



# Submission ***Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024***

NOVEMBER 2024

## Executive Summary

Meta makes this submission within the very short timeframe provided by the Committee in an effort to be constructive in assisting the Australian Government with achieving its aim of making social media safer for young Australians and supporting their overall online safety.

Unfortunately, the *Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024* (the **Bill**) is a missed opportunity and overlooks the practical reality of age assurance technology, as well as the views of a majority of mental health and youth safety organisations in the country. It will fail to achieve its stated goals of making young people safer online and supporting those who experience harms from their use of technology. In its present form, the Bill is inconsistent and ineffective. We urge the Committee to consider recommendations that would enable more consultation and careful thought in the practical impact of the Bill, and how it can best achieve its stated aims.

Contrary to the statements in the Explanatory Memorandum that there has been “extensive consultation” with relevant stakeholders, there has been minimal consultation or engagement and repeatedly, key details and pieces of evidence have been overlooked. Given the uncertainty surrounding the “reasonable steps” that need to be taken by industry impacted by the Bill and the significant penalties, even with the delayed implementation timeframe, we strongly recommend that the Government at least wait for the results of the age assurance trial before progressing with the Bill. In the absence of such results, neither industry nor Australians will understand the nature or scale of age assurance required by the Bill, nor the impact of such measures on Australians.

At Meta, we know we have a responsibility to invest in the safety and well-being of young people and we do, as our recent launch of Instagram Teen Accounts<sup>1</sup> demonstrates (drawing on years of research and consultation with young people, parents and child safety experts to inform our safety and privacy features).<sup>2</sup> Given the brevity of this Committee, we seek to include, by reference, details about our investment in online safety especially as it relates to young people in an Appendix to this submission.

It is not in our commercial interests for people to have a negative experience on our services. We have steadily invested in tools that provide heightened protections for young people, restricted the use of their data for ads targeting and recently announced that we are testing the ability for everyone on Instagram (including young people) to reset their recommendations and start

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<sup>1</sup> Meta, ‘Introducing Teen Accounts: Built-in protections for teens, peace of mind for parents’, *Newsroom*, 17 September 2024, <https://about.fb.com/news/2024/09/instagram-teen-accounts/>

<sup>2</sup> Meta TTC Labs, ‘How research and consultation informed Instagram Teen Accounts’, *Report*, 17 September 2024, <https://www.ttcclabs.net/report/how-research-and-consultation-informed-instagram-teen-accounts-a-new-protected-experience-f-or-teens-guided-by-parents>

afresh.<sup>3</sup> Users' recommendations will then start to personalise again over time, showing new content based on the content and accounts with which they interact. The reset will also enable users to review the accounts they follow and unfollow any that share content they no longer wish to see.

The Bill in its present form will fail to achieve its goal of reducing the burden on parents to manage the safety of young people on social media, overlooks what parents have said they want with respect to managing young people online, and ignores the evidence provided by well over 100 child safety and mental health groups here in Australia and internationally.

Given this, more time should be taken to get this Bill right.

## Key points

In response to the Committee's advice that submissions should be restricted to 1-2 pages due to the very short duration of the Committee, we make the following key points:

- **Bill will needlessly burden parents and young people:** The Bill will not achieve the Government's stated aim of placing "the onus on social media platforms – not parents or young people".<sup>4</sup> By requiring app providers to take unspecified "reasonable steps" to restrict access to their services by people under 16, app providers will need to adopt app-specific measures to achieve this. This means that parents and young people will need to navigate potentially different age assurance measures on each social media app that they wish to use. This necessarily places the burden *will* be placed on parents and young people.

There is a simpler way: a 'whole-of-ecosystem' approach that requires app store and OS providers to share age bands APIs with app providers – information which is already being collected today. This approach would achieve the Australian Government's stated aim of not imposing a burden on parents and young people, while having the important benefit of being more secure and privacy-protective than requiring all social media app providers to separately collect personally identifiable information to meet their obligations under an "app-by-app" approach.

Teens and parents already provide companies like Apple and Google with this information and these companies have already built systems for parental notification, review, and approval into their app stores. Meta's investment in User Age Group APIs in the Meta Quest Store, which are designed to help developers understand how old their users are, is

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<sup>3</sup> Meta, 'Reshape your Instagram with a recommendations reset', *Newsroom*, 19 November 2024, <https://about.fb.com/news/2024/11/introducing-recommendations-reset-instagram/>

<sup>4</sup> See The Hon Anthony Albanese MP and The Hon Michelle Rowland MP, 'Albanese Government delivers world leading legislation to protect young people online', *Media release*, 21 November 2024, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/albanese-government-delivers-world-leading-legislation-protect-children-online>

an example of how this can be achieved in a privacy-preserving way. When someone launches an app on the Meta Quest platform, these APIs allow Meta to share whether the app is used by a preteen, teen or adult account. The app is then able to use this information to tailor a more age-appropriate experience and to properly protect young people's data.<sup>5</sup>

We do not recommend this approach in order to divest Meta of our responsibility to ensure safe and age appropriate experiences for teens on our services. We make this recommendation based on our long experience in building online safety into our products. We know that teens move interchangeably between many websites and apps. The average teenager uses dozens of applications on their phone - in some cases as many as 40 apps or more. Many of these apps have different standards or safety features, which are constantly changing or have new features added which can be challenging for parents and guardians to keep up. This is why app store/OS level age verification is the most efficient, consistent and sustainable solution, on which Meta and other app providers can continue to build and invest in new tools to ensure children have age appropriate online experiences.

- **Bill disempowers Australian parents:** The Bill is inconsistent with what Australian parents have told us that they want, which is a simple and effective way for them to set controls and manage their teens' online experience.

A 'whole of ecosystem' approach is consistent with the approach Australian parents say that they want. Australian families use technology every day, and parents should have a voice in how the Government regulates standards for technology providers like Meta and in ensuring we meet community expectations. We therefore commissioned Ipsos Public Affairs Australia to conduct a survey of Australian parents with children under the age of 18 to investigate their opinions about app and social media use by minors.<sup>6</sup> The survey found that parents overwhelmingly want to be involved in teens' online lives: by a two to one margin (67%), Australian parents surveyed say that parents should be able to choose if their teen under the age of 16 is able to use social media apps over outright bans of social media for minors under 16 (33%). The vast majority (82%) supported a law requiring parental approval for children under age 16 to download apps, while 70% said that providing approval in one place such as an app store would be easier than providing approvals in each application individually (30%). Three quarters (75%) of parents surveyed trusted app stores over apps to securely handle the personal data needed to verify parental approval.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Meta, Introducing Age Group Self-Certification & Get Age Category API for All Developers, 23 July 2024, <https://developers.meta.com/horizon/blog/age-group-self-certification-apis-meta-quest-developers>

<sup>6</sup> Ipsos Australia Parents Poll 2024, [https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/WIP\\_Australia\\_Poll\\_Memo.pdf](https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/WIP_Australia_Poll_Memo.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Ipsos Australia Parents Poll 2024, [https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/WIP\\_Australia\\_Poll\\_Memo.pdf](https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/WIP_Australia_Poll_Memo.pdf); Meta, 'Parental consent and age verification for social media use should happen via app stores', Meta Australia Policy Blog, *Medium*, 7 November 2024,

- **Omission of YouTube and online gaming fatal to Bill’s purpose:** In public comments, the Government has indicated that the Bill will not include YouTube or online gaming, which means that the Bill will not address the Australian Government’s concerns about the role of technology in the lives of young people. The Prime Minister has stated that the intent of this legislation is so that “young Australians [...] grow up playing outside with their friends, on the footy field, in the swimming pool, trying every sport that grabs their interest, discovering music and art, being confident and happy in the classroom and at home. Gaining and growing from real experiences, with real people.”<sup>8</sup> The Bill does not achieve this if it excludes services commonly used by young people, such as YouTube and online gaming, which pose similar benefits and risks to the services captured by the Bill. The eSafety Commissioner’s own research indicates that:
  - YouTube is the most popular social media service among Australian teens aged 12-17, with 72% using YouTube in 2020, making it more popular than Instagram (57%) and Facebook (52%).<sup>9</sup>
  - Most young people aged 8-17 play online games - 89% of those surveyed by the Commission in 2023 played online games in the past year - and for many it is a social experience.<sup>10</sup>
    - The Commission found that a majority of young people (79%) play online games with others online, with 40% playing with people they didn’t already know in their offline life.
    - In 2023, 2 in 5 young gamers (40% of children aged 8–12 years and 44% of teens aged 13–17) had a negative experience while gaming (e.g. bullying-type behaviours, grieving or trolling, receiving or being asked to send nudes or sexual information, hate speech) in the past year, while half (51%) of teen gamers had a negative experience and/or were exposed to potentially harmful content (e.g. hate speech, misogynistic ideas, violent content) while gaming.<sup>11</sup>
  - Additional research indicates that 37% of participants reported seeing extremist content on social media platforms like YouTube.<sup>12</sup> Some researchers have focused

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<https://medium.com/meta-australia-policy-blog/parental-consent-and-age-verification-for-social-media-use-should-happen-via-app-stores-816d9e44944d>

<sup>8</sup> The Hon Anthony Albanese MP, ‘We want children to have their childhood - The Herald Sun’, *Opinion*, 11 September 2024,

<https://www.pm.gov.au/media/we-want-children-have-their-childhood-herald-sun>

<sup>9</sup> eSafety Commissioner, ‘The digital lives of Aussie teens’, *eSafety Research*, February 2021,

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/research/digital-lives-of-aussie-teens>, p9.

<sup>10</sup> eSafety Commissioner, ‘Levelling up to stay safe: Young people’s experiences navigating the joys and risks of online gaming’, *eSafety Research*, February 2024,

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-02/Leveling%20up%20to%20stay%20safe%20-%20gaming%20report.pdf?v=1732167210833>, pp16-17

<sup>11</sup> eSafety Commissioner, ‘Levelling up to stay safe: Young people’s experiences navigating the joys and risks of online gaming’, *eSafety Research*, February 2024,

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-02/Leveling%20up%20to%20stay%20safe%20-%20gaming%20report.pdf?v=1732167210833>, p10

<sup>12</sup> Nienierza A, Reinemann C, Fawzi N, Riesmeyer C, Neumann K. Too dark to see? Explaining adolescents’ contact with online extremism and their ability to recognize it. *Information, Communication Society*. 2021;24(9):1229–1246. doi: 10.1080/1369118X.2019.1697339

on the accessibility of problematic content on YouTube, and the role its recommender system plays in facilitating extremist content pathways.<sup>13</sup> ISD released its Pulling Back the Curtain series, a four-part investigation digging into YouTube's recommendation algorithm. Analysts found that YouTube is failing to properly safeguard young users: accounts set up to represent teens were served sexualised, misogynistic and suicide-related content.<sup>14</sup>

- **Evidence does not support a blanket ban:** The Explanatory Memorandum and related materials do not reflect the available evidence, which is claimed to support this Bill. The safety and well-being of young Australians is too important to be based on selectively quoted evidence. A blanket ban is not a suitable solution for the complexity of how young people use online services such as social media. Evidence that supports a more nuanced approach, but has been cited in haste and inaccurately to support the Bill includes:
  - A co-author of the study referenced by the Australian Government<sup>15</sup> to support the proposed Bill has underscored that the government has 'misinterpreted' the study's findings and that it is 'frustrating to see nuanced scientific findings oversimplified to support binary policy positions.'<sup>16</sup> University of Oxford professor of human behaviour and technology Andrew Przybylski, says a research report he co-authored has been inaccurately cited as a reason for the age limits to be 16, saying:
    - "Our 2022 Nature Communications paper on "Windows of developmental sensitivity to social media" was cited in Australian Parliament to support this sweeping policy. However, our research actually suggests something quite different: that individual young people respond to social media differently based on various personal and environmental factors. We explicitly advocated for targeted interventions that could minimize harms while preserving benefits."<sup>17</sup>
  - The Final Report of the Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Democracy, which was tasked with considering, among other things, "the use of age verification to protect Australian children from social media", stopped short of recommending an age ban and encouraged the reporting from the age assurance trial. The Final Report noted:
    - "As was evident throughout the inquiry, and discussed earlier in this report, social media, and the broader online environment is a highly complex space that requires a complex regulatory response. The core of this complexity is

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<sup>13</sup> M Yesilada and S Lewandowsky, "Systematic review: YouTube recommendations and problematic content", *Internet Policy Review*, 31 March 2022,

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7613872/#:~:text=Other%20studies%20that%20investigated%20the,content%20might%20be%20>

<sup>14</sup> ISD, Insights No. 70: <https://www.isdglobal.org/insights-newsletter/insights-no-70/>

<sup>15</sup> The Hon Michelle Rowland MP, 'Question Time Response - Social media age limit legislation', *Speeches*, 18 November 2024, <https://minister.infrastructure.gov.au/rowland/speech/question-time-response-social-media-age-limit-legislation>

<sup>16</sup> Professor Andrew Przybylski, [https://www.linkedin.com/posts/akprzybylski\\_the-communications-minister-cited-a-study-activity-7264917864673861632-9KZK](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/akprzybylski_the-communications-minister-cited-a-study-activity-7264917864673861632-9KZK)

<sup>17</sup> Professor Andrew Przybylski, [https://www.linkedin.com/posts/akprzybylski\\_the-communications-minister-cited-a-study-activity-7264917864673861632-9KZK](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/akprzybylski_the-communications-minister-cited-a-study-activity-7264917864673861632-9KZK)

not simply technological, it is also in the fact that while there are many harms that can be caused by social media, it also brings significant benefits to users, and is integral to the ways people interact in the modern world, particularly young people. This makes the task of regulating social media to promote and protect those benefits, while minimising harm, a complex policy problem to solve.”<sup>18</sup>

The Bill also ignores the advice of mental health and youth safety experts, based here in Australia and internationally. Specifically:

- More than 100 Australian experts and 20 international specialists have written in a joint Open Letter under the banner of the Australian Child Rights Taskforce to the Australian Government to express their shared concern that ‘a social media ‘ban’ is too blunt an instrument to address risks effectively’, and that ‘a blanket ban will create a challenge for those children and young people who feel their access has been unfairly restricted.’<sup>19</sup> The Australian Child Rights Taskforce are also ‘concerned that a ban will make children more unsafe online and are calling for a parliamentary committee review process to ensure the legislation is up to scratch.’<sup>20</sup>
  - Leading Australian mental health organisations, including Beyond Blue, headspace, ReachOut, Project Rokit, and Black Dog Institute say a blanket ban isn’t the answer and “will risk cutting young people across Australia off from mental health support, exposing them to new harms, and leaving many without any support.”<sup>21</sup>
- **Online safety regulatory confusion:** the Bill introduces a new concept of “age restricted social media platform” into Australia’s already highly regulated online safety framework. To date, the concept of a “social media service” (that includes YouTube) has been used consistently across the *Online Safety Act 2021* (Cth) (**OSA**) and the Basic Online Safety Expectations as well as the industry standards and industry codes.

The Bill seeks to introduce a new level of complexity into the OSA by, on the one hand, seeking to expand the current definition of a “social media service” to to capture a wider range of services but then, on the other hand, suggesting that services such as YouTube (which has been established to be a social media service under the OSA) should be exempt. It's difficult to understand, having regard to the alleged purpose of the Bill, why

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<sup>18</sup> Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society, ‘Social media: the good, the bad, and the ugly’, *Final Report*, 18 November 2024, [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportjnt/RB000524/toc\\_pdf/Socialmediathegood,thebad,andtheugly%e2%80%93Finalreport.pdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportjnt/RB000524/toc_pdf/Socialmediathegood,thebad,andtheugly%e2%80%93Finalreport.pdf) para 5.119

<sup>19</sup> Australian Child Rights Taskforce, ‘Open letter about ‘social media bans’’, 9 October 2024, <https://au.reset.tech/uploads/ACRT-Open-letter-re-social-media-bans.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> [https://www.linkedin.com/posts/amanda-third-03228a46\\_the-government-has-announced-in-question-activity-7264877800271020033-6\\_Xg/?utm\\_source=share&utm\\_medium=member\\_ios](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/amanda-third-03228a46_the-government-has-announced-in-question-activity-7264877800271020033-6_Xg/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_ios)

<sup>21</sup> Black Dog Institute, ‘Leading mental health organisations say proposed ban won’t make social media safe’, *Media Release*, 10 September 2024, <https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/media-releases/leading-mental-health-organisations-say-proposed-ban-wont-make-social-media-safe>

YouTube should be granted an exemption alongside apps with a clear educational or support purpose, like Kids Helpline.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, the Bill requires a social media platform to prevent children under the age of 16 from "having an account". There is nothing in the Bill that would preclude a parent or a teacher from using YouTube to show educational videos to children.

The exclusion of a social media service from YouTube from the scope of the Bill, without any clear rationale, undermines the objective of the Bill and draws arbitrary lines between social media services in Australia.

- **Unclear technical requirements, with significant penalties:** The Bill requires a social media platform to take "reasonable steps" to prevent Australian children under the age of 16 from having an account with the platform. However, the Bill does not provide any guidance on what "reasonable steps" should be taken by a platform. This ambiguity is problematic as understanding a person's real age on the internet is a complex challenge. In fact, the Government's response to the Roadmap for Age Verification concluded that "age assurance technologies are immature and present privacy, security, implementation and enforcement risks" and that "a decision to mandate age assurance is not ready to be taken".<sup>23</sup> In addition, the Government's age assurance trial, which will assess the effectiveness of different age assurance technologies, has only just begun and it is not yet clear whether that trial will result in a clear recommendation as to effective age assurance. This uncertainty is particularly concerning given that a platform will face substantial penalties (approximately \$49.5 million) for a failure to use adequate age assurance technology. Given the significance of these penalties, and the current state of age assurance technology, we strongly recommend that the Government at least wait for the results of the age assurance trial before progressing with the Bill. In the absence of such results, neither industry nor Australians will understand the nature or scale of age assurance required by the Bill nor the impact of such measures on Australians.
- **Overlap and duplication with Privacy Act:** The inclusion of amendments to the Privacy Act within an amendment to the Online Safety Act is unnecessary and will lead to confusion and unintended consequences. Our strong recommendation is that the privacy requirements are removed from the Bill as the Privacy Act already contains strong privacy protections related to the collection, use and disclosure of personal information for age assurance purposes.

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<sup>22</sup> See *Second Reading, Online Safety Amendment ((Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024*

<https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22chamber%2Fhansard%2F28041%2F0017%22>

<sup>23</sup> Australian Government, 'Government response to the Roadmap for Age Verification', August 2023,

<https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/government-response-to-the-roadmap-for-age-verification-august2023.pdf>, p2

There are two main issues with these provisions of the Bill:

- It fails to acknowledge that social media service providers use information about user age for a wide variety of valid, and often necessary purposes; and
- It fails to account for the practical reality of the way in which certain age assurance technologies work.

In practice, social media service providers use personal information including age signals (such as profile information) for a wide variety of valid purposes. This includes using the information for safety, security and integrity purposes, but also to provide a personalized, age-appropriate service for its users. As drafted, any information that a social media service provider currently holds for any reason, if those reasons would include “reasonable steps to prevent age-restricted users having accounts with an age-restricted social media platform” could no longer be used by the social media social provider outside of narrow exceptions within Australia Privacy Principles, or without the individual’s consent. This would amount to a fundamental shift in the operation of the Privacy Act in Australia, without proper consultation.

It would also undermine the use of existing forms of age assurance technology, such as AI models. For example, Meta uses an adult classifier to determine whether someone is likely an adult or a teen. We use signals such as profile information, like when a person’s account was created and interactions with other profiles and content, to train our adult classifier.<sup>24</sup> Under the proposed privacy amendments, it is possible that this type of information would have to be destroyed after being used for age assurance purposes which is nonsensical.

In this way, the Bill fails to address the reality that personal information collection, and age assurance itself, is often multi-layered and can occur throughout the online journey.

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<sup>24</sup> How Meta uses AI to better understand people’s ages on our platforms  
<https://tech.facebook.com/artificial-intelligence/2022/6/adult-classifier/>

## Appendix

### Supporting young people and parents

Creating an experience on Facebook and Instagram that is safe and private for young people, but also valuable and relevant, comes with competing challenges. In order to make sure we are striking the right balance, we engage closely with experts in this space – and with young people themselves. We have also engaged with parent groups to better understand the resources they need<sup>25</sup>.

We want people, especially young people, to foster their online relationships in an environment where they feel safe, and where they leave our apps feeling good about the time they spend on them. Our policies prohibit harmful content, or content or behaviour that exploits young people. We work closely with experts in mental health, child psychology, digital literacy and more, to build features and tools so teens can connect online safely and responsibly.

In addition to the responsibility of industry to invest in safety, parents and carers play a vital role in ensuring the safety of young people online. We want to provide tools and resources for parents and guardians so they can guide and support their teens.

We have developed a number of resources specifically to provide parents with the details about the tools and features available on our services that assist them in ensuring young people are having a safe experience, as well as tips and strategies about broader online safety. Examples of these are:

- **Family Centre.** We have developed resources, accessible from within the apps' supervisory experiences, that include product tutorials and tips from experts, to help parents and guardians discuss social media use with their teens.<sup>26</sup>
- **Parents Portal.** The Parents Portal provides a hub for information and tips on how to help your child navigate their online experience, it also connects parents to online safety organisations around the world that offer additional resources.<sup>27</sup>
- **Parents' Guide to Instagram.** In Australia, we worked with ReachOut to develop a Parents' Guide to Instagram to support parents in better understanding Instagram's safety tools. The Guide contains tips for parents on using Instagram's safety features and on how to have effective conversations with their teens about social media. The Parents' Guide can be downloaded for free on ReachOut's website and we supported ReachOut to

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<sup>25</sup> Meta, 'Introducing Family Centre and Parental Supervision Tools on Instagram and in VR', *Newsroom*, 16 March 2022, <https://about.fb.com/news/2022/03/parental-supervision-tools-instagram-vr>

<sup>26</sup> Meta, 'Supporting safer and more positive experiences for your family', *Family Center*, <https://familycenter.meta.com/au>

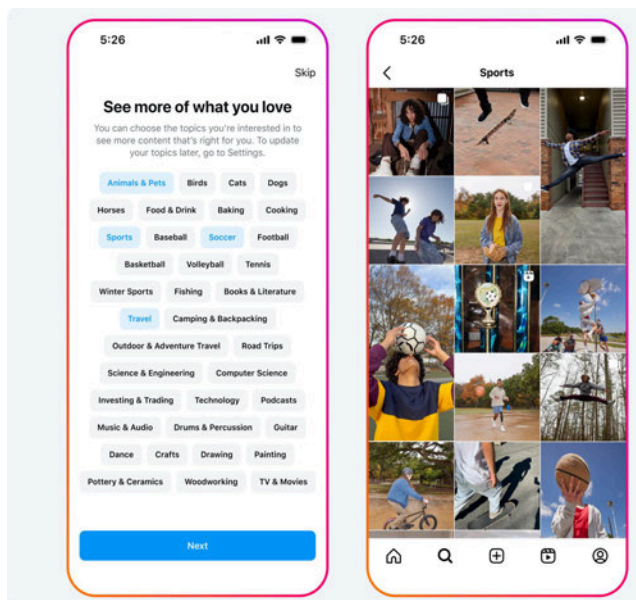
<sup>27</sup> Meta, 'Parents', *Safety Center*, <https://www.facebook.com/safety/parents>

publish the Guide and promote it on their social platforms.<sup>28</sup> The Guide was first released in September 2019 and updated in June 2021.<sup>29</sup> We are working with ReachOut to provide a new series of resources for parents in 2024.

## Instagram Teen Accounts: Built-In Protections for Teens, Peace of Mind for Parents

In September 2024 we introduced Instagram Teen Accounts<sup>30</sup>, a new experience for teens, guided by parents. Teen Accounts have built-in protections which limit who can contact them and the content they see, and also provide new ways for teens to explore their interests. We automatically place teens into Teen Accounts, and teens under 16 will need a parent's permission to change any of these settings to be less strict.

We know parents want to feel confident that their teens can use social media to connect with their friends and explore their interests, without having to worry about unsafe or inappropriate experiences. We understand parents' concerns, and that's why we're reimagining our apps for teens with new Teen Accounts. This new experience is designed to better support parents, and give them peace of mind that their teens are safe with the right protections in place. Teens will also get access to a new feature, made just for them, that lets them select topics they want to see more of in Explore and their recommendations so they can focus on the fun, positive content they love.



<sup>28</sup> ReachOut, *A parents guide to Instagram*,

[https://parents.au.reachout.com/-/media/parents/files/pdfs/parents\\_guide\\_to\\_instagram\\_austrian\\_edition2021\\_reachout.pdf](https://parents.au.reachout.com/-/media/parents/files/pdfs/parents_guide_to_instagram_austrian_edition2021_reachout.pdf)

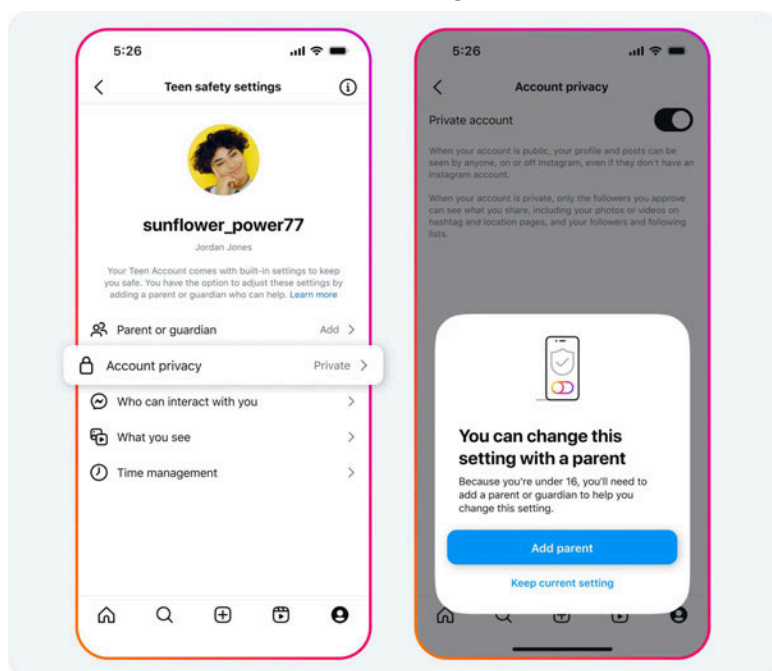
<sup>29</sup> Meta Policy AU, 'A Parent's Guide to Instagram', Meta Australia Policy Blog, *Medium*, 22 June 2021 (updated 27 January 2023),

<https://medium.com/meta-australia-policy-blog/a-parents-guide-to-instagram-in-partnership-with-reach-out-30a865e28fcb>

<sup>30</sup> Meta, 'Introducing Instagram Teen Accounts: Built-In Protections for Teens, Peace of Mind for Parents', *Newsroom*, September 17, 2024, <https://about.fb.com/news/2024/09/instagram-teen-accounts/>

We developed Teen Accounts with parents and teens in mind. The new Teen Account protections are designed to address parents' biggest concerns, including who their teens are talking to online, the content they're seeing and whether their time is being well spent. These protections are turned on automatically, and parents decide if teens under 16 can change any of these settings to be less strict:

- **Private accounts:** With default private accounts, teens need to accept new followers and people who don't follow them can't see their content or interact with them. This applies to all teens under 16 (including those already on Instagram and those signing up) and teens under 18 when they sign up for the app. (Updated on September 17 at 11:18 AM PT to clarify how private accounts are applied)
- **Messaging restrictions:** Teens will be placed in the strictest messaging settings, so they can only be messaged by people they follow or are already connected to.
- **Sensitive content restrictions:** Teens will automatically be placed into the most restrictive setting of our sensitive content control, which limits the type of sensitive content (such as content that shows people fighting or promotes cosmetic procedures) teens see in places like Explore and Reels.
- **Limited interactions:** Teens can only be tagged or mentioned by people they follow. We'll also automatically turn on the most restrictive version of our anti-bullying feature, Hidden Words, so that offensive words and phrases will be filtered out of teens' comments and DM requests.
- **Time limit reminders:** Teens will get notifications telling them to leave the app after 60 minutes each day.
- **Sleep mode enabled:** Sleep mode will be turned on between 10 PM and 7 AM, which will mute notifications overnight and send auto-replies to DMs.



Teens under 16 will need their parent's permission to use less protective settings. To get permission, teens will need to set up parental supervision on Instagram. If parents want more oversight over their older teen's (16+) experiences, they simply have to turn on parental supervision. Then, they can approve any changes to these settings, irrespective of their teen's age.

Once supervision is established, parents can approve and deny their teens' requests to change settings or allow teens to manage their settings themselves. Soon, parents will also be able to change these settings directly to be more protective. Learn more about how to manage Teen Accounts<sup>31</sup>.

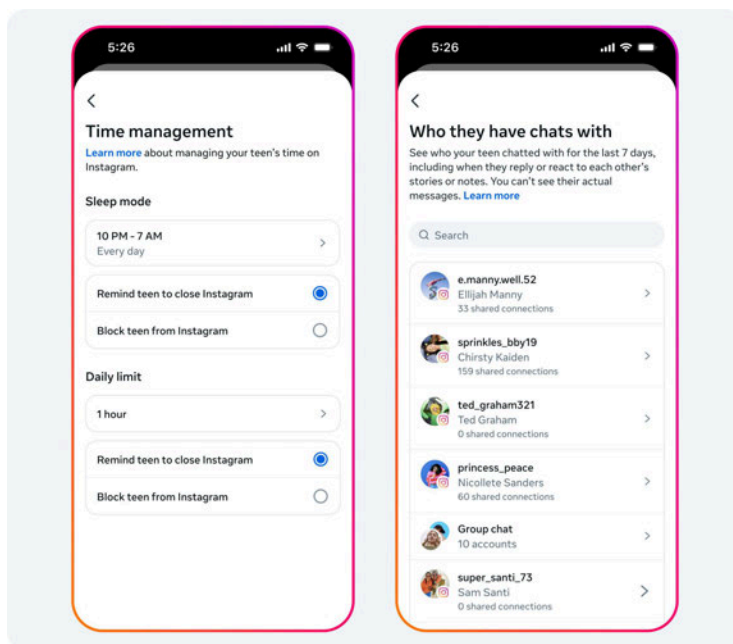
While Teen Accounts put new protections in place automatically, many parents want to be even more involved in their teen's experiences, so we're also adding to our supervision feature.

Updates include ways to:

- Get insights into who their teens are chatting with: While parents can't read their teen's messages, now they will be able to see who their teen has messaged in the past seven days.
- Set total daily time limits for teens' Instagram usage: Parents can decide how much time their teen can spend on Instagram each day. Once a teen hits that limit, they'll no longer be able to access the app.
- Block teens from using Instagram for specific time periods: Parents can choose to block their teens from using Instagram at night, or specific time periods, with one easy button.
- See topics your teen is looking at: Parents can view the age-appropriate topics their teen has chosen to see content from, based on their interests.

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<sup>31</sup> Meta, 'About Instagram Teen Accounts', <https://help.instagram.com/995996839195964>



## How We're Enforcing Teen Accounts

Teens may lie about their age and that's why we're requiring them to verify their age in more places, like if they attempt to use a new account with an adult birthday. We're also building technology to proactively find accounts belonging to teens, even if the account lists an adult birthday. This technology will allow us to proactively find these teens and place them in the same protections offered by Teen Account settings. We'll start testing this change in the US early next year.<sup>32</sup>

## Helping Ensure Teens See Age-Appropriate Content

We recognize parents are concerned that their teens might see mature or inappropriate content online, which is why we have stricter rules around the kinds of content teens see on our apps. We remove content that breaks our rules and avoid recommending potentially sensitive content – such as sexually suggestive content or content discussing suicide or self-harm. With Instagram Teen Accounts, teens will be placed into the strictest setting of our sensitive content control<sup>33</sup>, so they're even less likely to recommend sensitive content, and in many cases we hide this content altogether from teens, even if it's shared by someone they follow.

<sup>32</sup> TTC Labs, 'How Research and Consultation Informed Instagram Teen Accounts', <https://www.ttclabs.net/report/how-research-and-consultation-informed-instagram-teen-accounts-a-new-protected-experience-for-teens-guided-by-parents>

<sup>33</sup> Meta, 'Recommendations on Instagram', *Help Center*, <https://help.instagram.com/313829416281232>

## **Content Recommendations: A new way for people to shape their Instagram**

As part of our ongoing efforts to help ensure everyone on Instagram - especially teens - continue to have positive and age-appropriate experiences, we are announcing the ability for people to reset their content recommendations<sup>34</sup>.

Alongside providing built-in protections from sensitive content with Teen Accounts<sup>35</sup>, we want to give people new ways to shape their Instagram experience, so it can reflect their passions and interests as they evolve. That's why we've started testing the ability for everyone on Instagram - including teens - to reset their recommendations. In a few taps, you'll be able to clear your recommended content across Explore, Reels and Feed and start fresh.

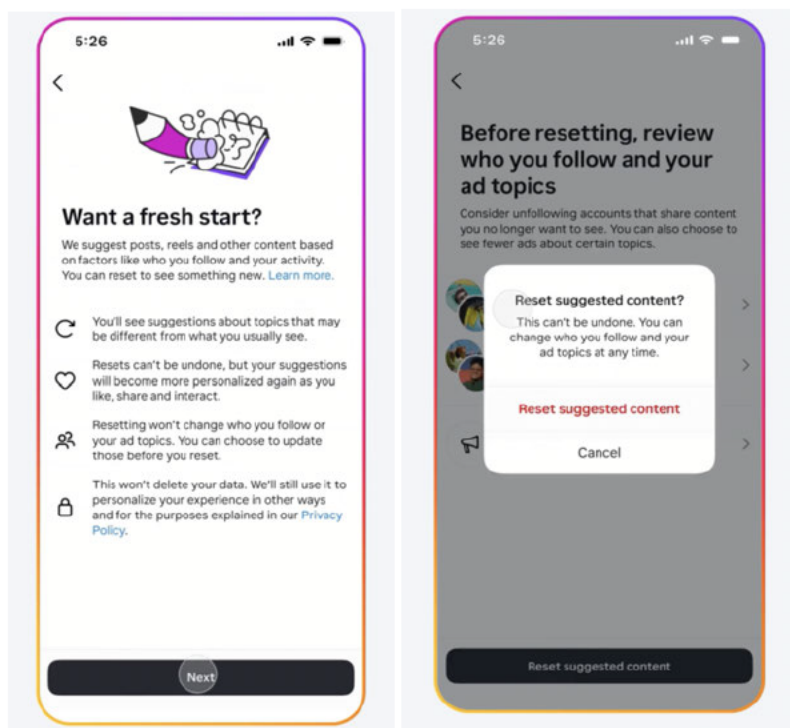
Your recommendations will start to personalize again over time, showing new content based on the content and accounts you interact with. When resetting, you'll also have the option to review the accounts you're following and unfollow any that share content you no longer want to see.

For example, people can tell us they like the content recommended in their Explore page by tapping the three dots in the corner of the post and selecting 'interested', they can tell us what they don't want to see in their recommendations by selecting 'not interested' from the three-dot menu, or using our Hidden Words feature to hide content with certain words or phrases in the caption. Additionally, with Teen Accounts, teens in the US, UK, Canada and Australia can choose topics they want to see more of - everything from books and travel to cooking and sports.

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<sup>34</sup> Meta, 'Reshape Your Instagram With a Recommendations Reset', *Newsroom*, <https://about.fb.com/news/2024/11/introducing-recommendations-reset-instagram/>

<sup>35</sup> Meta, 'About Instagram Teen Accounts', *Help Center*, <https://help.instagram.com/995996839195964>



We also offer a range of tools to help teens shape their Instagram experience, beyond recommendations. For example, teens can switch to a Following Feed to see, in chronological order, content from accounts they follow, with the most recent post first. Alternatively, they can add accounts to a Favorites list so they see content from those accounts more often and higher in their Feed, and they can see a dedicated feed of just their favorites when they want to catch up on their posts quickly.

Features like Close Friends give teens more control over who sees their Stories, while the “Your activity” section in settings lets teens see and manage all their previous interactions in one place, giving them more control over their digital footprint. We also encourage teens to regularly review their following lists, to make sure the accounts they’re following are still accounts whose content they enjoy seeing.

We published a new page in our Transparency Center<sup>36</sup>, to help parents and teens better understand how this approach to content works. The new page sets out the different layers of protection and provides examples of the types of content we remove, hide from teens only and avoid recommending.

<sup>36</sup> Meta, Helping teens see age-appropriate content’ *Transparency Center*, <https://transparency.meta.com/en-gb/policies/age-appropriate-content/>

## Bullying and harassment

One of the issues that can be faced by people online, and in particular young people where parents need greater support, is bullying and harassment. Often this may be initiated or may also occur offline, and the online bullying and harassment is simply an extension.

When it comes to bullying and harassment, context and intent matter. Bullying and harassment are often very personal — it shows up in different ways for different people. We therefore continue to update our policies, enforcement, tools and partnerships to ensure our approach to combatting bullying online remains up to date and effective.

We use human review and have developed AI systems to identify many types of bullying and harassment across our platforms. However, as mentioned above, because bullying and harassment is highly personal and contextual by nature, using technology to proactively detect these behaviours can be more challenging than other types of violations. It can sometimes be difficult for our systems to distinguish between a bullying comment and a light-hearted joke without knowing the people involved or the nuance of the situation. That is why we also rely on people to report this behaviour to us so we can identify and remove it.

Our latest Community Standards Enforcement Report outlines the significant progress we have made in removing bullying and harassment material. In the second quarter of 2024:<sup>37</sup>

- We actioned 7.8 million pieces of content on Facebook for violating our policies on bullying and harassment, and of that, 88.9 percent of bullying and harassment content was removed proactively via AI.
- We actioned 10.1 million pieces of bullying and harassment content on Instagram, and of that, 96.9 percent of it was removed proactively.

Even if content does not violate our Community Standards, people may prefer to not see it. They may also want to take steps in order to control their individual experience on our platform. As mentioned above, as well as our longstanding tools of Block, Report, Hide, Unfollow we have invested in a range of other industry-leading tools including:

- **Restrict tool.** We have created a Restrict tool in Instagram<sup>38</sup>, shown in Figure 4 below, where comments on a user's posts from a person they have restricted will only be visible to that person. Direct messages will automatically move to a separate Message Requests folder, and the user will not receive notifications from a restricted account. Users can still view the messages but the restricted account will not be able to see when they have read their direct messages or when you are active on Instagram. This feature was developed

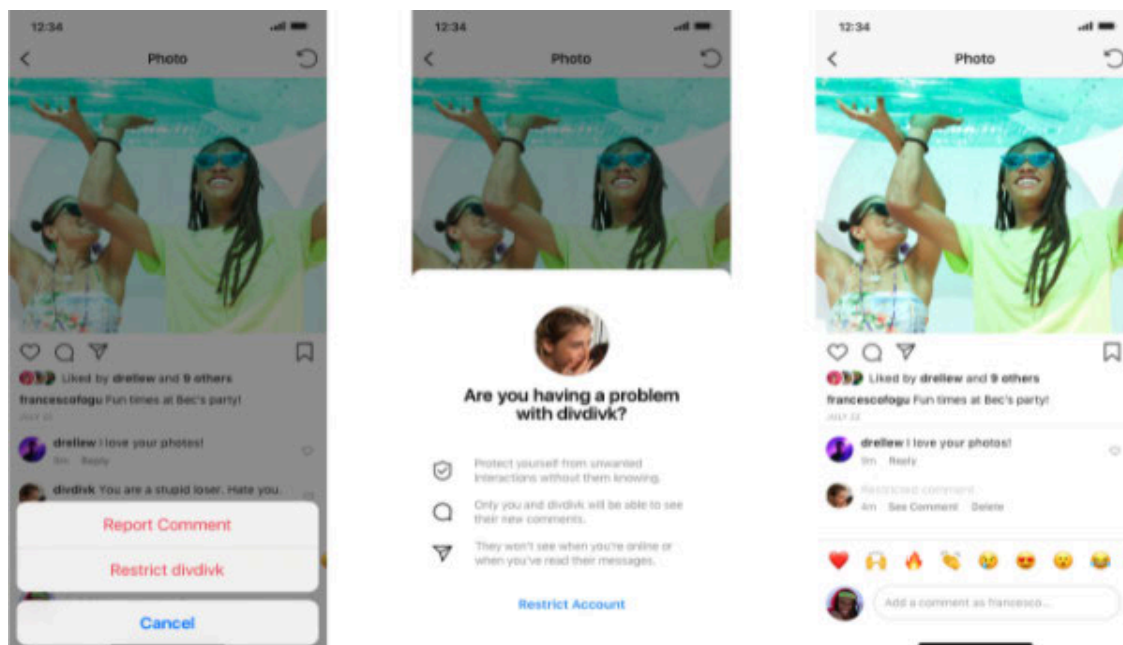
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<sup>37</sup> Meta, 'Community Standards Enforcement Report Q2 2024 - Bullying and harassment', *Transparency Center*, <https://transparency.fb.com/data/community-standards-enforcement/bullying-and-harassment/facebook>

<sup>38</sup> Instagram, 'Introducing the "Restrict" Feature to Protect Against Bullying', *Instagram Blog*, 2 October 2019, <https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/stand-up-against-bullying-with-restrict>

in direct response to feedback from teens who told us that blocking can be too severe and they wanted a way to protect themselves, but still be able to keep an eye on a bully's activity.

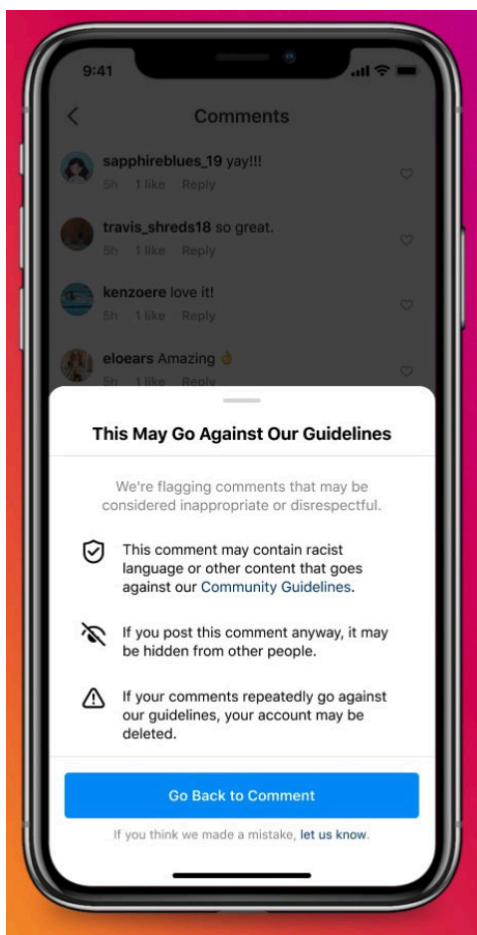
Figure 4: Instagram 'Restrict' tool



- **Bullying and harassment warning.** We send warnings on both Facebook and Instagram to educate and discourage people from posting or commenting in ways that could be bullying and harassment, shown in Figure 5 below. We have found that after viewing these warnings on Instagram, about 50 percent of the time the comment was edited or deleted by the user.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Meta, 'Our approach to addressing bullying and harassment', *Newsroom*, 9 November 2021, <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/11/how-meta-addresses-bullying-harassment>

Figure 5: Warnings to discourage bullying or harassment



- **Limits.** We enable users on Instagram to limit comments, messages, tags and other interactions to existing followers, and turn them off for accounts that do not follow them. When we detect someone might be experiencing a wave of bullying, we show them a notification of this tool asking if they would like to temporarily limit interactions. We recently expanded this in May 2024 to also give people the option of limiting interactions to those on their 'close friends' list only.<sup>40</sup>

## Mental health and wellbeing

Being socially connected, both online and offline, plays an important role in our mental health and wellbeing. We believe our platforms have a responsibility to not only provide a safe environment but to also support people in any time of need. We want the services that Meta provides to be a place for meaningful interactions with your friends and family - enhancing people's relationships offline, not detracting from them.

<sup>40</sup> Instagram, 'Introducing New Ways to Protect Our Community from Abuse', *Instagram Blog*, 10 August 2021, <https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/introducing-new-ways-to-protect-our-community-from-abuse>

We also recognise that people's time spent online should be balanced, positive and age appropriate, and so we invest heavily in the following areas so that a user's time spent on our services is positive and purposeful:

- **Research.** We have a dedicated team of researchers and support global and local research in Australia to understand the impact of social media, mental health and wellbeing.
- **Partnerships.** As mentioned above, Meta has convened a global Safety Advisory group. We have also developed strong relationships with global and local organisations to ensure our programs and tools are fit for purpose for Australians.
- **Tools and resources.** We have created a number of tools and resources, informed by our research and partnerships, to enable positive experiences, and guide users through finding support. These are outlined in more detail below.

### Approach to eating disorder content

We have developed - and continue to review and update - our approach to eating disorder content in consultation with experts around the world. Our specific policies about eating disorder content aim to strike a balance between preventing people from seeing harmful, sensitive or upsetting content and giving people space to talk about their own experiences, which experts say is important. We do not allow content that promotes, encourages or glorifies eating disorders and we remove it as soon as we become aware of it. We also have a dedicated in-platform reporting option for eating disorder content.

While it can be challenging to proactively identify eating disorder content, due to the many different forms this can take, between January and March 2024, we found and took action on 7.1 million pieces of suicide and self-injury content, including eating disorder content, on Facebook and 5.8 million on Instagram, 99.4% of which was found and actioned before it was reported to us.<sup>41</sup>

Recent tools that we have introduced include nudging teens towards other topics if they have been scrolling on the same topic on Instagram for a while.<sup>42</sup> When someone searches for, or posts, content related to eating disorders or body image issues, they will see a pop-up with tips and an easy way to connect to organisations offering support, including the Butterfly Foundation in Australia.<sup>43</sup> We have also updated this message to make it much more prominent, removing friction by reducing the number of click-throughs to get to helplines and ability to call the helpline within these resources pop-ups.

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<sup>41</sup> Meta, 'Community Standards Enforcement Report - Suicide and Self-Injury', *Transparency Center*, <https://transparency.meta.com/reports/community-standards-enforcement/suicide-and-self-injury/facebook/>

<sup>42</sup> Instagram, 'New tools and resources for parents and teens in VR and on Instagram', 14 June 2022, <https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/tools-and-resources-for-parents-and-teens-in-vr-and-on-instagram>

<sup>43</sup> Instagram, 'How we're supporting people affected by eating disorders and negative body image', 23 February 2021, <https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/how-were-supporting-people-affected-by-eating-disorders-and-negative-body-image>

## Approach to suicide and self-injury

We regularly consult with experts in suicide and self-injury to help inform our policies and enforcement, and work with organisations around the world to provide assistance to people in distress.

We define self-injury as the intentional and direct injuring of the body, including self-mutilation and eating disorders. We remove any content that encourages suicide or self-injury, including fictional content such as memes or illustrations and any self-injury content which is graphic, regardless of context. We also remove content that identifies and negatively targets victims or survivors of suicide or self-injury seriously, humorously or rhetorically, as well as real time depictions of suicide or self-injury.

We allow people to discuss topics relating to suicide and self-injury because we want Facebook and Instagram to be spaces where people can share their experiences, raise awareness about these issues and seek support from one another. However, we make content about recovery from suicide or self-harm that is allowed on our services harder for teens to find.<sup>44</sup>

On both Facebook and Instagram, we use machine learning and image-based technology to proactively identify and take action on potential suicide and self-injury content (either by removing it automatically or escalating it to human reviewers to take appropriate action) and expand our ability to get timely help to people in need.

We also work with experts in suicide prevention and safety to develop support options for people posting about suicide. Experts say that one of the best ways to help prevent a suicide is for people in distress to hear from others who care about them. Meta has a role to play in connecting people in distress with people who can offer support.

We have released suicide prevention support on Facebook Live and introduced AI to detect posts that indicate someone may be at risk of imminent harm. And when there is risk of imminent harm, we work with emergency responders who can help. We also connect people more broadly with mental health resources, including support groups on Facebook.<sup>45</sup>

## Research

We have a dedicated team of researchers that work to understand the impact of social media on mental health. We employ social psychologists, social scientists and sociologists, and we collaborate with top scholars to better understand wellbeing and the impact of social media on mental health.

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<sup>44</sup> Meta, 'New protections to give teens more age-appropriate experiences on our apps', *Newsroom*, 9 January 2024, <https://about.fb.com/news/2024/01/teen-protections-age-appropriate-experiences-on-our-apps>

<sup>45</sup> Meta, 'Getting our community help in real time', *Newsroom*, 27 November 2017, <https://about.fb.com/news/2017/11/getting-our-community-help-in-real-time>

According to research, the impact of technology on senses of wellbeing depend on how people use it.

In general, when people spend a lot of time passively consuming information — reading but not interacting with people — they report feeling worse afterward. However, actively interacting with people — especially sharing messages, posts and comments with close friends and reminiscing about past interactions — is linked to improvements in wellbeing.<sup>46</sup>

Moira Burke, Meta's Data Scientist and Wellbeing Researcher, has undertaken a number of studies on the intersection of wellbeing and social technology.<sup>47</sup> These studies found that people tend to have higher quality interactions on social media with their strong personal ties, such as friends, family and romantic partners. Further, a study we conducted with Robert Kraut at Carnegie Mellon University found that people who sent or received more messages, comments and Timeline posts reported improvements in social support, depression and loneliness. The positive effects were even stronger when people talked with their close friends online.<sup>48</sup>

In a peer-reviewed consensus report led by 12 interdisciplinary experts, the National Academies report concluded: "[t]he committee's review of the literature presented in this chapter and Appendix C did not support the conclusion that social media causes changes in adolescent health at the population level."<sup>49</sup> In fact, the report questions the uniqueness of the crisis, pointing to even higher suicide rates among teens in the early 1990s, before social media. And there's a growing body of research that suggests social media can play a positive role in teens' lives, and provide support to those who may be struggling or are members of marginalised groups. A Pew Research survey also reported that over 90 percent of teens from a nationally representative sample found that social media had a positive or neutral effect on them.<sup>50</sup>

We have used this research and others to inform user experiences online by introducing changes to News Feed, and tools such as the Activity Dashboard, suicide prevention tools, hiding likes, and the 'Take a Break' tool (all discussed below).

We made these important changes because we want to support wellbeing through meaningful interactions, even if it decreases time spent on the platform. In fact, shortly after we made the Meaningful Social Interactions change to News Feed in 2018, we saw time spent on the platform go down by 50 million hours per day.

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<sup>46</sup> P Verduyn, et al., 'Do social media sites enhance or undermine subjective wellbeing? A critical review', *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 13 January 2017, <https://spssi.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/sipr.12033>

<sup>47</sup> M Burke, *Research*, <https://research.facebook.com/?s=burke+moira>

<sup>48</sup> Meta, 'Hard questions: Is spending time on social media bad for us?' *Newsroom*, 15 December 2017, <https://about.fb.com/news/2017/12/hard-questions-is-spending-time-on-social-media-bad-for-us>

<sup>49</sup> S Galea, et al. (eds), 'Social media and adolescent health', *National Academies*, p5 <http://nap.nationalacademies.org/27396>

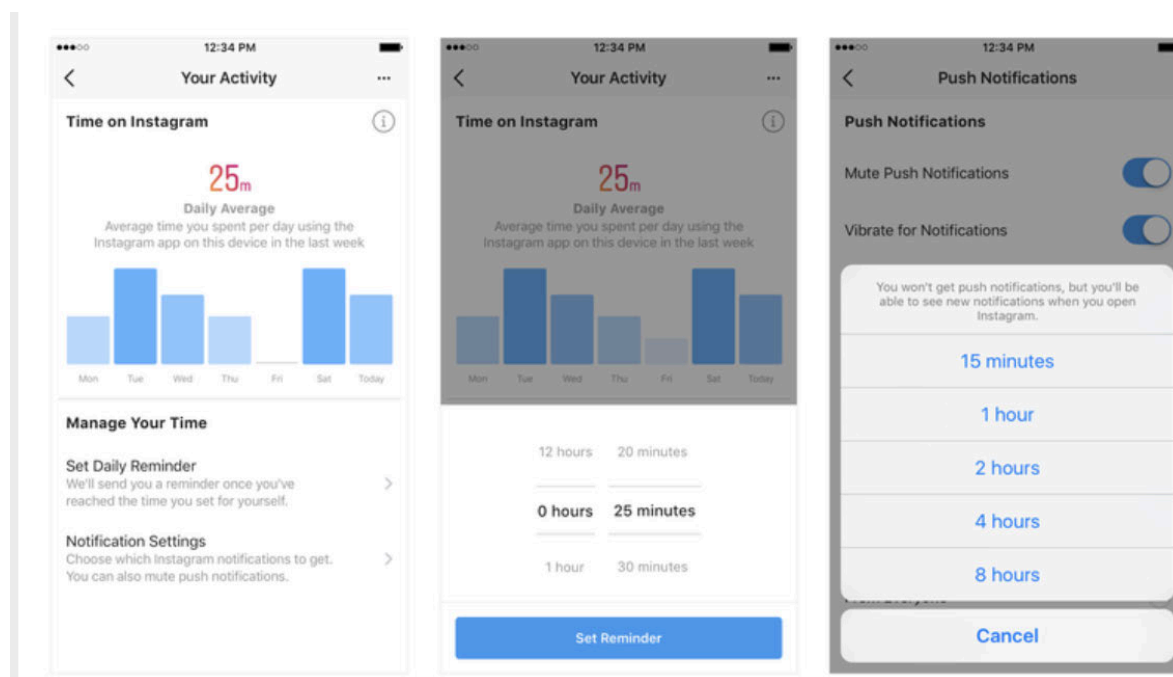
<sup>50</sup> M Anderson, et al., 'Connection, Creativity and Drama: Teen life on social media in 2022', Pew Research Centre, 16 November 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/11/16/connection-creativity-and-drama-teen-life-on-social-media-in-2022/>

## Additional well-being tools

We want the time people spend on Facebook and Instagram to be intentional, positive and inspiring, and we have developed tools to help users understand how much time they spend on our platforms so they can better manage their experience. These include:

- **Improving Feed quality.** As mentioned above, we have made several changes to Feed to provide more opportunities for meaningful interactions, and reduce passive consumption of low-quality content.<sup>51</sup> We demote things like clickbait headlines and false news. We optimise ranking so posts from the friends you care about most are more likely to appear at the top of your feed. Similarly, our ranking promotes posts that are personally informative. We also redesigned the comments feature to foster better conversations.
- **Activity Dashboard.** The Activity Dashboard, shown in Figure 7 below, was introduced in 2018 to help people manage their time on Facebook and Instagram. The Dashboard allows people to see the average time spent on the app, and allows them to set reminders once they have reached the amount of time they want to spend on the app.<sup>52</sup>

**Figure 7: Activity Dashboard**



<sup>51</sup> M Zuckerberg, Meaningful social interaction post, *Facebook*, 2 November 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/zuck/posts/10104146268321841>

<sup>52</sup> Meta, 'New tools to manage your time on Facebook and Instagram', *Newsroom*, 1 August 2018, <https://about.fb.com/news/2018/08/manage-your-time>

- **Hide Likes on Facebook and Instagram.** We tested hiding like counts to see if it might depressurise people's experience on Instagram.<sup>53</sup> What we heard from people and experts was that not seeing like counts was beneficial for some and annoying to others, particularly because people use like counts to get a sense of what's trending or popular. We now give users the option to hide like counts on all posts they see in their feed. They also have the option to hide like counts on their own posts, so others cannot see how many likes their posts get.
- **Take a Break.** In 2021, we launched a tool called Take a Break on Instagram which empowers people to make informed decisions about how they're spending their time.<sup>54</sup> If someone has been scrolling for a certain amount of time, we ask them to take a break from Instagram and suggest that they set reminders to take more breaks in the future. We also show them expert-backed tips to help them reflect and reset.

We offer a number of online Centres that work as a centralised source of authoritative, up to date information for users. This includes a Safety Centre that provides resources on online wellbeing, a Family Centre focused on support for families' online experiences, and an Education Hub with third party resources on conversations about online experiences at home.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Meta, 'Giving people more control on Instagram and Facebook', *Newsroom*, 26 May 2021, <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/05/giving-people-more-control>

<sup>54</sup> Meta, 'Raising the standard for protecting teens and supporting parents online', *Newsroom*, 7 December 2021, <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/12/new-teen-safety-tools-on-instagram>

<sup>55</sup> See Meta, *Safety Center*, <https://facebook.com/safety>, Meta, *Family Center*, <https://familycenter.meta.com/>, and Meta, *Education Hub*, <https://familycenter.meta.com/education/>