



DISCIPLINE OF SPEECH PATHOLOGY

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Submission to the Committee of the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024

1) Challenges of Communication Disability: Imagine a world where communication feels like an insurmountable challenge. This is the reality for people with communication disability— a wide range of issues, including language, speech, reading, and writing difficulties. In Australia, the prevalence of low language skills in school-aged children is between 6.4% and 8.04% (Hill et al., 2023). Speech-language pathologists transform lives by helping individuals of all ages manage communication disability; this includes not only addressing issues with oral and written language skills but also helping people to access and participate in social activities across both offline and online, including social media, environments.

2) Importance of Social Media: Social media are digital technologies that enable social networking, and/or the creation and sharing of user-generated content (Aichner et al., 2021). Young people view social media as a means by which to foster a sense of social connectedness to others through participation in online communities (Marsden et al., 2022). This involves using digital tools (e.g., apps, websites) to maintain social communication and relationships with peers, family members, and other individuals (Rose & Morstyn, 2013). The use of social media can offer benefits such as increased opportunities for social contact and support (Reid Chassiakos et al., 2016).

3) Benefits of Online Interaction: Online communication can positively impact young people's wellbeing by influencing the time they spend with existing friends (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Additionally, social media can be particularly valuable to young people with disabilities (including communication disability) who may feel excluded, marginalised, or lacking in support (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2023).

4) Communication Disability and Social Media Use: Scholars at The University of Sydney recently conducted a comprehensive review on "Social Media Use by Young People with Language Disorders" ([Shelton et al., 2024](#)). We report on how young people with communication disability engage with social media and the unique challenges they face. We found that:

- Young people with communication disability use social media for social connection and social interaction. This typically involves improving existing (offline) relationships rather than establishing relationships online.
- Young people engage in activities such as chatting to people, planning social activities, finding acceptance/a sense of belonging, being a source of social support, and supplementing offline relationships.
- Social media use can offer people with communication disability significant benefits by helping them feel less isolated and alone (Hemsley et al., 2024).

5) Importance of Social Media Skills: For young people with communication disability, achieving success as communicators during childhood and adolescence is crucial for their preparation for adulthood. If they do not learn to use social media during their teenage years, when will they? To

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transition successfully into adulthood, it is essential for them to have opportunities to build social networks, especially with peers, in the environments where these interactions will occur.

6) Recommendations: Social media legislation could improve the online safety and social media experiences for young people with communication disability. However, taking away under-16s' access to social media could isolate them from support that they value and use. We make the following recommendations to support the digital participation of young people with communication disability:

1. **Inclusive Design:** Social media platforms must incorporate inclusive design principles to ensure accessibility for young people with communication disability. This includes supporting features like text-to-speech/speech-to-text and visual aids.
2. **Parental Resources:** Provide resources and education for parents and caregivers on how to support safe and effective social media use for young people with communication disability. This includes guidance on balancing safety concerns with the need for social interaction.
3. **Research and Development:** Development of evidence-based programs and resources to support this population to access social media.

We thank the committee for considering the needs of this age group and respectfully request active consideration of our recommendations.

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