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Media Release: PSNZ Welcomes Online Safety Bill, But Says Restrictions Alone Won't Protect Tamariki

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

The Paediatric Society of New Zealand | Te Kāhui Mātai Arotamariki o Aotearoa (PSNZ) strongly supports the Government's Online Safety (Minimum Age and Child Safety Risk Assessment) Bill, recognising it as a critical and welcome step forward. However, PSNZ is unequivocal: an age restriction in isolation is not the solution. To genuinely protect tamariki and rangatahi, this legislation must anchor a much broader, comprehensive framework. Crucially, that framework must be co-designed with young people themselves. In keeping with the principle of "nothing about us, without us," tamariki and rangatahi must be active participants in shaping the digital safeguards that affect their lives.

The Bill sets a minimum age of 16 for social media platforms with features linked to known harm and requires companies to conduct regular child safety risk assessments. This closely mirrors the approach [PSNZ set out in its own position statement](#), released this month, including a shared emphasis on regulating platforms by their harmful features rather than naming individual platforms, an approach designed to stop young people simply migrating to the next unregulated app.

What PSNZ welcomes in the Bill:

- PSNZ strongly agrees that responsibility must sit squarely on platforms, not on children or whānau; the Bill includes no offences or penalties for young people or their families.
- The regulator has genuine enforcement powers, including penalties of up to 10% of a platform's global turnover, a credible deterrent, not a token one.
- A mandatory two-year statutory review is built in, allowing the age threshold and settings to be adjusted as evidence evolves, consistent with PSNZ's own approach of keeping the age-16 threshold under review.

PSNZ President and Consultant Paediatrician Dr Sonja Crone says the Bill is a genuinely welcome step, but stresses that legislation of this kind cannot work in isolation.

"We are pleased to see so much of what we called for reflected in this Bill," Dr Crone says. "But this is a nuanced and complex issue, and an age restriction on its own will not resolve the drivers of youth mental distress. Age restrictions are just one part of a much wider, systemic response that needs to be delivered alongside platform accountability, safe alternatives, and support for whānau. Without those other pieces, this risks failing the very young people it's designed to protect."

A gap for equity

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PSNZ says one of the most significant gaps in the Bill is the absence of any equity provisions. Māori, Pacific, rainbow, disabled, and neurodivergent young people experience disproportionate rates of online harm, but for many of these groups, digital spaces also provide vital connection, cultural identity, and community that isn't always available to them offline.

"If we restrict access without investing in safe, inclusive alternatives, we risk removing one of the few spaces where marginalised young people find connection and support," Dr Crone says. "Equity must be built into this legislation from the start, not bolted on later. That means dedicated consultation and investment in alternatives that are co-designed with, not for, rangatahi Māori, Pacific, rainbow, disabled, and rural young people, and it should be explicit in the Bill."

Young people must have a voice

PSNZ is also calling for young people themselves to have a genuine, ongoing role in shaping how this legislation is implemented and reviewed. PSNZ's position statement links to data that shows 47% of surveyed NZ teens support an age restriction at 16, yet young people were equally clear that education and support to transition to safer alternatives is a must.

"If this legislation is to be truly effective, it cannot just be adults making decisions on behalf of young people," Dr Crone says. "Rangatahi possess the lived experience, and they have been clear about what they need to stay safe online. Genuine participation goes far beyond basic consultation; it requires us to elevate their voices and co-design solutions alongside them. The evidence is clear: when young people help build the safety measures intended to protect them, those measures work. Centring their voice in this Bill is an absolute necessity."

AI companions need a higher bar

PSNZ is concerned that the Bill applies the same 16-year threshold to social AI companions as it does to social media, despite PSNZ's position statement calling for a minimum age of 18 for these products given their distinct attachment and developmental risks. AI companions are designed to simulate an ongoing emotional relationship, and research has found these products routinely claim to be sentient, initiate sexual conversations with users identified as minors, and fail to appropriately handle disclosures of self-harm. AI companions are designed to simulate a real relationship at a key developmental stage when identity, attachment, and relationship skills are still forming. That combination is genuinely concerning.

Self-assessment is not the same as accountability

PSNZ also has concerns about how the Bill approaches platform accountability. Rather than banning specific harmful design practices, such as addictive engagement features or algorithmic amplification of harmful content, the Bill largely requires platforms to self-assess and report on these risks. PSNZ's position statement specifically warns that self-regulation has a poor track record: independent testing of Meta's own teen safety features found that only 5 of the 24 features worked as they claimed.

"We've already seen what happens when we ask platforms to mark their own homework," Dr Crone says. "A risk assessment that a company writes about itself is not the same as a genuine ban on the design features we know cause harm. If we want this legislation to actually change platform behaviour, self-reporting needs to be backed by independent auditing and clear limits on the practices we already know are harmful."

PSNZ is calling on the Government to strengthen the Bill by:

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- Embedding explicit equity provisions for Māori, Pacific, rainbow, disabled, and rural young people.
- Requiring meaningful, ongoing participation of children and young people in the Bill's implementation and its two-year review.
- Raising the minimum age for social AI companions to 18, in line with their distinct attachment and developmental risks.
- Requiring independent auditing and banning of harmful design features, not platform self-reporting alone.
- Investing in safe, inclusive alternative spaces for connection and mental health support, co-designed with young people.
- Funding culturally responsive digital literacy and whānau support so families are equipped, not just restricted.

PSNZ welcomes any opportunities to work constructively with the Government, the regulator, and young people themselves as this Bill progresses through Parliament, to ensure New Zealand's approach to online safety works for every child and young person in Aotearoa.

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Contact:

For more information, or to arrange an interview with Dr Sonja Crone, contact Ruth Dryfhout, Communications Manager, PSNZ, communications@paediatrics.org.nz

Notes for editors:

PSNZ's full position statement, Protecting Tamariki and Rangatahi Online: Social Media, Digital Harm, and the Case for Action, is available here - <https://www.paediatrics.org.nz/files/1787532751724.pdf>

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