

Australia is banning social media for kids under 16. How will it work?

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwyp9d3ddqyo>

From 10 December, social media companies will have to take "reasonable steps" to ensure that under-16s in Australia cannot set up accounts on their platforms and that existing accounts are deactivated or removed. The government says the ban - a world-first policy popular with many parents - is aimed at reducing the "pressures and risks" children can be exposed to on social media, which come from "design features that encourage them to spend more time on screens, while also serving up content that can harm their health and wellbeing".

A study commissioned by the government earlier this year said 96% of children aged 10-15 used social media and that seven out of 10 of them had been exposed to harmful content and behaviour. This behaviour ranged from misogynistic material to fight videos and content promoting eating disorders and suicide. One in seven also reported experiencing grooming-type behaviour from adults or older children, and more than half said they had been the victims of cyberbullying.

The Australian government has so far named ten platforms to be included in the ban: Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Threads, TikTok, X, YouTube, Reddit and streaming platforms Kick and Twitch.

It is also under pressure to expand the ban to online gaming. Fearing they may be targeted, gaming platforms such as Roblox and Discord have recently introduced age checks on some features in an apparent bid to ward off inclusion in the ban.

Children and parents will not be punished for infringing the ban - it is social media companies who are charged with enforcing it, and they face fines of up to \$49.5m (US\$32m, £25m) for serious or repeated breaches. The government says these companies must take "reasonable steps" to keep kids off their platforms, and use age assurance technologies - without specifying which ones.

Several possibilities have been raised, including the use of government IDs, face or voice recognition and age inference. The latter of these uses online information other than a date of birth - such as online behaviour or interactions - to estimate a person's age. The government is encouraging platforms to use multiple different methods. It has also said platforms cannot rely on users declaring their own age, or on parents vouching for their children.

Others point out that teens who rely on social media for community will be left isolated, and argue that educating children about how to navigate social media would be more effective.