

What Schools and Families Need to Know About the Social Media Age Ban

By Dr Justin Coulson

Australia's new social media minimum-age legislation has prompted strong reactions from parents and schools alike. Some families feel relieved; others are frustrated or unsure whether anything has really changed.

For parents of children aged **5–18**, this moment matters. Here's a clear, practical overview of what the ban means — and what families can do now.

What the Law Does — and Doesn't Do

The legislation restricts children under 16 from accessing major social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and Snapchat.

Key points for families:

- Responsibility sits with **platforms**, not parents
- The rollout was never expected to be instant or perfect
- This is **not** a ban on communication

Children can still text, call, message friends, and play games together. The aim is to reduce exposure to **algorithm-driven platforms** designed to maximise screen time by manipulating attention and emotion.

Why This Matters for Children and Teens

Most content on major platforms is no longer shared between people who know each other. Instead, children are exposed to endless short-form content from strangers, selected by algorithms designed to keep them scrolling.

For developing brains, this can contribute to:

- Increased anxiety and comparison
- Reduced focus and emotional regulation
- Sleep disruption and lower wellbeing

For younger children, this affects **play and brain development**. For adolescents, it is associated with **identity development, confidence, and mood**.

What We're Seeing So Far

Early outcomes are mixed — which was always expected.

Encouraging signs include fewer youth accounts on major platforms, calmer homes for some families, and a slow cultural shift where early access is becoming less “normal”.

Challenges remain. Some children are migrating to other platforms, bypassing restrictions, or being helped by adults to work around safeguards.

Children testing limits is normal. Adults undermining protections is not — and it weakens both wellbeing and trust.

Three Practical Things Parents Can Do Now

1. Explain the *Why*

Children engage in better ways when they understand the “why”. Rather than relying on “it’s the law,” explain — in age-appropriate ways — how platforms make money, why algorithms push outrage, violence, or reactionary content, and how this affects users.

2. Replace, Don’t Just Remove

Removing social media without replacing connection creates frustration. Helpful alternatives include phones that call and text but limit apps, parental controls (agreed to by everyone in healthy conversations), offline games, sport, hobbies and face-to-face time.

Connection is essential. Algorithms are not.

3. Model Healthy Digital Habits

Children learn more from what they see than what they’re told. Keep phones out of bedrooms, take breaks from social media yourself, and show that play, connection, and rest matter.

A play-based childhood needs play-based adults.

A Final Word for Families and Schools

This legislation is imperfect and still evolving. But something important has changed.

For the first time, **big tech must justify children’s presence on their platforms**, rather than parents having to justify their absence.

When families and schools work together — explaining, replacing and modelling — children are better protected and better prepared to navigate the digital world with confidence.

That’s progress worth building on.



Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters and grandfather to 1 granddaughter. Justin travels all around the country, speaking at schools to students, educators and parents about wellbeing and relationships. He is also the parenting expert and co-host of Channel Nine’s Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia’s #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families Podcast. Justin has written 10 books about families and parenting - with the latest about raising boys out this year! For further details visit happyfamilies.com.au.