

# Age verification for social media would impact everyone—researchers ask parents and kids if they actually want it

May 22 2024, by Justine Humphry, Catherine Page Jeffery, Jonathon Hutchinson and Olga Boichak

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This month the Australian [government announced](#) a A\$6.5 million commitment to trial an age-verification program that will restrict children's exposure to inappropriate online content, including pornography and potentially social media. The announcement came out of a National Cabinet meeting geared towards addressing gender-based violence in Australia.

Much has been said about age-checking technologies in the weeks since. Experts point out implementing these tools effectively (so they aren't easily by-passed) will be complicated—and any such system could come with data security risk. Internet freedom groups have [criticized](#) the decision on account of its potential to erode privacy.

There is, however, an important dimension missing from these discussions: the voice of young people and parents. In our [research](#) into [social media](#) use and online harms affecting Australian teenagers, we asked young people and their parents what they themselves thought about [age verification](#). We found mixed reactions from both groups.

Our findings suggest age verification is generally supported, but participants think it likely would not work. Instead, they said more safety education, face-to-face dialogue, and accountability from social media companies would be better approaches to keeping young people safe online.

## **Young Australians and social media**

Young Australians use social media for a variety of reasons, from keeping in touch with friends and family, to seeking information and entertainment.

[Our latest research](#) found almost a quarter of young people 12 to 17 use WhatsApp daily. One in two are daily Snapchat users. Instagram and YouTube are the most frequently used platforms, used daily by 64% and 56% of young people respectively.

These patterns are especially significant for culturally and linguistically diverse Australians, who are more likely to use social media to socialize, maintain familial and cultural ties and learn about the world.

That said, social media and the internet more broadly do present risks to young people. These risks include online bullying, grooming and unsolicited contact, privacy breaches, misinformation and content that is pornographic, racist, sexist, homophobic and/or violent.

Studies have found associations between social media use and poor [mental health and self-esteem](#), although direct causation is difficult to establish. It's also important to note risk doesn't equate with harm, and [young people themselves](#) commonly demonstrate skills, judgment and agency in negotiating online risks.

In an environment of heightened concern, decisions are now being made that will have significant impacts on both young people and their parents. These decisions are being fueled by media brands, celebrities and ex-politicians [seeking to influence discourse](#).

Elsewhere in the world, the UK's Online Safety Bill is attempting to restrict young people's access to online pornography, through either government-issued [documents or biometrics](#). The UK regulator Ofcom is set to publish guidance on age-assurance [compliance in early 2025](#). France has also been testing a system to verify age based on [a user intermediary](#), after it enacted a law in 2023 to restrict social media use for people under 15.

The details of the trial in Australia haven't yet been released, but it could use one or a combination of approaches.

## The missing perspective

Our research, which focused on Australian teenagers aged 12–17 and their parents, drew from focus groups and a [national survey](#) in 2022–23. Overall, the survey showed broad support for age verification. Specifically, 72% of young people and 86% of parents believed more effective age limits would improve online safety for young people.

But we also heard about several drawbacks. For instance, young people saw age verification as something that would benefit adults. One participant said,

"I guess it benefits parents who want to be in the right mindset that their kids are safe on social media."

Another young person said, "I feel like in the case of lot of controlling parents it would be bad for the kid because then if the parents are controlling and they don't have any social media to talk to people, I feel like that could negatively impact the kid. Maybe they'd get lonely, or they wouldn't be able to use it as an outlet."

Some young people noted they could find ways around age-verification tools:

"It would be simple just to get a VPN and change my country if it was going to create this obstacle."

They also pointed out such tools don't account for evolving maturity levels and differing capabilities among young individuals.

Parents shared concerns about the burden of providing proof of their age and managing consent:

"I mean depending on what kind of site it is would you be comfortable providing your passport information or your driver's license?"

Both groups were worried about the risk of data breaches and leaks of sensitive information. As one parent told us:

"Well, it certainly makes you think about it a lot more. What are they using that data for? Is it really just for age verification, or is it for something more nefarious?"

Another young person also had privacy concerns:

"But if I would say that I was OK with it, I think I'd be lying. Because, I'm a really private person, privacy really matters. And yeah, I do think to be safe, I think we really should be having our own privacy as well."

## **So what should be done?**

Governments, parents, educators and platforms all have an important role to play in ensuring young people's safety online.

Beyond age verification, there's a growing consensus [social media companies](#) should be doing more to ensure users' safety. Until that happens, the best approach is for [parents](#) and children to [talk to each other](#) to determine the appropriate age for a child to be on social media. By working together, families can develop guidelines and expectations for appropriate use.

Schools can also help by developing young people's digital literacy and online safety skills.

Ultimately, if we want [young people](#) to thrive in online environments, we need to involve them in the decisions that will directly affect them.

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