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

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Position Statement: Protecting Tamariki and Rangatahi Online: Social Media, Digital Harm, and the Case for Action

From: Te Kāhui Mātai Arotamariki o Aotearoa | Paediatric Society of New Zealand (PSNZ)

In 2025, PSNZ submitted to Parliament's inquiry into online harms, calling for a nuanced, systemic approach to protecting tamariki and rangatahi online. This position statement advances that work. It draws on the latest evidence, international developments, and the voices of young people in Aotearoa to set out PSNZ's position on social media age restrictions, platform accountability, and the broader reforms needed to safeguard child and youth wellbeing in the digital age.

What We Know So Far

While social media may offer some benefits, multiple systematic reviews consistently link social media use in young people to increased depression, anxiety, body dissatisfaction, self-harm, and suicidal ideation, particularly among girls and heavy users. These findings warrant serious attention from policymakers and health professionals. [1]

How young people are being harmed:

- **Harmful content exposure:** A significant and growing proportion of young people report exposure to harmful content via social media, including material that normalises eating disorders and self-harm, misogynistic and racist content, and violent pornography, with some research documenting unintentional exposure to pornography in children as young as 10–12 years old. [1,2,3,8]
- **Addictive design:** Algorithms designed to maximise engagement drive compulsive, addiction-like use. In Aotearoa, 22% of young people meet the criteria for problematic social media use, with a further third in the high-risk category. NZ teens average 2.5 hours daily on social media, with almost a third spending five or more hours per day. [4]
- **Technology facilitates sexual exploitation:** Social Media is increasingly used to facilitate child sexual exploitation, including grooming, sextortion and propagation of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) and continues to trend upward in Aotearoa. [18]
- **Displacement of healthy activity:** Time spent on social media displaces sleep, physical activity, face-to-face connection, and learning. All activities that are essential for healthy development. [5]
- **Attention and cognitive impacts:** Emerging evidence links frequent use of social media and short-form video content with reduced sustained attention and challenges with impulse control in young people. [5] Research shows that habitual social media checking is associated with changes in brain regions involved in emotional regulation and impulse control. [6]
- **Online bullying:** Online bullying amplifies traditional bullying because it reaches wider audiences, operates around the clock, and persists over time. Evidence shows higher

exposure rates, more severe psychological impacts, and elevated suicide risk compared with face-to-face bullying. [7]

In Aotearoa, rates of psychological distress among young adults have risen sharply in the past decade. Among rangatahi Māori, depressive symptoms doubled from 14% to 28% between 2012 and 2019, and suicide attempts more than doubled from 6% to 13%. Pacific youth saw depressive symptoms rise from 14% to 25%, with suicide attempts increasing from 7% to 12%. [9] While multiple factors contribute to these trends, they have occurred during a period of rapid social media uptake, and social media is increasingly identified as a significant and modifiable risk factor.

Equity Must Be Central

Māori, Pacific, rainbow, neurodiverse, and disabled young people face disproportionate online harm. [9,10,11] Netsafe research found that 46% of Māori experienced unwanted digital communication, and 39% reported that it had a negative impact on their lives. Netsafe's 2023 hate speech reporting also shows Māori are more likely than average to be targeted online with race-based hate. [10] The majority of LGBTQIA+ youth, who regularly use social media, report frequent exposure to discrimination and harmful interactions online. [11]

Balancing Harm and Connection for Marginalised Youth

PSNZ recognises that the digital world can also be a place of connection, cultural identity, and community for young people, and we take this very seriously. For rainbow youth, it can offer peer support not always available locally. For Māori and Pacific young people, it can sustain connection to whanaungatanga and cultural identity across distance. For disabled and neurodiverse young people, it can lower barriers to building friendship and community.

However, current evidence on whether social media improves wellbeing for these groups overall is limited and mixed. Quantitative analyses indicate that even those who describe experiences of connection may experience the strongest associations between online discrimination and mental health harm. [11] PSNZ strongly advocates that any restrictions must be accompanied by investment in safe, inclusive alternatives for marginalised youth to find community, connection, and mental health support.

Emerging Threats: AI Companions and Gambling

AI companions: AI companion apps have grown to tens of millions of users globally. The 2026 International AI Safety Report identifies AI companions as a growing risk, with early evidence suggesting that heavy use is linked to increased loneliness, emotional dependence, and reduced engagement in human relationships. [12] Common Sense Media found that 72% of US teens have used AI companions, with over half using them regularly. [13] Safety testing has found these products pose unacceptable risks to children, with age-appropriate safeguards frequently inadequate. [14] Given the risks to attachment and development, particularly for younger users, international child safety experts have proposed an age-18 minimum.

Gambling advertising: Gambling and gambling-like mechanics are aggressively marketed to young people through social media. In Aotearoa, 21,000 young people aged 15–24 are classified as at-risk gamblers. User-generated and embedded advertising on social media is difficult to regulate, and

platforms are currently not responsible for user-generated content. Age restrictions on social media would help limit young people's exposure to gambling marketing.

Developmental impacts of irreversible exposure

Digital harm in childhood is not just about what is seen in the moment, but what is carried forward. Children and young people cannot "unsee" harmful content. Early exposure to sexualised, violent, or extreme material occurs during critical windows of brain development, where patterns of thinking, behaviour, and expectation are being formed. Without the maturity or context to interpret this content, young people may internalise distorted norms around relationships, bodies, and behaviour. These effects can persist, particularly when reinforced by repeated exposure through algorithm-driven platforms.

Why Platform Self-Regulation Has Failed

Technology companies have a poor track record of prioritising child welfare over profit. Persuasive design to maximise engagement is central to their business model. When legislation is introduced, companies have actively sought to undermine compliance through litigation, data relocation, and lobbying. [15]

Independent testing consistently reveals gaps between companies' safety claims and reality. Of **24** Meta teen safety features tested independently, only **five** worked as stated, while the remainder were no longer available, had significant flaws, or had notable limitations. [15] Content management tools such as 'see less of this' can paradoxically increase exposure to harmful content, as algorithms interpret engagement, even negative engagement, as interest. The UK's Online Safety Act has driven some improvements, but harmful content remains widespread, and platforms are already challenging the law. Crucially, regulation alone does not address harms such as addiction, compulsive use, attention fragmentation, or social comparison.

What Young New Zealanders Are Telling Us

A 2025 survey of 540 NZ teens aged 13–17 found that 39% wish social media had never been invented, half said they accessed it too young, and 47% support age restrictions at 16 years. [4] When asked what would help, 44% wanted education and transition support, and 39% wanted practical parental guidance. Young people said giving up social media would be easier as a shared experience rather than individually. 77% of NZ caregivers also support age restrictions. [4]

International Momentum

Australia has implemented age restrictions with responsibility placed on platforms, not children or families. To date, 4.7 million child accounts have been removed. Early data indicate that while initial spikes in alternative platform registrations occurred, these did not translate into sustained usage. [17] Countries actively pursuing or considering age-based limits include France, Spain, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Germany, Malaysia, India, the UK, and the USA. The European Parliament has called for continent-wide restrictions for under-16s.

Meta-analyses of social media reduction interventions show mental health benefits and no harms. [16] Parental consent models, by contrast, have shown limited effectiveness, as children can simply enter a different age group, and these models place the burden on caregivers rather than on platforms.

PSNZ Positions

Age restrictions alone will not resolve the multifactorial drivers of youth mental distress, and PSNZ does not present it as a complete solution. The measures below represent a system-wide approach: age restriction is one component, paired with mandatory platform accountability, investment in safe alternatives, and digital literacy support.

The age-16 threshold reflects convergence across the available evidence. It aligns with the age most young people and caregivers in Aotearoa already support (47% of surveyed NZ teens and 77% of caregivers, see above), and with the threshold now being adopted or considered internationally. PSNZ is not presenting this age as a precise developmental age at which resilience to online harm is established, and will keep this threshold under review as new evidence emerges.

Until platform accountability and safety are demonstrated, age restrictions are **one** essential component of a comprehensive precautionary public health response. Systemic reform will take years. Our young people's health and wellbeing cannot wait.

1. **Age restriction under 16 years for social media platforms** with known harmful features. Communication platforms without these features (e.g. WhatsApp) are excluded.
2. **Restrictions are defined by platform features** (algorithmic content curation, persuasive design, and image-based social comparison) rather than by naming individual platforms. A features-based restriction mitigates what's been seen internationally: young people migrating to newer, potentially more harmful platforms.
3. **Age 18 for AI companion platforms** due to attachment and developmental risks, and the current inadequacy of safety features.
4. **Responsibility sits on the platforms, not children or whānau.** Children are not breaking laws. It's not solely the responsibility of whānau to manage it. Companies must be held accountable for the products they deploy to young people.
5. **Establish an independent eSafety Commissioner** with Te Tiriti obligations, statutory enforcement powers and capacity to monitor the behaviour of social media companies
6. **Platform accountability legislation** banning addictive design features, prohibiting harmful content amplification, removing targeted advertising to minors, and mandating independent safety audits.
7. **Invest in safe, inclusive alternatives** for connection and mental health support, co-designed with rangatahi Māori, Pacific, rainbow, disabled, and rural young people. Solutions must not leave marginalised communities behind.
8. **Culturally responsive digital literacy and whānau support** co-designed with young people, informing and supporting the whole whānau to find safe solutions that work for their young people.

Online harm is real and growing, but so is the opportunity to create a safer digital world for tamariki and rangatahi. That requires leadership from government, accountability from business, and support from society. PSNZ is committed to this work.

Ngā mihi,

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