

The Mental Health Crisis and Australia's Hopeful First Step

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Australia is the first country to ban social media for children under the age of 16. Hopefully, it will not be the last. In fact, if everything goes accordingly and the results are as successful for Australian adolescents as intended, Aussie teens will soon be (at least partially) free of the mental health disaster plaguing young people worldwide.

Young people have been experiencing a mental health crisis that conveniently coincides with the rise of social media. People have realized that no, it probably isn't just a coincidence that mental illness diagnoses, especially for depression and anxiety, have risen exponentially among young people since the introduction and widespread use of social media. According to the CDC, suicide rates among young people aged 10-24 have increased from 6.8 deaths per 100,000 in 2007 to 11 in 2021—an alarming statistic that follows the normalization of social media use following its introduction in the early 2000s with platforms like MySpace and Facebook.

For the past two decades, children and adolescents have practically had free reign over any platform; with a simple lie about birthdate, anyone of any age can access nearly any publicly available website or app. The lack of effective restrictions has allowed young people to be exposed to inappropriate, and often harmful, content online, in addition to posting and browsing through most social media platforms (officially) past the age of 13.

13 proved to be too young of an age for children to be on social media. Child exploitation, cyberbullying, unrealistic life standards, hijacked dopamine production, promotion of harmful mindsets and behaviors and distraction from real world experiences have left a generation of children born in the 2000s to be more depressed, anxious and self-conscious than their internet-free predecessors. While there are benefits to social media use, maturing alongside platforms like Instagram has proven to be more destructive to an adolescent's perception of themselves and their worldview than advantageous. The adverse impacts of social media may be manageable for a fully grown individual with a mature outlook and self-image, but the strong correlations between social media and symptoms of mental illness cannot be brushed under the rug.

The Australian government's decision will come to fruition next year, but it isn't easy to foresee how effective this legislation will be. Regardless of how this will be implemented or if this plan will even be successful the first time around—concerns have been voiced about the lack of organization in this hasty move—more countries worldwide have identified the problem and are planning to enact similar laws. According to ABC, Norway and France already have plans underway to prevent children under 15 from either having a social media presence or owning a smartphone. This is hopeful news: lawmakers are recognizing the negative impact of social media on undeveloped brains and are now taking action, preventing future generations from experiencing the mental health crisis affecting the youth of today.

Of course, this doesn't mean that social media will be eradicated; after reaching the approved age, young people will once again have the opportunity to connect with like-minded communities on these platforms and even benefit from their use. This time, the hope is that these users will be mature enough to handle the consequences of social media and not develop their worldviews through the content they consume and post online.

Unsurprisingly, according to The Guardian, this move has been critiqued by unsettled tech companies. Australian teens may comprise only a small fraction of social media users, but if more countries follow suit, these companies face an uncertain future. I'm sure that some young people will oppose this new legislation and claim that their parents know them better than the government does; however, the vice-president of global affairs at Meta, Nick Clegg, has said himself that parental controls on Facebook and Instagram are not being used by parents. Parents are, for the most part, ignorant of the content their children consume online and often give their children free reign over the internet. To ensure that all young people are safe, it takes more than just one knowledgeable parent. To avoid mental health issues and societal consequences of social media, updated legislation from governors is absolutely necessary. As the impacted youth continues to grow into adulthood, we can anticipate more potentially life-saving legislation being passed, because the negative impact of social media is becoming increasingly difficult to hide as harmed children are growing into disillusioned adults.

Sources: ABC, CDC and The Guardian