

Australia's social media ban – is it working?

Research briefing – April 2026

In March 2026, Molly Rose Foundation conducted the first large-scale polling of Australians aged 12–15 on the country's social media ban. Our findings show:

- There are significant questions about the effectiveness of Australia's social media ban. Three fifths (61%) of 12–15 year-olds who previously held accounts on restricted platforms continue to have access to one or more active accounts;
- More than half of 12–15 year-olds who previously used TikTok, YouTube and Instagram remain able to use accounts on these platforms;
- 70% of children still using restricted sites say that it was 'easy' to circumvent the ban. In most cases, social media platforms have failed to detect or seek to remove under 16s accounts;
- Over half (51%) of children who used restricted platforms prior to the ban coming into force say it has made no difference to their online safety. One-in-seven (14%) now feel less safe;
- In the early months of the ban, children report mixed impacts on their wellbeing, with some indications it has reduced their overall time spent online.

Methodology

Molly Rose Foundation has conducted the first large-scale polling of young Australians aged 12–15 on the country's social media ban. Our aim is to inform discussions on whether to follow suit in the UK and Europe.

YouthInsight, Australia's largest online youth panel, surveyed 1,050 Australians aged 12–15. Fieldwork was undertaken between March 12th and 31st and conducted online.

Results

1. A clear majority of Australian 12–15 year-olds are still using social media platforms covered by the ban

Four months after Australia's social media ban took effect, over three-fifths of 12–15 year-olds (61%) who previously had accounts on platforms covered by the ban still have access to at least one active account. This equates to over half (54%) of all children aged 12–15.

More than half of children who previously had TikTok, YouTube and Instagram accounts still remain able to use accounts on these platforms. While a significant proportion of accounts have been deactivated, 53% of previous TikTok users, 53% of YouTube users and 52% of Instagram users are still able to access an account on these platforms.

A small proportion of children have opened accounts on new restricted platforms since the ban came into force. Given the broad questions about the effectiveness of the ban, this churn is unsurprising and suggests that the ban has failed to prevent new account openings.¹

These findings broadly align with a survey of parents conducted by Australia's eSafety Commissioner, published in March 2026. This survey also found that a majority of under 16s retained access to social media accounts.²

Table 1: Proportion of Australian 12–15 year-olds with accounts on restricted platforms before and after the ban came into force.

	Proportion of children with accounts before the ban	Proportion of children with active accounts in March 2026	Proportion of previous user base with active accounts
YouTube	66%	35%	53%
TikTok	55%	29%	53%
Instagram	49%	25%	52%
Snapchat	49%	23%	47%
Facebook	43%	23%	53%
X	18%	7%	41%
Reddit	13%	6%	49%
Twitch	12%	6%	47%
Threads	10%	4%	45%
Kick	3%	1%	36%

1 Our figures reflect this churn.

2 eSafety Commissioner (2026) Social Media Minimum Age: Compliance update

2. Most of those still using social media sites covered by the ban had no need to circumvent restrictions

Most children who were still using restricted platforms had not needed to find workarounds – this is because platforms had failed to identify and remove their accounts in the first place.

Among children who remained able to use accounts on restricted platforms, a significant majority (70%) said it had been ‘easy’ to circumvent the ban. Just under half (46%) had found it ‘very easy’.

More than three-fifths of children who continued to use YouTube (64%), Snapchat (61%), Instagram (60%) and TikTok (60%) said that that ‘no action’ had been taken by the platform to remove or deactivate an account they had before restrictions were introduced.

Around a quarter of children still using each restricted platform had been successfully able to get around an age check on a pre-existing account. This includes 25% of TikTok users, 24% of those still using Snapchat, and 23% of those using YouTube.

Smaller proportions had used proactive measures to circumvent restrictions. For each platform, between 3% and 13% had asked a friend or family member to set up a new account for them.

For each platform, around one in twenty children were using a VPN to access an account.

Table 2: How children aged 12–15 had retained access to accounts on social media sites covered by the restrictions

	Children with active accounts on YouTube	Children with active accounts on TikTok	Children with active accounts on Instagram	Children with active accounts on Snapchat
No action taken to remove or deactivate a pre-existing account	64%	60%	60%	61%
Got around age checks to keep using a pre-existing account	23%	25%	22%	24%
Used a workaround to set up a new account as an over-16	10%	14%	14%	11%
Had a friend or family member set up a new account as an over-16	10%	8%	7%	7%
Use a VPN to access an account	4%	5%	4%	4%
Something else	4%	1%	1%	2%

Note: As children may have multiple active accounts on a single platform, they were able to select all applicable options. Totals may exceed 100%.

3. Most children do not feel that the ban has improved how safe they feel online

Among 12–15 year-olds who had accounts on restricted platforms prior to the ban coming into force, there is a mixed picture about whether the ban has made them feel any safer.

While three-in-ten of these children (31%) do feel safer, **half (51%) said that the ban had not changed how safe they felt online. One in seven (14%) of these children said they now felt less safe online than before the social media restrictions came into force.**

Among children who had wholly lost access to their accounts on restricted platforms, perceptions of how their safety had changed remained similarly mixed.

Two-fifths (42%) did feel safer, but an identical proportion felt that the restrictions had made no difference to their safety online.

One-in-eight children (12%) felt less safe after having their social media accounts removed. This may reflect a range of factors, including their displacement to smaller or more poorly moderated platforms, their experiences on sites not covered by the ban, or a perception that online platforms have pivoted from safety towards prioritising access restrictions.

4. Children are using gaming, messaging and other social media platforms more, but some are spending less time online

Our data suggests that the social media ban has led to some early changes in children's online behaviour.

Substantial proportions of 12–15 year-olds who used restricted platforms prior to the ban coming into force report that they are using messaging apps (39%) and gaming platforms (43%) more since restrictions were introduced.

Around one in five of these children (21%) have started to more frequently use social media platforms which have not faced restrictions. A smaller proportion of children (16%) have opened accounts on platforms they hadn't previously used.

There are early indications that the social media ban is having some early positive impact on time spent online. Half (50%) of children who used restricted platforms prior to the ban coming into force said they now spent less time online, although 37% felt the time they spent on social media had not changed.

Experience from other countries suggests that these metrics will need to be monitored closely over time. In 2011, South Korea responded to concerns about gaming addiction by introducing a ban on online gaming for children between midnight and 6am. Although the ban initially resulted in a reduction in time spent online, these improvements steadily eroded and within 4 years internet use had increased.³ South Korea's government subsequently discontinued the policy, with evaluations finding 'practically insignificant effects' on time spent online, academic performance and adolescent sleep time.⁴ Studies showed that sleep time increased by an average of only 1.5 minutes per child, with internet addiction declining by only 0.7 percentage points.⁵

3 Lee, C (2017) Ex post valuation of illegalising juvenile online gaming after midnight: a case of shutdown policy in South Korea. *Telematics and Informatics*, 34(8)

4 Choi, J et al (2018) Effect of the online game shutdown policy on Internet use, Internet addiction, and sleeping hours in Korean adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 62(5)

5 Lee, C (2017), see above.

5. The ban is not having a clear positive or negative impact on children's wellbeing

As it stands, children believe that new restrictions are having neither a clear positive or negative impact on their wellbeing.

When asked about the overall impact of the ban on their lives, around two-fifths (42%) of 12–15 year-olds who used restricted platforms prior to the ban coming into force felt it had 'not had any impact'. Around a third felt it had a somewhat or very negative impact (32%). One in five young of these children (22%) felt the ban had a somewhat or very positive impact.

Those who had lost access to all their accounts on restricted platforms also reported a mixed range of experiences. One-third (34%) said the loss had resulted in a negative impact on their life, while similar proportions claimed there was a positive impact (33%), or no impact at all (30%).

When asked about the impact of the ban on their mental health and wellbeing specifically, there was a similarly mixed picture. Of those who used restricted platforms prior to the ban coming into force, 45% felt it had had no impact on their mental health and wellbeing, a fifth reported a negative impact (19%), but around one third (33%) reported a positive impact.

Among those who had wholly lost access to accounts on restricted platforms, around 45% of children reported positive impacts on certain areas of their life, including on their mental health and wellbeing and academic performance. These children also reported a net negative impact on their understanding of news and current events.

Looking forward, negative outcomes on children will need to be studied especially closely, particularly for vulnerable groups - including neurodivergent children, children with mental health difficulties and LGBTQ children.

Table 3: Perspectives on the impact of restrictions by children who used social media before the ban, and among children who have lost access to all their accounts.

	12–15 year-olds who used restricted platforms prior to the ban coming into force			12–15 year-olds who had lost access to all accounts on restricted platforms after the ban		
	Negative impact	No impact	Positive impact	Negative impact	No impact	Positive impact
My mental health and wellbeing	19%	45%	33%	19%	33%	46%
My performance at school or in training	12%	50%	34%	8%	42%	47%
How connected I feel to friends and family	26%	39%	32%	31%	24%	43%
My understanding of what's going on in the world	29%	42%	26%	34%	35%	29%
My sleep	12%	48%	38%	10%	37%	51%

Note: 'Positive' and 'negative' columns include those who reported either a 'somewhat' or 'very' positive or negative impact. The table does not include those who chose 'not sure' or 'prefer not to say'.

Analysis and implications

Last month, Australia's e-safety Commissioner told the UK Parliament that Australia's social media ban had been 'very successful in its early days.'⁶ This research, the first large-scale survey of Australian 12–15 year-olds, suggests a very different picture.

Proponents of a ban in the UK have argued that a ban is necessary to deliver immediate and swift improvements to children's safety. Early data from Australia suggests that it will deliver neither:

- a majority of children who previously used social media platforms covered by the ban remain able to do so;
- two-thirds of children who used restricted platforms prior to the ban coming into force report it has had no impact on their safety (or has actively made it worse), and;
- despite this being a signature policy of the Australian Government, malign compliance from the tech firms means that social media platforms have largely failed to detect and remove accounts in the first place.

This data suggests that, at least in the medium term, an Australia-style ban is unlikely to deliver the improvements in safety that parents and children deserve and demand. At worst, the Australian ban risks giving parents a false sense of safety, with children still freely able to use social media platforms, but with tech firms let off the hook in terms of their safety-by-design and safeguarding responsibilities.

Given the substantial questions raised by this research, it would be deeply imprudent for the UK or other countries to follow suit with social media bans at this point. The question marks about the efficacy and implementation of Australia's ban are significant and unresolved.

Instead, we recommend that the Prime Minister makes **a commitment to a new Online Safety Act in the Kings Speech, building on the Government's ongoing consultation to end addictive and harmful design features.** This must make provisions for a systemic Duty of Care, reset regulatory incentives in favour of harm reduction, and significantly strengthen the regulatory regime so that it is better targeted to the size and cash-rich position of the largest companies in the world.

There is palpably no basis to rush into a social media ban at this early stage. The UK and other countries should instead continue to closely follow the lessons from Australia – including the outcomes from long-term, systematic evaluations and academic reviews.

This will enable the efficacy of regulatory measures to be determined, and where early data suggests that a ban may produce positive effects if it is capable of being scaled effectively, for the harm-benefit ratio to be properly assessed against other interventions, including compared to strengthened regulation.

Regulation remains the most powerful tool available to tackle the underlying business models and commercial incentives that are the root causes of preventable harm. Got right, it can protect children on social media, gaming services and on AI.

With the right political will, fixing and strengthening the Online Safety Act can deliver the quickest, most effective and decisive route to protect children from preventable harm.

6 Evidence to the Commons Science, Innovation and Technology Select Committee, 11th March 2026

For further briefing and a conversation about how Molly Rose Foundation can support your work please contact Rowan Ferguson at r.ferguson@mollyrosefoundation.org

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