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**The Royal Australasian College of
Physicians' submission**

**Education and Workforce Select
Committee's Inquiry into the harm young
New Zealanders encounter online, and the
roles the Government, business, and society
should play in addressing those harms**

Hōngongoi | July 2025

Introduction

The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP) welcomes the opportunity to submit feedback to the Education and Workforce Committee's Inquiry into the harm young New Zealanders encounter online, and the roles that Government, business, and society should play in addressing those harms. We also welcome the opportunity of engaging further with the committee on these issues.

The RACP works across more than 40 medical specialties to educate, innovate and advocate for excellence in health and medical care. Working with our senior members, the RACP trains the next generation of specialists, while playing a lead role in developing world best practice models of care. We also draw on the skills of our members, to develop policies that promote a healthier society. By working together, our members advance the interest of our profession, our patients and the broader community.

Key Comments

In partnership with parents/whanau/carers and teachers, healthcare professionals play an important role as advocates for children and young people. RACP physicians and trainees, particularly paediatricians and paediatric trainees, have considerable expertise and experience in caring for children and young people, who express both the positive and negative impacts of online activity. These physicians and trainees are well-placed to identify and advise on appropriate responses to the challenges that online activity presents for the health and wellbeing of children and young people.

The RACP advocates for a public health approach to regulating children/tamariki and young people/rangatahi's online activity. A public health approach supports the implementation of sensible and appropriate interventions that prioritise the health and wellbeing of children and young people. It balances this with the importance of young people not being deprived of the benefits that social media can provide, such as communication with loved ones, a sense of belonging, and educational opportunities.

Young people should be engaged and consulted on any proposed bans or restrictions of their social media use in recognition of their agency and right to participate in the decisions that impact them¹.

The RACP is developing a binational position statement on social media (due for publication August 2025) which includes recommendations for the Aotearoa New Zealand and Australian Governments and social media platforms. The RACP's current recommendations include:

1. Adopt a **public health approach** to the regulation of access and use of social media by children/tamariki and young people/rangatahi.
2. Explore and implement **appropriate additional interventions** to protect children/tamariki and young people/rangatahi who are permitted to access and use social media.
3. Implement **effective legislation** that requires social media platforms to:
 - a. **enforce age restrictions** on access to social media for children/tamariki under the age of 16 years,

¹ Holly L, Demaio S, and Kickbusch I (2024). Public Health Interventions to Address Digital Determinants of Children's Health and Wellbeing. The Lancet Public Health. Available from: [Public health interventions to address digital determinants of children's health and wellbeing - The Lancet Public Health](#)

- b. **be accountable** for maintaining safer online environments for children/tamariki and young people/rangatahi.
- 4. Ensure there is **national consistency** in relation to the access and use of social media by children/tamariki and young people/rangatahi.
- 5. Preserve and support:
 - a. mechanisms to ensure that young people/rangatahi can **maintain their support networks and access to reliable sources of information**,
 - b. the development of **appropriate, alternative spaces** to provide access to educational and creative resources, connect vulnerable youth and provide avenues for help-seeking.
- 6. Engage, consult and listen to the **voices of children/tamariki and young people/rangatahi** in relation to the proposed ban.
- 7. Invest in measures to **improve social media literacy** among children/tamariki and young people/rangatahi, to equip children/tamariki with the skills to safely navigate online environments.
- 8. Provide **education and support** to empower children/tamariki, young people/rangatahi and their families to make social media use as safe and healthy as possible.
- 9. Social media platforms to implement **appropriate and effective restrictions** to ensure reasonable limitations on children/tamariki and young people/rangatahi's use of social media, such as age verification, time limits, and time-of-day based access limitations.
- 10. Social media platforms to implement **safety mechanisms** to create a safer online environment that minimises the harms of social media and its impact on children/tamariki and young people/rangatahi, for example, restricting certain features or reforming algorithms to be age appropriate for young people/rangatahi.

Benefits of online activity

Social media can offer positive experiences for children and young people. It can be an important tool for them to seek information, share knowledge, and learn collaboratively with their peers, which has the potential to improve educational engagement and learning outcomes.²

It can also be a creativity outlet, allowing access to new skills, experiences, and learnings from around the world, as well as sharing from individuals to online spaces. Access to educational content can support a child's knowledge and understanding of the world, including by developing their critical thinking and analysis skills.³ While misinformation on social media presents a very

² Cheong Li, K and Tak-Ming Wong, B (2020). Social Media in Higher Education: A Review of Their Uses, Benefits and Limitations. Technology in Education: Innovations for Online Teaching and Learning. Available from: [Social Media in Higher Education: A Review of Their Uses, Benefits and Limitations | SpringerLink](#)

³ NSW Government. Using social media safely. (2024) Available from: [Using social media safely | NSW Government](#)

significant risk to young people,⁴ social media can also be a key mechanism to access diverse perspectives⁵ and to counter misinformation that young people have encountered.

Social media can be a positive medium to foster connection and a sense of belonging in children and young people, and to communicate with friends and family.⁶ This can be particularly important if they live apart from family or friends, live in regional, rural and remote areas, are expatriates, are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and are neurodiverse.

Social media is also important for children and young people who struggle to find a sense of belonging at their school or within their immediate friend/social circle, as they may instead find a sense of community with others online who share their identity, abilities and/or interests.⁷

Social media can also be a source of help and support. Young people who are struggling with mental health challenges frequently rely on online resources to make sense of their experiences, while those with severe suicidal ideation are more likely to seek help online than in-person.⁸

Removing young people's access to social media can involve negative impacts and remove a vital tool for connection and belonging.⁹ It can also impede young people's pathways for help-seeking if they are struggling with mental health challenges or suicidal ideation. A survey of young people in Aotearoa New Zealand showed the benefits of online access to mental health support to be ease of access, anonymity and a non-threatening starting point.¹⁰

Harms of online activity

Studies on social media usage show compelling indications that unrestrained social media use by children and young people has negative correlations with reduced cognitive, emotional, and social wellbeing.¹¹

Social media platforms can expose children and young people to inappropriate and illegal content, including pornographic material, gambling and alcohol advertising, vaping and cigarette promotion, unhealthy food and beverage marketing, dangerous viral challenges that have resulted in the deaths of children and young people around the world, and more.¹²

⁴ Chung, M and Wihbey, J (2024). The Algorithmic Knowledge Gap within and between Countries: Implications for Combatting Misinformation. Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review. Available from: [The algorithmic knowledge gap within and between countries: Implications for combatting misinformation | HKS Misinformation Review](#)

⁵ Weir, K (2023). Social Media Brings Benefits and Risks to Teens. Psychology Can Help Identify a Path Forward. American Psychological Association. Available from: [Social media brings benefits and risks to teens. Psychology can help identify a path forward](#)

⁶ Allen, KA, Ryan, T, Gray, D, McInerney, DM and Water, L (2014). Social Media Use and Social Connectedness in Adolescents: The Positives and Potential Pitfalls. Available from: [Social Media Use and Social Connectedness in Adolescents: The Positives and the Potential Pitfalls](#)

⁷ Uhls, YT, Ellison, NB and Subrahmanyam, K (2017). Benefits and Costs of Social Media in Adolescence. Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory (2023). Available from: [Social Media Has Both Positive and Negative Impacts on Children and Adolescents - Social Media and Youth Mental Health - NCBI Bookshelf](#)

⁸ Christensen, H, Slade, A and Whitton, A (2024). Social Media: The Root Cause of Rising Youth Self-Harm or the Convenient Scapegoat? Available from: [Social media: the root cause of rising youth self-harm or a convenient scapegoat?](#)

⁹ Centre for Digital Wellbeing (2021). The Impacts of Social Media in Australia: Research Brief. Available from: [Research-Brief-Impacts-of-Social-Media-in-Australia.pdf](#)

¹⁰ Susan MGarrett, Jo Hilder, Rachel Tester, et al (2024). Young People Talk About Digital Support for Mental Health: An Online Survey of 15 – 30 Year Olds in New Zealand. Available from: [Young People Talk About Digital Support for Mental Health: An Online Survey of 15–30-Year Olds in New Zealand - Garrett - 2024 - Health Expectations - Wiley Online Library](#)

¹¹ Queensland Health. Position Statement: Social Media and the Mental Health and Wellbeing of Young Queenslanders (2024). Available from: [Position Statement: Social Media and the Mental Health and Wellbeing of Young Queenslanders](#)

¹² eSafety Commissioner, "Inappropriate content: factsheet." Available from: [Inappropriate content: factsheet | eSafety Commissioner](#)
London School of Economics, "Young people online: Encounters with inappropriate content" (23 May 2017). Available from: [Young people online: Encounters with inappropriate content – Parenting for a Digital Future](#)

Exposure to aggressive, violent, misogynistic and racist content can normalise unhealthy behaviours and beliefs.¹³ Frequent social media use and social media addiction can increase irritability and aggression,¹⁴ with online social comparisons fuelling feelings of envy and frustration. This can lead to behavioural changes online, where anonymity can lead to reduced accountability and encourage hostility and cyberbullying,¹⁵ as well as behavioural changes in the offline world.

Prevention by education is an important tool to counteract the harms of social media and the harmful content available on social media platforms. The Government must ensure that children, young people, parents, grandparents, whanau and carers are educated about the importance of prevention, the identification of risk factors, possible interventions, and ways to access support for young people online.

Increasing the digital literacy and health literacy of young people and their support networks is a crucial step in preventing harm, allowing safe conversations between carers and young people and for adults to model healthy social media behaviours and limits.

Public health approach to the regulation of access and use of social media

A public health approach involves the Government taking reasonable and appropriate interventions to ensure that young people and children are protected from online harm. These interventions should include legal measures to ensure that social media platforms enforce reasonable restrictions and limitations on children and young people's use of their platforms, including by enforcing new age restrictions for users under the age of 16 years. It should also include mechanisms for social media platforms to ensure that their online environments are safe.

Measures to regulate social media platforms should be accompanied by initiatives to combat some of the problems exacerbated by social media, such as cyberbullying, to protect children and youth from mental health harm and suicidality. Initiatives to combat cyberbullying, including support lines, cyber safety tools, parent and youth support programs, and mental health first aid training are commendable and should be supported by the Government.

It is crucial for the Government to support educational opportunities for children and young people to develop greater media literacy and health literacy skills. This will promote safer engagement with social media by allowing children and young people to navigate online environments in a way that maximises the benefits of social media and minimise the negative experiences once they are able to access the platforms at the age of 16 years, or beforehand if young people manage to circumvent the ban. Online safety education should be delivered in a way that engages children and young people.

Next steps

The RACP calls for the Government to ensure that social media platforms are accountable for creating safer online environments for children and young people, as well as enabling safer online environments into adulthood.

¹³ Li, J (2023). The Impact of Media Violence on Child and Adolescent Aggression. *Journal of Education Humanities and Social Sciences* 18, 70 – 76. DOI: 10.54097/ehss.v18i.10956

¹⁴ Rustamov, E, Aliyeva, M, Nahmatova, U, et al (2023). Aggression Mediates Relationships between Social Media Addiction and Adolescents Wellbeing. *The Open Psychology Journal* 16. DOI: 10.2174/0118743501251575230925074655

¹⁵ Bozzola E et al. The Use of Social Media in Children and Adolescents: Scoping Review on the Potential Risks. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2022 Aug 12;19(16):9960.

The RACP thanks the Education and Workforce Select Committee for the opportunity to provide feedback on this inquiry.

To discuss this submission further, please contact Tanya Allen, Senior Policy & Advocacy Officer, of the Aotearoa NZ Policy and Advocacy Unit at policy@racp.org.nz.

Nāku noa, nā

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Hamish McCay', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Dr Hamish McCay FRACP
President, Aotearoa NZ
The Royal Australasian College of Physicians