



The Paediatric Society of New Zealand
Te Kāhui Mātai Arotamariki o Aotearoa



July 2025

Protecting Tamariki Online: A Paediatric Perspective on Harm, Responsibility, and Systemic Solutions

Submission from Te Kāhui Mātai Arotamariki o Aotearoa

The Paediatric Society of New Zealand | Te Kāhui Mātai Arotamariki o Aotearoa (PSNZ) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry into the harm young people in Aotearoa encounter online, and the roles that Government, business, and society should play in addressing those harms.

PSNZ is a multi-disciplinary society committed to advancing the health and wellbeing of tamariki and rangatahi in Aotearoa. Our members include paediatricians, nurses, allied health professionals, researchers, and child health experts working across the motu.

Acknowledging the Harms

There is growing and well-substantiated evidence that aspects of their online lives are harming young people in Aotearoa. These include exposure to harmful content, online bullying and exploitation, compulsive and addictive use of social media and gaming platforms, and associated impacts on sleep, development, educational outcomes, and mental health. **This is a serious issue, and action is required.**

A Nuanced Approach Is Essential

However, while acknowledging these harms, we caution against overly simplistic or one-size-fits-all responses. Young people's experiences online are varied. For many, the digital world is also a place of connection, cultural identity, learning, creativity, and community.

An effective public policy response must be proportionate and balanced, recognising the multifaceted nature of the digital environment. Simply banning or heavily restricting access, without acknowledging or addressing the structural drivers of harm, is unlikely to succeed and may create unintended consequences.

“Tamariki in Aotearoa flourish in health and wellness”

Addressing Systemic Drivers

Much of the harm being caused is not accidental. It stems from online platforms that are intentionally designed to maximise engagement, time on site, and monetisation, often at the expense of young people's wellbeing. These platforms deploy behavioural design features that are exploitative and addictive by design.

We are particularly concerned by narratives that shift the burden of responsibility onto parents, whānau, or even young people themselves, when the systems in question are deliberately designed to exploit neural responses and override self-regulation. These platforms understand how young brains respond to stimuli and use that knowledge to drive engagement, often at the cost of wellbeing. Effective responses must address these commercial and structural causes.

Key Recommendations

We support the aims of this inquiry and offer the following recommendations:

- **Regulate design features and content:** Government-led frameworks should address addictive design patterns, algorithmic targeting of youth, and harmful content promotion. This includes legislative measures similar to those under development internationally.
- **Hold platforms accountable:** Businesses, particularly social media and technology companies, must be required to meet minimum child safety standards and be transparent about the psychological impacts of their platforms on young users.
- **Invest in education and digital literacy:** A sustained, evidence-based programme of digital literacy and wellbeing education should be available across all school levels, co-designed with young people and culturally responsive to Māori and Pacific communities.
- **Support whānau, don't blame them:** Rather than placing blame on caregivers, resourcing is needed to help whānau navigate the digital world alongside their children, through accessible tools, guidance, and community support networks.
- **Fund research and surveillance:** Ongoing monitoring of the prevalence and impact of online harm, especially in marginalised communities, is needed to inform evidence-based interventions.
- **Involve youth in the solution:** Young people must be part of this conversation. Their perspectives are essential in shaping solutions that are both effective and respectful of their rights.

Online harm is real and growing, but so is the opportunity to reimagine the digital world in safer, more empowering, and more equitable ways for tamariki and rangatahi. That will require leadership from government, accountability from business, and support from society as a whole.

PSNZ is committed to contributing to this work. We thank the Committee for initiating this important inquiry and welcome the opportunity for further engagement.

This submission has been reviewed and received the endorsement of members and clinical experts from the Paediatric Society of New Zealand | Te Kāhui Mātai Arotamariki o Aotearoa.

Ngā mihi nui,

Dr Owen Sinclair, (Te Rarawa), President of PSNZ and Consultant Paediatrician