as a talking point to be used only when politically convenient. And now, after years of adults failing to fix the real problems, a lot of leaders have landed on the same blunt and easy answer: take social media away from us.

That is not leadership. That is surrender.

It's easier to ban than to build. It's easier to blame technology and teenagers than to do the slower, harder work of actually fixing what is broken. That means real rules, real oversight, better digital literacy, safer product design, and more support for families and schools. It's easier to announce a headline-grabbing restriction than to admit that politicians and adults themselves have helped create the vacuum they are now trying to fill with panic.

And now teens are paying the price. We are paying with our connections. With our communities. With our support systems. With our learning. With our creativity. With our joy.

For many of us, social media is not just some extra, silly thing we could easily lose. Adults often talk about our "digital lives" like they are separate from our real ones. For us, they aren't two different things.

Social media is a big part of where life happens. It's where we keep up with our friends across towns and time zones. It's where we laugh after long days at school. It's where we learn and discover new ideas, find role models, explore our identities, and access communities that may not exist for us offline. It's where isolated teens find belonging. It's where vulnerable teens sometimes find help. These are often marginalized or LGBTQ+ teens who can't find community where they live, and are further hurt when prevented from making connections online. A study by the Born This Way Foundation found that 44% of LGBTQ+ youth feel "very safe" in online spaces compared to just 9% in-person.

Additionally, as UNICEF reports, "when rules focus on restricting access, young people adapt quickly, often in ways policymakers don't anticipate." Following these policy shifts, data from the Australian government revealed that seven out of 10 parents reported their under-16s were still using their accounts after restrictions were imposed.

The reality is that vital age verification needed for these sorts of bans is difficult to implement, and teens are inherently tech-savvy. Driven by our desire to stay connected, many of us will naturally turn to VPN workarounds, alternative accounts, and unmonitored corners of the internet where there is even less oversight and even greater potential danger.

To adults who dismiss our concerns as superficial, we ask: would you say the same thing about your group chats, your work messages, neighborhood groups, news feeds, or the people you speak to online every day? If connection matters for you, it matters for us, too.

Yes, the online world has serious risks of harm. We know that. We live there. We see the harms. We live the pressures. From cyberbullying to grooming and severe mental health challenges, we want these problems fixed. But while an age ban might feel like a victory for politicians, it is not setting us up for success as we do not magically inherit digital literacy when we turn 15 or 16 or 18. We are not asking anyone to ignore them. We are asking governments to stop pretending that excluding us is the same thing as protecting us.

We understand why many parents are worried. When they look at what's happening online, they see risks of harm. But too often, they are misdiagnosing the problem. The answer is not to remove young people from online spaces altogether. The answer is to make those spaces safer based on our real experiences and perspectives.

A blanket ban does not teach us how to make good decisions. It does not help us handle risk or build resilience. It does not teach digital literacy. It does not ensure better product design and it does not make us safer online. On the contrary, stripping social media away entirely misses a critical developmental window when teens can learn to navigate digital risks under the guidance of parents, guardians, and educators.

We reject the idea that the best society can do for teenagers is to lock us out.

If governments are serious about protecting young people, then we need everyone, from policymakers to companies, to do the real work:

- Require safer platform design
- Set and consistently enforce meaningful rules

- Build privacy and safety features that actually work for teens
- Fund relevant and comprehensive digital literacy in schools and make it mandatory (Digital literacy may be more important for adults, by the way!)
- Make online reporting systems easier, clearer, accepted, and more trustworthy
- Foster a collaborative ecosystem of guidance between parents, teens, schools, and governments rather than relying on restrictions, and
- Most importantly, include teens in the decisions that shape our (digital) lives

We are not problems to be managed. We are people to be heard.

We deserve a digital world that is safer, yes, but also more open, more thoughtful, and more human. We deserve connection, fun, friendship, learning, and community and we deserve laws based on how our lives actually work, not on older generations' definitions of "childhood."

Part of that "older definition" is that real life and the online world are somehow separate and distinct. For us, they are seamlessly interwoven and inextricable. Help us by creating an environment where we can be safe in both.

Signed,
Members of teen online safety, wellbeing, and youth councils around the world

ConnectSafely Youth Advisory Council, United States
https://connectsafely.org/youth-perspectives/

Ditch the Label Youth Advisory Board, United Kingdom
https://ditchthelabel.org/youth-advisory-board

NetSafe Youth Action Squad, New Zealand
https://netsafeyas.nz/

Our Minds Matter Teen Advisory Council, United States
https://ourmindsmatter.org/

Project ROCKIT Youth Collective, Australia
https://www.projectrockit.com.au/for-young-people/join-the-movement/youth-collective

Snap's Various Global Councils for Digital Well-Being
https://values.snap.com/safety/cdwb

Young Leaders for Active Citizenship (YLAC), India
https://theylacproject.com/

Youth Ki Awaaz, India
https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/about/