



21 November 2024

Submission Inquiry into the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024
[Provisions]

To the Honourable Members of the Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee,

I write this submission not as an outsider or an academic, but as someone who has spent the last 11 years standing shoulder to shoulder and working face to face with children, parents, and educators on average over three thousand a week. Every week. I've heard the cries for help, seen the devastating impacts of online harm, and grappled with the reality that what we're doing is simply not enough.

Initially I opposed an age ban on social media. I believed education, awareness, and strong parental oversight were the answers. I stood firm, vocal in my belief that restricting access wasn't the solution. But I very publicly flipped my stance because the evidence the tears, the trauma, the deaths is irrefutable. After revisiting our extensive data, and being immersed in school communities, businesses, and parent groups, we must act, and we must act now.

Safe on Social has spent over a decade collecting data from more than 800 schools and has produced close to 300 in-depth reports, each over 70 pages long, on the realities of their online communities. We've adjusted every strategy for each unique school, for every age group, and for the evolving challenges families face online. What I've seen in the past 12 months alone has made it impossible for me to remain on the sidelines.

For every mother sobbing on the phone or emailing me because her child has been humiliated or manipulated, there's another parent in despair because they don't know how to stop the chaos. I can no longer ignore that what we've been doing simply isn't working. Education alone is not enough.

If setting age limits on social media means we save even one child from having their self-esteem systematically dismantled, it is worth it. If it means one fewer mother calling me in tears, it is worth it. And for those who say, "Kids will just find workarounds," I say this: technology can enforce this, and my extensive background in cybersecurity since the mid 90's tells me it can be done. I know there will be VPNs, loopholes, and resistance from Big Tech, but these are battles we can fight. What matters is that we draw a line and say, "No more." This is about giving parents a tool to delay their children's exposure to the toxic environments of platforms that have profited off their vulnerabilities for far too long.

Responding to Critics

"Bans will limit digital skills."

Digital literacy does not come from scrolling on TikTok. Coding platforms, educational apps, and structured digital environments teach real skills without the risks of exploitation.

"Kids need social connections."

Genuine connections are not built in spaces rife with bullying and predatory behaviour. Moderated, safer alternatives exist.

"Marginalized youth need safe spaces online."

Vulnerable children deserve real safe spaces, not the harmful environments of mainstream platforms.



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Communities like TrevorSpace show this can be done right.

“Creativity will suffer.”

No, it won't. There are many ways to provide online avenues for creativity without exposing children to the harmful content that lurks on social media.

“It won't work.”

A ban won't be perfect, but it doesn't need to be. If it reduces harm by even 10%, that is progress. Pair it with education, enforcement, and transparent algorithms, and it becomes a lifeline.

In the last few weeks, I've spoken to thousands of children, parents, and educators. I've stood in classrooms where girls clutch their backpacks in fear while boys mimic toxic online figures like Andrew Tate. I've heard of seven-year-olds telling classmates to “go kill yourself” because they've absorbed it as normal from platforms. Phones in bedrooms have become the epicentres of anxiety, sleep deprivation, and depression. Apps like Character AI and deepfakes are weaponising technology against our children in ways we never imagined.

I know firsthand how devastating online harm can be. I survived brutal online bullying 12 years ago, and the scars it left have never fully faded. That experience, combined with the stories I hear every day, compels me to step up and say enough is enough. We cannot let this continue. The Albanese Government's proposal for an under-16 social media ban is not a “knee-jerk reaction” as it has been called; it's an urgent, enforceable measure we need to protect children now.

This ban is not the end, it's the beginning. Safe on Social has developed a robust framework that integrates education, parental support, and community engagement. It's not a one-off seminar; it's a living, evolving commitment to meet the moment every time the moment demands it.

This is not just about banning social media; it's about creating a new online culture where children can thrive safely. We owe it to them to act boldly, decisively, and immediately.

I have many ideas from my own frontline evidence base how we can roll out this ban effectively, addressing loopholes and ensuring its success. Together, we can set a global precedent for prioritising children over profits. The time to act is now, not in six months, not in a year. Every delay costs us more. Every child left unprotected is a failure we cannot afford. I stand ready to help, ready to fight, and ready to build a safer digital future for our kids.

Yours sincerely,
Kirra Pendergast

Founder and Principal Consultant/Advisor



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