



How Young People Can Be Supported Through New Social Media Age Restrictions

**YOUNG AND WISE ROUNDTABLE REPORT
March 2025**

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”

About ARACY

ARACY champions the wellbeing of all Australian children and young people. Together, we drive systemic change, collaborate with communities, and amplify young voices to create a healthier future. Our work focuses on prevention, early intervention, and equity. Our purpose is for every child and young person to thrive.

We genuinely listen to and amplify the voices of young people, highlighting their issues and the solutions they envision. Our Young and Wise Roundtables is a continuation of ARACY's Young and Wise Report by Dr Kristy Noble. The report brings together insights from over 117 consultations with children and young people across Australia over the past five years.

Purpose

The purpose of ARACY's Young and Wise roundtable is to gain an initial understanding of the perspectives of young people about:

- The key mental health and general impacts of the social media age restrictions to be imposed as of December 2025
- Supports that could assist in the transition into the age restrictions
- The impact of the social media age restrictions on government communications with young people
- How government communications with young people could be improved

Scope

ARACY has undertaken all efforts to ensure young roundtable participants represent a diverse cross section of young people nationally. Key demographic details are outlined below. However, given the small cross section, this summary should not be taken to be a comprehensive assessment of the above issues. Rather, this is an exploratory or scoping exercise that can identify common or likely issues and supports that can be examined in greater depth. As always, any action in relation to young people should be done in partnership with them.

Key Details

Roundtable date: 12th March 2025

Roundtable time: 5:30pm – 7:00pm AEDT

Online/in person: Online (Microsoft Teams)

Recording available: Yes

ARACY staff present: Adam Valvasori, Kristy Noble

***ARACY's Young and Wise Roundtables are supported by
the Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care
under the Health Peak and Advisory Bodies Program.***

Executive Summary

As Australia transitions to new social media age restriction rules, young people want their mental health needs front and centre. Social media is not just entertainment—it plays a critical role in their sense of connection, identity, and mental wellbeing.

Young people in the Young and Wise roundtable felt the shift to age restrictions could have an overall positive effect on their mental health by reducing harmful content and pressure. However, they also flagged key risks. Social media is often the only place they feel safe discussing mental health or reaching out to peers. Many avoid offline supports due to fear of judgment, lack of anonymity, or a sense of being a burden. Without accessible alternatives, the transition could cut off vital support networks and leave young people feeling isolated.

To support mental health through this transition, young people are calling for:

- **Preserving peer connection** – online spaces are often where they find solidarity and support.
- **Clear, youth-friendly guidance** – helping them understand and navigate the rules safely.
- **Digital and mental health literacy** – especially through school-based education and trusted platforms.
- **Tailored, accessible supports** – government services must be anonymous, relevant, and trusted by young people.
- **Balanced, empowering approaches** – not just restriction, but education, co-design, and real options for support.

We would like to thank the young people who generously shared their time, insights, and lived experience to help us better understand, contextualise, and strengthen the findings of this report.

Process

Participants were recruited and consented via circulation of an Expression of Interest online form to our young subscriber network of 500+ young Australians. Key demographic details were collected on registering their interest through a non-compulsory survey. Registration was open for two weeks. Of the approximately 80 applicants, 31 were invited to participate, selected based on their age, diversity of lived experience as well as location to ensure a broad community cross section.

Availability to participate was collected via a poll with the most popular timeslot allocated for the roundtable. Options included outside of school/business hours to ensure availability of young people.

During the roundtable, participants were given a short (10 minute) overview of ARACY, the roundtable context and purpose, key details of the upcoming social media age restrictions, and reminded about the remuneration process. An icebreaker activity was used for participants to briefly introduce themselves.

The roundtable was then divided into three sessions of approximately 20 minutes each. Each session had a specific theme and was opened with online Menti polls, which were then used as prompts for further discussion facilitated by ARACY staff alongside pre-prepared 'prompting questions'. The three themes, results of the Menti polls, and key findings of the ensuing discussion are detailed below.

Participant Demographics

Total number of participants:

9 (all identified as female) Under 14 = 1, 13-14 = 4, 14+=4

States:

Victoria=4, NSW=2, Queensland=3

Lived Experience / Identity Characteristics:

- Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD): 5
- Neurodiverse: 2
- Lives with a mental health condition: 2
- Lives with a disability: 2
- LGBTQIA+: 2
- Lives or grew up in a rural, regional, or remote area: 2
- Experienced or grew up in poverty: 1
- Other diverse lived experience not listed: 2
- None of the above: 1

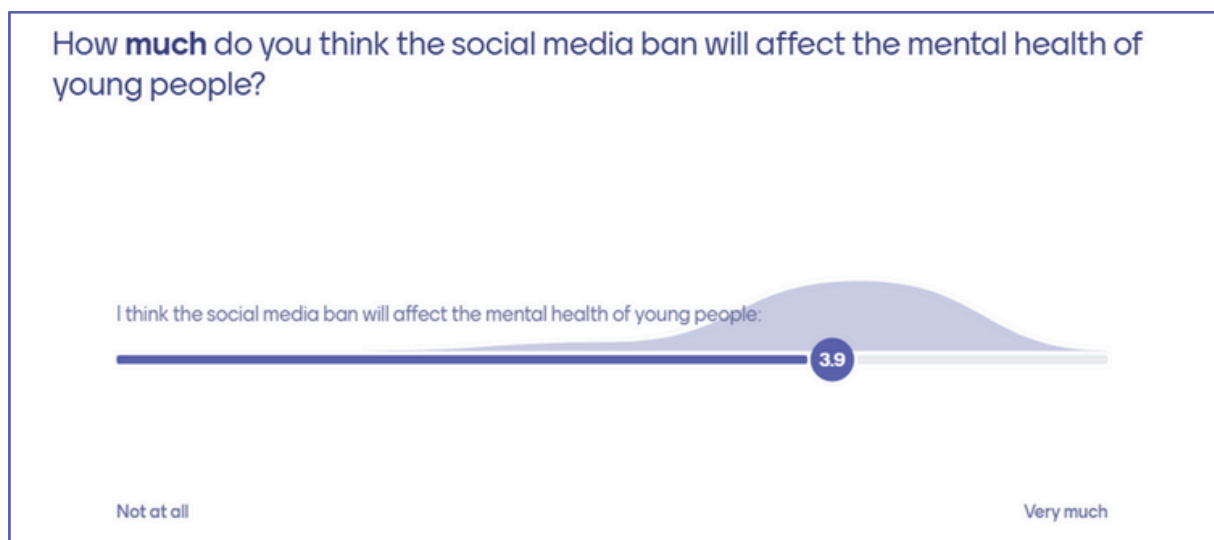
Roundtable Findings

1. Mental Health Impacts & Supports

- How do you think the social media ban is going to affect young people generally?
- Are there any groups of young people who you think might be more affected than others?
- Do you think there will be implications for young people's mental health? Do you think these mental health effects will be good or bad, or a combination? We know that social media can provide some benefits to mental health, for example connection with peers, or access to mental health information. What sort of challenges do you think young people will face as a result of the ban?
- What do you think could help young people navigate some of these challenges?
- What do you think it will be like when younger people who haven't used social media before get access to it at 16? Do you think this will have mental health impacts? If so, what kind?

Mental Health

Young people overall felt that the social media age restrictions will have mixed effects on the mental health of young people with moderate to high impact. Interestingly, overall young people tended to feel that the social media restrictions will be largely beneficial to mental health despite the loss of connection and community that would ensue. Menti polls were used to prompt discussion and obtained the following results:



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”

Young people indicated that they relied heavily on social media for mental health supports, especially since COVID-19, and expressed concern at the sudden withdrawal of this support. Young people indicated that seeking mental health supports from professionals (such as a counsellor or doctor) could be “daunting”, and social media permitted mental health support without these challenges. More details on how social media was used to support mental health can be found in Section 2.

“So it's a bit concerning when online spaces will be taken away, like how mental health will get to talk about because places that are very formal and government based aren't gonna be accessed as much as informal thing that are designed by young people for young people.”

“I think it's also easier to type out my problems rather than say them out loud to a person, and using platforms such as KidsHelpline or Headspace feel really daunting to use because the people who would be talking to me aren't part of the same age range as me, and even though I know that they would've experienced similar things in their youth it's easier to talk to people who are currently experiencing similar problems”

Key positives of the ban included reduced exposure to unhealthy material, for example ‘influencers’ propagating unhealthy messages about body image. Young people also mentioned how digital media could contribute to misinterpreted meaning or “overthinking” e.g. the implications of a friend responding with “k” instead of “okay”. The ban was considered unlikely to have any impact on cyberbullying, as there were other platforms on which this could occur.

Connectedness

A key concern was the loss of connectedness that social media provides to young people, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic where social media was and now still is heavily relied on for connection. There were concerns about how a sudden removal of access to social media when it is depended on so heavily so social connectedness could be “jarring”.

Online events and connectivity were seen to circumvent barriers to in-person connection to communities and socialising, for example transport issues or limitation on time.

“...like I see so many youth events on like libraries and things holding youth events. But the amount of people that don't go is like a lot, because either you know, time or it's hard to get there and stuff like that.”

Particular concerns for loss of connectedness for groups with additional barriers, specifically young people in rural and remote communities, disability, and LGBTQIA+ identity.

“Social media like gives like a good space to like meet other people and have identity and celebrate culture...especially in minority spaces like disability or queer culture, um like social media is has been amazing for that. But going forward, it's a bit concerning thinking about, like how people will be able to connect to those communities when they can't go into an in person event because you know, maybe they have sensory issues or they're in a wheelchair.”

Recreation

Young people noted that social media was an important source of entertainment and hobbies which would be lost from the ban, alongside loss of access to creative inspiration and expression e.g. following and creating dancing content on Instagram.

Entrepreneurial Opportunities

There were concerns that lack of access to social media (for example Instagram) stunted entrepreneurial opportunities for young people under age 16 years.

General effects

One respondent suggested that the ban was more likely to shift the problems occurring on social media from one type of platform to another, rather than reduce problems.

Young people felt these challenges would be more pronounced at the beginning of the ban but felt that young people would adapt to the change and the challenges would ease over time. There was some scepticism expressed about enforcement of the ban.

Suggested Supports

To prompt discussion, young people were asked where they typically seek mental health supports via a Menti poll. The following word cloud was generated:



In terms of what supports could be provided for young people to aid in the transition into social media age restrictions, there was strong support for alternative online spaces that were regulated and considered safe for young people. Young people expressed a desire to connect with peers and other healthy media through curated content in order to replicate the benefits of social media without the harms. Suggestions included content that was posted by people of similar age, youth organisations, governments etc. but excluded harmful content such as pop culture 'influencers'.

"So maybe creating alternative spaces where young people can still learn how you appropriately behave on social media... maybe creating a platform or something that's monitored by the government and has safe content and stuff that's designed just for people between the ages of 12 to 15, so that they still learn the skills and have a place to communicate that replicate social media just without a lot of the harmful content."

"I think it would be good to have like different kind of platforms for different age suitabilities and like allowing people to maybe not so much post content but be able to watch content by or to users. Cause I think something that like a lot of people that are younger, they will just watch, you know, whatever's on tiktok or social media. And that way, if a youth group still wants to contact a particular age group they can still have education content on a platform in an engaging way without it being overridden by harmful things."

"I think there should be online access on alternate platforms such as whatsapp, zoom meetings and online classes which can assist those who believe that they will struggle with the new law."

There was a clear desire to empower young people to engage with social media in a healthy and responsible way through education, including recognition and education about how social media can be beneficial. Alternative safe platforms (above) and dedicated school-based education programs were specifically suggested as options to facilitate this.

"I think having mental health programmes and resources in school, just to support students dealing with the social pressures because of the ban. I think the integration of media and digital safety into education would really help them when they transition into social media as well. Otherwise, there's not really any point if the ban."

"The government could create a website with resources and tips for young people because I think that one of the main reasons why young people go on social media is because they don't know where to find relevant support, and don't know what to do with their free time and how to effectively study, leading to endless scrolling. So tips for what to do in free time and 'how' to study, and other general info would be really helpful!"

"I actually really loved the idea about giving education... I think it's quite important for them to learn how to actually use social media to their benefit, because sometimes we go around saying we shouldn't have social media or that it can be harmful. But I think we need to actually learn that there are definitely benefits towards it, but how can we access that and how can we keep a good boundary between how much we are using social media and how much we should be offline? But I think it's also about teaching young kids to be able to be able to control that themselves and have responsibility for their own usage of social media."

"I think it would be amazing if they can specifically have like, try and dissect what was good about social media in terms of like sex Ed or mental health education because there's so much like good, helpful content on there that schools aren't addressing."

"I think that mandatory school programmes would be really helpful... like we have with all these other mandatory health sessions given to us, I think it would be just another aspect of those to teach youths how to use social media responsibly so that when they do turn 16 and do end up on social media that they have the grounds to know... like just understand what the positive negatives are just to know what they're getting themselves in."

"I think the integration of media and digital safety into education would really help them when they transition into social media as well."

It was also suggested there was a need to refocus young people on alternative methods of socialising and communicating, especially when transitioning onto social media at 16 years.

"It's important to you know, really incentivise those other communication methods and those other methods of connection rather than, you know, having it seem like your whole life is a countdown until you turn 16 and you can go on social media... I think we need to reframe it that social media is not the priority in young people's lives."

We asked participants 'What is your advice to the Health Minister and the Prime Minister to help them help young people transition through the age restriction to social media?' in the online chat. The responses are included below.

"A partnership between Education QLD and QLD health in relation to the social media ban would be very beneficial - when using mandatory school program to highlight pros and cons, effective and healthy uses of social media."

"I think more in person events for young people to meet new people and make friends and find communities like we do on social media could also be pretty great."

"platforms for young people to be able to connect with people their age without the fear of judgement and having to talk to doctors/adults if they feel uncomfortable with that. I think the platform shouldn't be highly controlled or strict by the govt. since that can prevent young people from reaching out because they would think they're being watched. Platform could potentially be anonymous"

"oh for sure, every school should have some sort of wellbeing program implemented with RELEVANT topics (using information from focus groups etc)"

“

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2. Communication Methods

- Where do you usually access mental health information?
- Will this change as a result of the social media ban?
- We know that health and mental health organisations use social media as a way to reach and advertise to young people. What are some other ways the government and other organisations could use to communicate with young people (e.g. provide mental health information, services etc.) outside of social media?

Sources of mental health information

Young participants were asked where they normally go to get information about mental health via Menti poll. Multiple answers were permitted. The following word cloud was generated from their responses:



How young people engaged with social media

Young people use social media to “crowd source” specific information about mental health through posting comments, questions, or scrolling through comments after using the search function to find information on a specific topic. Young participants indicated they were seeking shared experiences and a sense of community, rather than seeking information on a specific mental health issue.

“I think a very important point to note is that it's not so much like finding information about mental health because young people already know a lot about mental health. It's not so much that we're looking to find out what depression is. We know what depression is, we're kind of more just seeking community...”

“A lot of the time young people don't go on social media to learn how to fix their mental health issue, they go there to learn how to like connect with other people their age.”

“If I'm feeling insecure, I might look up insecure and then you get to like repost videos and you can just like express how you feel and like, look at the comments and see other people feeling that way.”

“For me, being able to hear the lived experience of other people (especially the recovery journeys of other people) has been really helpful when improving my mental health.”

There were many perceived benefits to social media compared with other sources of mental health support. These included:

Anonymity or reduced visibility.

Posting a comment was seen as less visible, while scrolling comments for similar questions was completely anonymous. This linked to fear of feeling judged by more formal supports or in-person supports.

"I feel like social media is easier to ask questions to, and get advice from because I feel like I won't get judged for what I search."

"If you go on kids helpline or headspace to get that support, you need to make a call or text them. Whereas on social media it's anonymous."

"there are options you can make a whole new name and a whole different like persona of yourself."

"Over the phone if I'm like talking to someone, deep down inside I'll feel like they're judging me."

That social media provides tailored feedback, while government sources are more generic. For example, by posting questions in the comments section, or using a search feature to find content posted by others which captures their same question. This linked to the intersectionality of social media as a support compared to formal services which were considered to lack an intersectional lens.

"And because in like an intersectional way like mental health is needed to be talked about and it's not happening in person. So it's happening online."

Social media provides instant information compared with formal services

"But if I'm like, I'm like if I'm feeling like distressed or something and I want like an answer immediately and I call kids helpline or like message them or something I don't wanna be left on hold to get my answer, like on social media I can get my answer to whatever I'm I want to know immediately."

"Agree 100% agree with [participant's] point about not wanting to text or call someone. Social media is instant and easy."

Social media enables interactions with young people rather than adults, and people with shared experiences.

"Something that would make it more scarier for young people to access support from KidsHelpline or headspace and etc. is that they'd have to connect with adults and they'd have the fear that adults don't have the same experiences as them because they're from the previous generation and it can be more scarier. They might think of that adults might judge them, whereas on social media there's people our age and we can connect with them and have more first hand experience."

"I think it is also because you can find a lot of people with similar experiences to you and people who can really understand mental health issues better (especially other young people) on social media, which makes it much easier."

Government communication with young people

There was an undertone that young people don't generally engage with online government resources or services in relation to their mental health, suggesting that communicating with young people about mental health may be a challenge. Examples of government sources and services referred to included Headspace and KidsHelpline.

"I personally only look at things from the department of health when I am worried about my physical health and I'm looking up my symptoms."

Reasons for not engaging with government based digital resources largely centred on the comparative benefits offered by social media. Government information sources were considered generic and not tailored to their personal situation. Government digital services were not seen to offer the same benefits as social media, such as anonymity, immediate access to information, information tailored to personal experience, and the ability to offer advice that was intersectional (meaning they permitted exploration of multiple layers of marginalisation within one individual).

"Um, I think a very important point to note is that it's not so much like finding information about mental health because young people already know a lot about mental health. It's not so much that we're looking to find out what depression is. We know what depression is, we're kind of more just seeking community..."

"I think just the general consensus on my own personal opinion is just that the government is seen as such a faceless entity that it's not really able to give that personalised advice, even through those organisations like KidsHelpline."

"I think the benefits of social media for connecting about mental health is that you can connect to people who know your situation and that you can connect to people who relate to your situation. And I think that that's really where any services that the government provides aren't able to do that same sort of thing."

Participants were asked via Menti poll the best way for government and other organisations to communicate with young people. The following responses were obtained. Participants were permitted multiple answers. One participant also suggested communication with young people via schools.

"If the government or a certain group is trying to communicate with a particular age group they can always encourage schools both public and private to take initiative and inform their students."



3. Other Findings

- Do you have any additional thoughts or comments?
- Are there any questions we haven't asked you today that we should have?
- What do you think is the most important message we can share with the government and other organisations about social media and mental health and how to support people?
- What do you think is the most important action for government, stakeholders and adults to take to support young people in relation to the social media age restrictions?

Openness to in-person or telephone mental health supports

There was some recognition that non-digital supports and connections had value, but that young people were not confident in engaging in this way, especially in the wake of COVID-19. Communicating outside of social media was considered challenging. It appeared that young people felt dependent on social media for connecting and communicating about mental health.

"Um, I just think that generally, as a society users started to rely more on social media, whether that be for entertainment or in what we're talking about at the moment...it's because of that reliance [we're] sort of scared to change a little bit because there are spaces like KidsHelpline and Headspace that have these opportunities for us to learn, but just because they're not widely known I think people are like ohh, where am I gonna go? But we've just gotta take a step back and realise that there are other options out there that could be anonymous with different tech. I guess I think it's just that, yeah, we've just got to remember that there's always multiple options for something. It's not always on social media."

"I believe social media is just really easy to ask a question...without having a like an actual conversation... no one's brave enough to say it in like a real conversation. So it's just it's really accessible."

"I guess for like mental health and like talking being open about having mental health and like the difference between online spaces and in reality is very, very different. It's so easy to confess how you're feeling and find community online and so much harder to express how you're feeling and even just acknowledging that mental illness exists at all."

"I think like what I'm trying to say is human connection I feel is needed to really deeply learn and understand that, so maybe social media doesn't give that."

"social media it also feels like less of a 'burden' on the other person due to that layer of disconnection and separation... And the implied consent: it's easier to leave an online conversation if you're uncomfortable than a physical conversation."

Questions from young people

There was some confusion about how the ban would be enforced, and whether they will have to provide personal information. There were also questions about whether the ban will be retrospective i.e. young people under 16 with existing accounts.

"How is the government going to monitor like the ages of the people using like the social media platforms?"

"Would we have to like give them like some kind of idea or something that has our age on it? Like do I have to send them like my passport or something?... like how am I meant to prove my age?"

"Is the government gonna, like, make us give some sort of personal information to social media companies that ensure that we're over 16?"

Social media education in schools

At the end of the session, we asked participants about their experiences in school about education about social media and mental health.

"In year 8 we did have an assessment and we could choose and research whether we believed the use of social media is primarily positive and negative and i did feel that this assignment was effective."

"In my school they did talk about it but all of the examples and stuff they used were kind of irrelevant to me so i felt kind of disconnected from what they tried to teach me."

"In school, we only discussed support services in school and external resources but we never really talked about mental health in relation to social media."

"Also these times that people come to my school to talk about personal development it is never really taken seriously and this is when those who actually are interested will access social media for more of an understanding."

Conclusion

Young participants in this focus group have provided essential information on the value of uses of social media to young people in terms of their mental health, sense of community, sense of belonging and connectedness, and their broader wellbeing. They have also provided insights into how social media age restriction could affect young people and the kinds of supports that might aid in the transition.

Key messages arising from this focus group include:

- Social media is heavily relied upon to connect with people with shared experiences and cultivate a sense of community in relation to mental health and broader wellbeing.
- Young people generally feel uncomfortable engaging outside of digital media with formal and informal supports in relation to their mental health due to fear of feeling judged and being a “burden” on their support.
- There is a clear desire from young people for enhanced social media literacy (i.e. how to engage with social media in healthy ways, how to harness the benefits of social media, and how to mitigate potential harms of social media) with schools and alternative, regulated online platforms as suggested methods of achieving this.
- Young people tend not to engage with government resources in relation to their mental health for multiple reasons, including lack of anonymity, lack of immediacy in accessing material, non-tailored and non-intersectional resources, and fear of being judged.

This focus group suggests a need to support young people in cultivating healthy relationships and become confident engaging with both formal and informal supports outside of social media. It also suggests a need to educate and empower young people in utilising social media benefits and mitigating harms, potentially through school-based education in the setting of mental health education more broadly.

Lastly, it suggests a need for governments to partner with young people to better understand communication challenges and develop a more effective communication strategy about government mental health resources with young people.

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themselves and have
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own usage of social media**

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