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Online Harms and the Best Interests of the Child

1. Introduction

In December 2025 Australia banned children below the age of sixteen from social media accounts. Malaysia[1] followed suit, while Portugal, Spain and France announced restrictions on social media, and the UK is considering such a ban. The matter is the subject of much discussion among parents, schools, tech companies, policymakers and children themselves. Would a social media ban for children under the age of 16 in South Africa be the best solution for protecting our children? Would it be in the 'best interests of the child'?

This paper outlines the broad issues involved. The CPLO will be publishing further papers in the new year focusing on different aspects of the discussion.[2]

2. The Internet and Social Media

The internet is analogous to Alice in Wonderland going down the rabbit hole and not being sure where it will lead. The internet contains almost limitless and ever-growing possible destinations. While it provides opportunities for learning, discovery, entertainment and human connection, it reflects society and is thus also an avenue to much darker sites of discovery and exploitative connection. It is a complicated web. It can be used by predators as a discovery platform to identify and abuse vulnerable children; it is a gateway to pornography and child sex abuse materials; and it is a site of cyberbullying and engagement with unknown adults.

Social media is any application which allows a discussion over the platform of the internet. It involves sharing, connecting, hash tagging, downloading and uploading. The platforms include Facebook, YouTube, Pinterest, X, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, Snapchat, Flickr, BBM and WeChat as well as 600 000 other websites and applications. Engagement on these platforms leaves a permanent digital footprint, and activities on these sites are highly addictive.

3. Digital Natives

The children of today are digital natives. A digital native is a person who has been born in the digital age and who has interacted with digital technology from a young age. Children's lives are forever connected with digital technology, and healthy engagement with such technology is necessary. Generation Z, those born between 1997 and 2012, refers to adolescents and young adults who hit puberty around the rise of smartphones and social media in the early 2010s. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt points out that "Gen Z became the first generation in history to go through puberty with a portal in their pockets that called them away from the people nearby and into an alternative universe that was exciting, addictive, unstable, and unsuitable for children and adolescents."[3]

In his book *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness,*[4] Haidt argues that smartphones, social media, and helicopter parenting have led to a decline in young people's mental health, resulting in anxiety, depression, and self-harm.[5] This is borne out by studies by the American Psychological Association which found that Gen Z adults and younger millennials report some of the highest rates of overwhelming stress and mental health challenges compared to previous generations.[6]

4. The Ubiquity of Screens

There are screens everywhere. The television screen was first. While children's time spent watching TV could be supervised relatively easily, there were concerns that it was used as a

babysitter, that children's content was sometimes inappropriate, and that some cartoons were unnecessarily violent. These concerns were amplified with the emergence of computer games and access to the internet. The advent of the smart phone has meant that users have a portable screen that can be accessed anytime and anywhere. Children are surrounded by screens and, consequently, much of their engagement with the world is focused on screens.

5. Time Spent on Social Media

South Africans manage an average of nearly eight social media platforms per user, with top platforms including WhatsApp (93.8 per cent), Facebook (88.6 per cent), TikTok (76.9 per cent), and Instagram (71.4 per cent).[7] The average amount of time spent on social media daily in South Africa is 3 hours and 36 minutes. This is the second highest amount in the world.[8] South African children and teens average between 3.2 and 8.5+ hours of total daily screen time, with a Stellenbosch University study showing that teens spend an average of 197 minutes (about 3.2 hours) specifically on smartphones daily, while broader reports indicate general adolescent screen and media use can reach 5.5 to over 9 hours a day. [9] Children's online behaviour is mirroring that of their parents.

The amount of time spent on social media by both adults and children detracts from real engagement with each other. There is less time spent on imaginative and free play, reading and hobbies, as well outdoor and sporting activities. Research highlighted by local health groups and platforms like News24[10] and Absolute Mama[11] point out that heavy screen and social media consumption strongly correlates with elevated anxiety, sleep disruption, and reduced academic performance due to poorer concentration and constant social media notifications. It also contributes to social withdrawal and isolation as the digital interactions replace face to face interactions. The development of important social skills is undermined. Social media provides instant gratification and anticipation which is highly addictive. Furthermore, there are physical health consequences with higher rates of obesity, headaches, eye strain and poor posture. Damaging messaging, such as those promoting eating disorders, takes place in the digital world. Particularly distressing is cyberbullying, which leaves a permanent and damaging impact.

6. A Smartphone-Free Childhood

Many child rights activists advocate that children should be kept off major social media platforms and infinite-feed apps until the age of 16, when they have passed through the most vulnerable early stages of puberty. Instead, children can be provided with basic phones that only handle calls and text messages without an internet browser or app store. This would give children more independence, free play, and responsibility in the real world. Haidt argues that "children need more unsupervised, real-world adventures, outdoor play, and everyday responsibilities to build genuine confidence and social skills".[12] Research shows that just 60 minutes of active, imaginative play per day boosts children's emotional well-being, resilience, and social skills.[13]

Commenting on Haidt's work, Bill Gates wrote that "the irony is that parents these days are overprotective in the physical world and strangely hands-off in the digital one, letting kids live life online largely without supervision".[14] Psychiatrist Professor Renata Schoeman has recommended strict, balanced boundaries for children's device usage focusing on age-appropriate time limits, parental role-modelling, and establishing healthy digital habits at home. She emphasizes that adults are setting a problematic example in their own social media activity. She recommends several actionable household boundaries including the following:

- **Create device-free zones:** Implement strict screen-free moments, such as putting phones away during family dinners.
- **Overnight storage:** Collect and store digital devices in a central location overnight so they do not disrupt sleep.
- **Encourage offline activities:** Actively guide children towards physical and real-world social hobbies.
- **Focus on consistency:** Parents do not need to be perfect, but they must remain consistent with rules to send a powerful message.[15]

7. But We Live in a Digital World

In our increasingly digital world there is a debate regarding phone-free schools. The University of Stellenbosch study pointed out that teens are using tools like ChatGPT and Meta AI to

generate essays, orals, and artwork for school projects. The researchers say the challenge for parents, educators, and policymakers is to strike a balance between harnessing the educational benefits of smartphones and mitigating their potential negative effects. They call for nuanced approaches to regulation – approaches that consider individual differences, the diverse ways smartphones are used, and the rapidly evolving nature of digital technology.[16]

Drawing on insights from consultations with over 200 children across seven countries, UNICEF's latest report on *Children's Best Interests in Digital Policy and Practice* explores how children themselves think about their best interests online, the challenges they face, and their vision for a digital world that better supports their rights and well-being. The resulting report recommended that "overall, digital and AI literacy should begin early, following a gradual, developmentally appropriate approach to digital access. Children should receive age-appropriate education on digital opportunities, risks and ethics before they are given full access to devices, helping them to build confidence and competence from an early age".[17]

8. Conclusion

The intersection of social media regulation and children's rights is a difficult space to navigate. While screens are an undeniable part of modern life, children need balance and it is incumbent on parents, educators and policy makers to develop actionable solutions to help our children become mature and emotionally healthy adults. Child rights activists[18] emphasise that children want their parents to be more available and off their phones! The years of childhood are relatively short in the span of a lifetime but are very formative, and these years determine the path to adulthood. Presently social media is occupying too much of that precious time.

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[1] https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2026-06-01-malaysia-bars-under-16s-from-signing-up-for-social-media-/?utm

[2] On 6th August the CPLO, together with For the Voiceless, hosted a webinar which explored how the online world affects children, focusing on specific harms such as exposure to pornography and violence, online grooming, AI companions, cyberbullying, gambling, self-harm and suicide. It considered how online activity impacts developing brains, hearts and relationships, as well as possible solutions, including education, communication, regulation, litigation and bans. The webinar was address by Robyn Wolfson-Vorster, Tumelo Hlaka and Dr Joan Niekerk. This paper owes much to their presentations. A recording of the webinar can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yfj1FUsMc_Q

[3] https://hsph.harvard.edu/news/how-to-calm-the-anxious-generation/

[4] https://www.barlinsbooks.com/post/the-anxious-generation

[5] https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11221737/

[6] https://www.apa.org/topics/stress/generation-z-millennials-young-adults-worries

[7] https://www.meltwater.com/en/blog/2025-social-media-statistics-south-africa

[8] https://labourguide.co.za/general/the-time-we-spend-on-social-media

[9] https://www.su.ac.za/en/node/19823

[10] https://www.news24.com/drum/advice/parenting/digital-detox-urgently-needed-south-african-childrens-mental-health-at-risk-in-screen-obsessed-nation-20250618-0526

[11] https://absolutemama.co.za/2025/09/15/south-african-kids-spend-9-hours-a-day-on-screens-but-toys-are-fueling-a-screen-free-comeback/

[12] https://www.barlinsbooks.com/post/the-anxious-generation

[13] https://absolutemama.co.za/2025/09/15/south-african-kids-spend-9-hours-a-day-on-screens-but-toys-are-fueling-a-screen-free-comeback/

[14] https://www.gatesnotes.com/the-anxious-generation

[15] https://www.news24.com/drum/advice/parenting/digital-detox-urgently-needed-south-african-childrens-mental-health-at-risk-in-screen-obsessed-nation-20250618-0526

[16] https://www.su.ac.za/en/node/19823

[17] https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/media/12841/file/UNICEF-Innocenti-Children's-Best-Interests-Digital-Policy-Practice-report-2026.pd

[18] CPLO Webinar

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