

WEBPURIFY E-BOOK

# The teen social media dilemma

What is the line between protection and participation?

Unpack perspectives and explore a deeper understanding of why banning social media for teens is appealing but deeply flawed. Find out what smarter, more nuanced alternatives might be possible.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**As governments and policymakers grapple with the question of whether banning under-16s from social media is the right move, the debate remains more complex than a simple yes or no.**

While concerns over mental health, online safety, and digital addiction are valid, history has shown that an outright ban on anything rarely achieves its intended goal. Instead, it often results in unintended consequences – pushing people into unregulated spaces and creating enforcement challenges that are nearly impossible to resolve.

### *Find out:*

- The reasoning behind calls for a ban and whether such measures could reduce harm.
- The logistical and ethical challenges of enforcement, particularly in a digital world where teens can easily bypass restrictions.
- The potential unintended consequences of a ban, including increased risk-taking and the displacement of young users into unregulated online spaces.
- Alternative approaches to protecting young users, from stronger platform safeguards to digital literacy initiatives.





# INTRODUCTION

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## The futility of banning social media for teens

Banning teenagers from social media. It's an idea that feels both revolutionary and hopelessly outdated at the same time. In the wake of Australia's landmark legislation, governments across the world are now debating new restrictions, positioning them as a way to protect children from mental health crises, online exploitation, and addictive digital habits. On paper, the premise is simple: no access, no harm. But history tells us otherwise.

When was the last time banning something outright truly solved a social issue? From Prohibition to the War on Drugs, our history books are full of well-intended, blunt-force policies that have repeatedly failed to eliminate the behaviors they sought to suppress. Instead, such policies have typically driven them underground, where they become harder to regulate and often more dangerous.

At its core, banning social media for teens might seem less about solving a problem and more about the illusion of control. The idea offers governments a tidy, PR-friendly response to an increasingly messy social media landscape, but the reality is far more complex. Enforcement is a logistical nightmare. The internet is global and social platforms operate beyond national borders. And young people are crafty; they have always been adept at skirting restrictions, from fake IDs in nightclubs

to burner accounts on Instagram. Where would they go if banned? The rise of stealth apps, encrypted chat services, and shadow communities could push teens into digital spaces with even fewer safeguards.

To make matters more complicated, social media isn't an unqualified evil. For every horror story of cyberbullying or algorithm-driven addiction, there's another of a teenager finding community, discovering activism, or escaping loneliness in a way their offline life never allowed. Social media is woven into the social fabric of today's youth. The question perhaps isn't whether teens should be on these platforms; it's whether they can be on them in ways that don't leave them vulnerable to harm.





**We brought together a panel of experts, ranging from former tech industry insiders to digital safety advocates and, crucially, a teenager, to help dissect this debate and piece together what a truly effective strategy for youth digital wellbeing might look like.**

## The panel:



### AILÍS DALY

*Head of Trust & Safety, EMEA at WebPurify who has also held leadership roles at TikTok and Twitter.*

Ailís has been at the forefront of shaping policies that protect users from online harm.



### TRACY ELIZABETH

*Tracy, who earned her doctorate in adolescent development and media from Harvard, is an expert in tech policy with a focus on promoting the wellbeing of youth in digital spaces.*

At TikTok, Tracy led the Global Family Safety & Developmental Health teams, enhancing the platform's commitment to safe online environments and she is renowned for her ability to develop global maturity ratings and design family-friendly products.



### NIALL BRESLIN

*Renowned academic, thought leader, speaker, bestselling author, podcaster, and host of Classical Wind Down on BBC Radio 3.*

Niall's expertise in change management and social entrepreneurship will provide a unique perspective on our topic.



### NATASHA AHMED-WALSH

*An expert in youth wellness and digital engagement, currently advancing her studies at Harvard Graduate School of Education.*

Natasha shaped youth safety policies at TikTok and advocated for children's digital rights with 5Rights. She also influenced online safety policies at the UK's Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport.



### ELILI FLORE

*A 15-year-old high school student and editor of young adult books, offering a firsthand view of the impact a ban would have on teens.*



# The case for banning teens from social media





## **At first glance, banning teens from social media seems like a radical yet necessary step.**

If online platforms are perceived to be amplifying mental health crises, fueling consumerism, and exposing young users to toxic content, isn't the simplest solution to remove them altogether? It's an argument that resonates with many parents, educators, and even some teenagers themselves.

Supporters of a ban believe that eliminating social media use would put a hard stop to harmful content. Platforms are rife with cyberbullying, predatory behavior, and algorithm-driven rabbit holes that amplify everything from body image issues to extremism and misinformation. Restricting access, proponents argue, would remove one of the most potent sources of digital distress for young people.

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***"If you don't have social media, you are the odd one out. A ban could flip that narrative – so the kids who stay on social media become the exception, not the norm."***

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**ELILI FLORE**





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## A teen's perspective



**Beyond the content itself, a ban could also shift social norms. Right now, not being on social media makes a teen the exception rather than the rule.**

Elili, our 15-year-old teen representative, points out that the reverse could be true with a ban:

*"If you don't have social media, you are the odd one out," she says. "A ban could flip that narrative – so the kids who stay on social media become the exception, not the norm."*

The idea is that removing access en masse could relieve peer pressure, allowing teens to engage in offline relationships and real-world experiences without the overwhelming influence of digital culture.

*"I was actually really grateful when I heard about the bans. I live in a country where our gun regulation is lacking. I feel like my government does not care about my wellbeing and if I'm safe in my school. So the fact that the Australian government was actually considering its children and was trying to protect them, meant a lot to me."*

*"Banning teens from social media might not be 100% effective, but I don't think 100% compliance is the end goal. Cigarettes are banned for teenagers, but it doesn't mean that all teenagers aren't smoking."*

*"A ban will limit the number of kids who are on social media and it will make the kids who are on social media the odd ones out, rather than the way it is now. Flipping the narrative is really important. I know that social media has many benefits, but I don't think that children are reaping those benefits."*





# The mental health case



**Mental health is another driving force behind the push for restrictions.**

*"I still find social media at age 44 an impossible thing to navigate. If it's that hard for me, how can we expect teenagers to cope?"*

Niall argues. There is mounting research linking heavy social media use to anxiety, depression, and even sleep disturbance among teens. Proponents of bans argue that young people would be forced into healthier offline habits – more sleep, more physical activity, and less exposure to toxic comparison-driven self-esteem issues. The goal is to eliminate the addictive feedback loops that keep teens glued to their screens, often at the expense of their mental wellbeing.

However, Natasha warns against viewing social media as the singular problem: *"Social media is a symptom. The real issue is that young people are struggling, and banning them from these platforms doesn't change that."* Simply removing access to digital spaces, she suggests, doesn't address the underlying causes of youth distress, including economic instability, lack of mental health support, and broader societal pressures.

Supporters of a ban also point to the precedent of age-based restrictions. We already have laws preventing teens from buying cigarettes, alcohol, or even driving without supervision. If society accepts that age restrictions protect young people from harm, why shouldn't social media face similar scrutiny?

Yet, even those who believe in the merits of banning social media acknowledge one major flaw: enforcement. *"Governments might introduce bans, but do we really think teenagers won't find a workaround?"* Tracy asks.

History has shown that blanket bans rarely work as intended.





# The challenges of enforcement





## **While the idea of banning social media for teens may sound pretty straightforward, enforcing such a ban is anything but simple.**

Even with the best intentions, regulatory policies often fail when they clash with technological realities and deeply ingrained user behavior. The panelists in our discussion were unanimous in their belief that enforcement challenges could render a ban largely ineffective, and in some cases, even counterproductive.

Tracy argues that abstinence-only approaches have a well-documented history of failure, citing research in public health, particularly around drug use and teenage pregnancy, which shows that strict prohibitions can actually drive riskier behavior. *“What we see in prevention science efforts is that if you just have this abstinence support of ‘no,’... drug use goes up, teenage pregnancies go up, etc.*

*“Blocking access entirely may push teens toward unregulated or more harmful online spaces, where protective policies and content moderation are absent.”*

The same logic applies to social media: blocking access entirely may push teens toward unregulated or more harmful online spaces, where protective policies and content moderation are absent. This means that rather than keeping young users safe, a ban could leave them more vulnerable to exploitation, misinformation, and other online harms.

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***“Blocking access entirely may push teens toward unregulated or more harmful online spaces, where protective policies and content moderation are absent.”***

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**TRACY ELIZABETH**



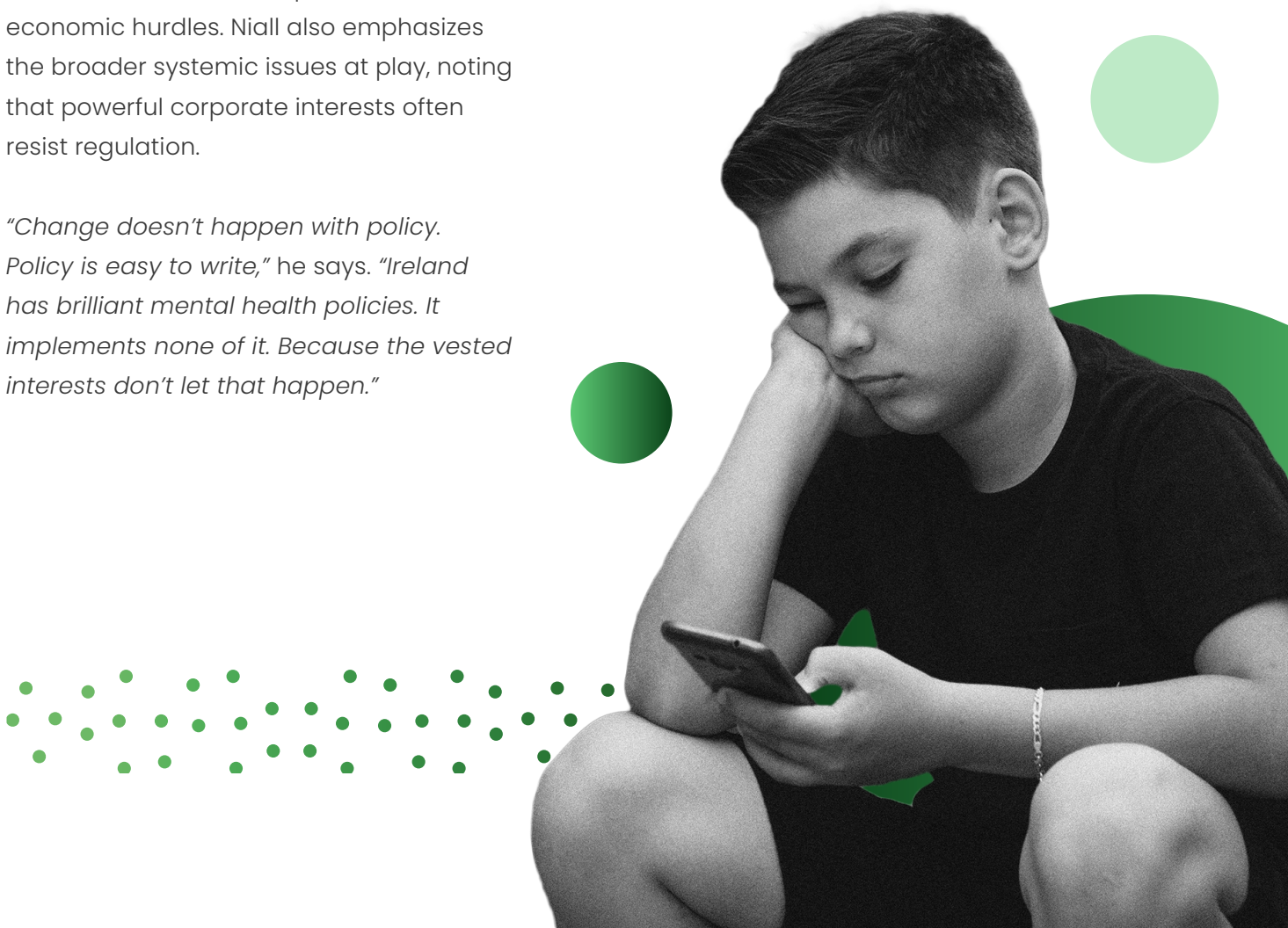


And yet, there is another key obstacle: technological limitations. Many social media platforms already have age restrictions, yet teens routinely bypass them through simple workarounds such as falsifying their birthdate. Without robust verification systems – something that even major platforms struggle to implement – a ban may be functionally meaningless. Governments enacting such bans could face an uphill battle in trying to police online identities without significant investment in digital infrastructure and privacy-compliant identity verification mechanisms.

Beyond these technical challenges, enforcement also faces political and economic hurdles. Niall also emphasizes the broader systemic issues at play, noting that powerful corporate interests often resist regulation.

*“Change doesn’t happen with policy. Policy is easy to write,” he says. “Ireland has brilliant mental health policies. It implements none of it. Because the vested interests don’t let that happen.”*

Social media platforms face an immense challenge in tackling online harms at an unprecedented scale. Many review hundreds of millions of pieces of user-generated content on a daily basis, all while navigating a landscape shaped by global conflicts, elections, climate crises, cyber threats, and platform misuse by criminal networks. At the same time, they must balance law enforcement and government requests with the responsibility of keeping their services running seamlessly for their users worldwide.





Adding to this complexity, regulation is rarely coherent – each jurisdiction has its own objectives, even when it comes to protecting teens. This makes it incredibly difficult for platforms to consistently and effectively adhere to an evolving set of demands, even when they are fully committed to doing so.

Yet, even if a ban could be enforced, the question remains: at what cost? Tracy warns that overly strict enforcement mechanisms – such as widespread digital surveillance or aggressive policing of online spaces – could have unintended consequences for privacy and civil liberties.

*“Adults really need to be open-minded and not create a scary space. If something goes*

*wrong, we need to be the people who, if the young person is scared, startled or confused, do not say, ‘Oh no, you’re in trouble now. We told you not to be there.’ Instead, we should be saying, ‘Alright, let’s work on this together. What are the strategies?’”* If teens don’t feel comfortable approaching trusted adults about their online experiences, punitive policies will simply drive them underground.

*“The worst thing that people can try to do is find a perfect solution that doesn’t exist,”* says our panel host, WebPurify’s Head of Trust & Safety for EMEA, Ailís Daly. *“We’re ultimately just trying our best to find the least worst options, and that can actually be a really powerful uniting position to take on these really complex matters.”*

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## What did the panel conclude about enforcement?

**Ultimately, they agree that enforcement is a major stumbling block for any attempt to ban social media for teens.**

The technical, political, and social challenges involved suggest that prohibition alone is unlikely to be a viable solution. Instead, the conversation needs to shift toward more realistic, evidence-based strategies that acknowledge the complexities of youth digital engagement without resorting to ineffective bans.



# The unintended consequences of a social media ban





**While banning social media for teens is rooted in concerns over mental health and digital safety, we also need to be aware of the unintended consequences that can stem from a blanket ban.**

Ailis draws a parallel between [a UN initiative in the 1990s, backed by the US administration at the time, to ban child labor](#) which, on the face of it, sounded like a very noble plan.

*"Who would reject that sort of initiative?" she asks. "But as they began to implement the ban, what they realized was that some young people from particular cultures needed to have a work opportunity in order to fund their families or contribute to their families. While it might not have been in alignment with some Western values, it was an incredibly important component of their cultural life.*

*"And what the child labor ban ended up doing is driving many of these young people into underground industries where it was less safe for them to work. This resulted in massive spikes of sexual exploitation of those young people who previously were working, yes, as child labor, but in relatively safe environments. Now they were pushed into more harmful environments.*

*"And this always struck me as something that is a good example of what we might learn from regulation. Even well-intentioned regulation, that on the face of it people might think is great, can have drastic consequences."*

While social media can be harmful, it can also serve as a powerful educational tool, provide kids with a channel for self-expression and foster greater cultural exchange. Banning it outright may deprive teens of valuable learning opportunities, civic engagement, and creative expression. The challenge, then, is finding a balance — one that mitigates risks without erasing the positive aspects of digital participation.





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## The links between isolation and polarized views



**One of the most significant risks in all this, Natasha says, is an epidemic of digital isolation.**

*"Young people, especially those from marginalized communities, often turn to online spaces to find connection and support," she explains. "If we take things away from people without speaking to them, we risk cutting them off from communities that help them feel less alone."*

Niall adds that this isolation could then push young people towards riskier, unregulated platforms. If mainstream social media apps become inaccessible, teenagers may seek out alternative spaces with fewer safeguards, increasing their exposure to harmful content and predatory behavior. Rather than solving the problem, a ban could simply displace it to corners of the internet that lack the oversight of major platforms.

*"I think it comes back to the issue we see around masculinity. Everyday, I'm dealing with men or young men who see other men being rewarded for brutal behavior, like the worst type of behavior. The problem is that good role models are not rewarded by social media algorithms. The algorithm rewards this awful behavior. So you're left with these pretty testy characters that we somehow have to celebrate and it's exhausting."*

He notes that banning social media outright could limit exposure to positive male role models and leave young men more susceptible to toxic influencers in other unregulated online spaces.

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***"I've come from a more marginalized community. My dad was an asylum seeker and I wonder, when I was growing up, if I'd had a digital community to connect with maybe I'd have felt less lonely."***

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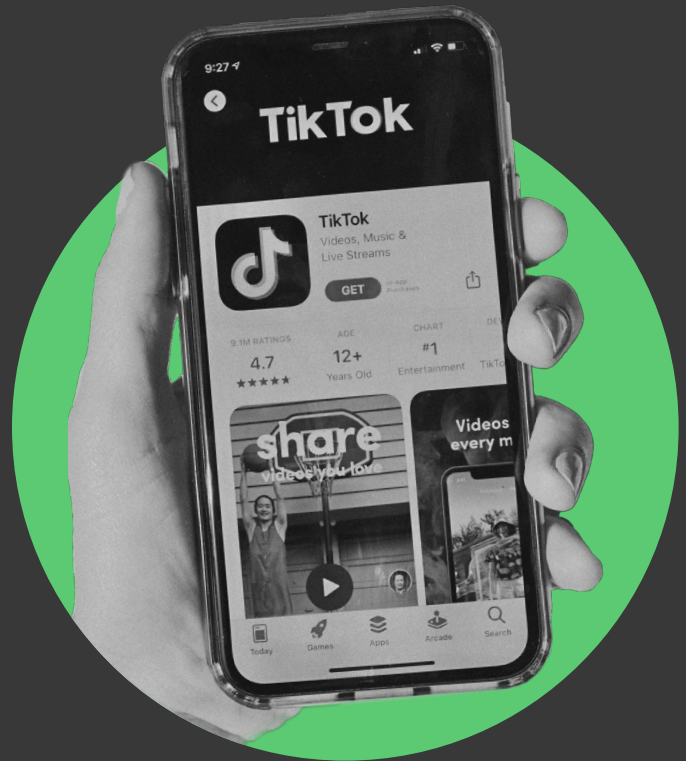
**NATASHA AHMED-WALSH**





*"Masculinity is in this very strange place and you can't wish the problems away," adds Niall. "This is men's responsibility. It's [up to] people like me and my friends, as adults, to reach out to young men and have these conversations with them. But they're so affected by social media. That is their world; that is how they consume every aspect of what it means to be a man."*

*"What are the drivers to these young men, these boys, going online and seeking validation?" Natasha asks. "The point is, they want belonging and they want community; they're trying to seek ways to find that loss that we sometimes have in our lives. We don't always have loving relationships. Can we find that online?"*



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## Ways to tackle it

***"We wanted to balance the ways that young people could talk about their lived experiences, but in a way that wouldn't trigger another young person to feel a certain way. We wanted to be able to talk about recovery for eating disorders or loneliness or suicidal thoughts, but we also didn't want to impact young people into taking it upon themselves to join that particular train of thought."***

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**NATASHA AHMED-WALSH**





# Alternative solutions to a ban





**Instead of outright bans, several of the experts on our panel advocate for alternative approaches that emphasize education, digital literacy, and structured access to social media.**

*"I come from a prevention science lens and what science has shown over and over again is that abstinence approaches don't work," Tracy explains. "I think there are other approaches we can take where we work with teens to develop scaffolded, developmentally optimal experiences where we put in safeguards and lift those safeguards as the young people grow into adults."*

This approach is similar to successful harm-reduction strategies in other areas. For example, in drug prevention programs, teens are educated about substance use [rather than simply told to avoid it](#). Similarly, [comprehensive sex education has been shown to reduce teenage pregnancies](#) more effectively than abstinence-only programs. A similar approach to managing teens' use of social media might include age-appropriate platform access, increased parental guidance in early stages, and mandatory digital literacy courses before full engagement.

By allowing structured exposure with safeguards in place, young users can develop the skills necessary to navigate social media responsibly, rather than being left to figure it out in an unregulated digital space.

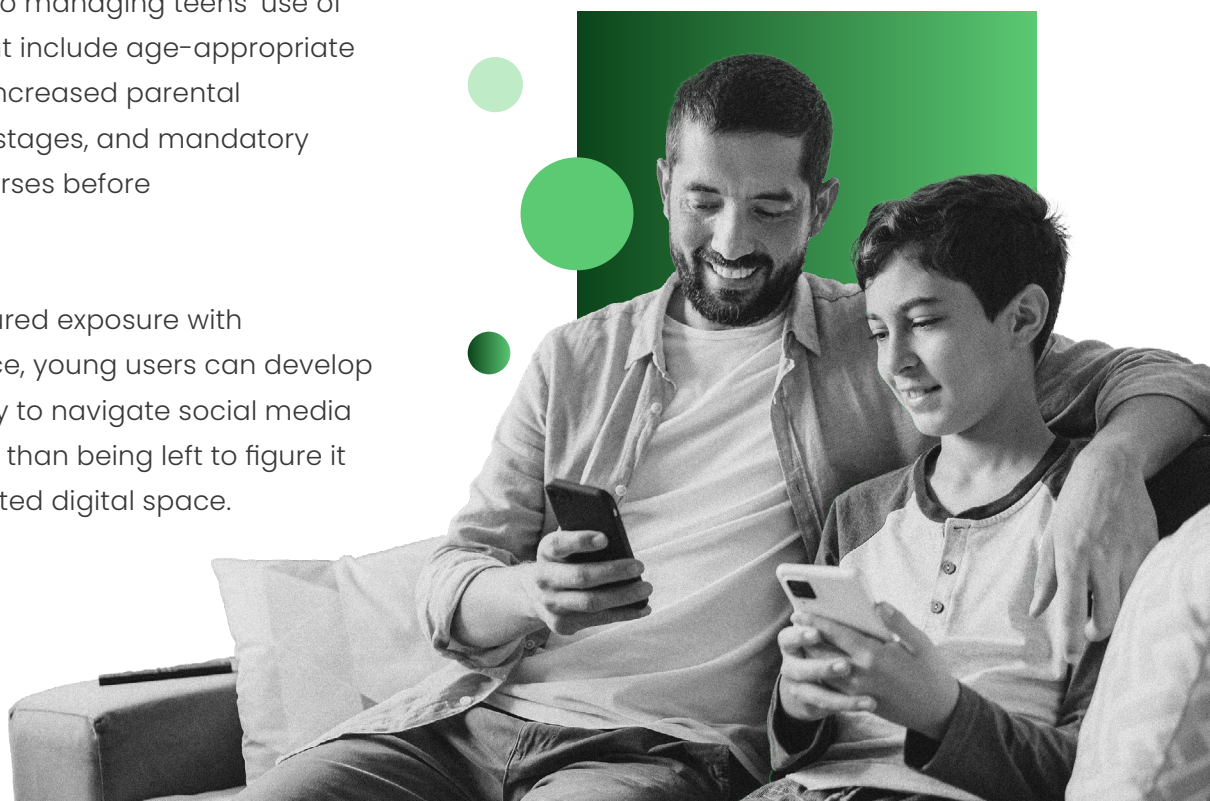
*"We have an option here to get really dynamic in creating proper evidence-based programs and getting things like health budgets that put mass amounts of money with the education budgets toward earlier prevention," Niall says.*

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***"Abstinence approaches don't work. We've seen it in drug prevention, in early pregnancy prevention – when you just say 'don't do it,' the problem doesn't go away, it often gets worse."***

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TRACY ELIZABETH





# The role of adults and policymakers





## **The responsibility for addressing the challenges posed by social media does not rest solely with teenagers – it also lies with adults and policymakers.**

Elili argues, *“I think that the overarching issues can be solved by the adults on social media rather than the children who are being so negatively affected.”*

Tracy agrees, emphasizing that parents, educators, and governments must take an active role in guiding young people’s digital experiences. *“From a developmental psychology perspective, there are ways to empower young people in digital spaces that make sense for their age. Younger kids don’t need private chats with strangers, they don’t necessarily need access to comments, and they don’t need to be creating content themselves. As they grow and develop more sophisticated ways of interacting and making sense of the world, digital guardrails can be adjusted accordingly.”*

*“I also strongly encourage adults to actually use the media they allow their young people to use. By understanding these spaces*

*firsthand, they can better help young people navigate them safely. Too often, well-intentioned adults don’t really know what an app is, so they don’t know how to talk about it. Instead, they default to saying, ‘Just don’t use it.’ But that’s not the right approach. The best thing we can do is empower both young people and adults with the tools and knowledge they need to protect themselves online.”*

Niall also highlights the broader systemic failures in addressing youth mental health, linking them to inadequate government funding. *“In Ireland, none of our budget goes into early prevention. We wait for people to get to the point of crisis, mainly teenagers, and then we intervene,”* he explains. This approach, he argues, is unsustainable and reactive rather than proactive.

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***“We need to stop waiting for crisis points and start investing in early intervention.”***

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**NIALL BRESLIN**





Policymakers also face challenges when it comes to regulation. Natasha underscores the importance of youth participation in shaping digital policies. *"If we are designing policies and practices for young people, they need to be involved in that policy decision,"* she states. Without their input, regulations may fail to address the realities of how young people use digital spaces.

In addition, education systems need to catch up with the realities of the online world. *"We can't just teach kids how to read*

*books anymore,"* says Tracy. *"We have to teach them how to read the internet."* Digital literacy should be embedded in the school curriculum, ensuring that young people develop the critical thinking skills necessary to safely navigate online spaces.

By promoting digital literacy, advocating for responsible platform design, and investing in early intervention, adults and policymakers can create a healthier digital environment for young people – one that mitigates harm without resorting to ineffective bans.





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# Starting the conversation:



## The role of parents

*"Years ago, I did a two-year study where we interviewed hundreds of teens, parents, psychologists, schools, teachers, and school officials," Tracy recalls. "This was a study to understand how media was specifically affecting young people between the ages of 12 and 15. And something that we learned right away is that parents, specifically, were scared to talk about dark topics like suicide, eating disorders, suicide, or even euthanasia.*

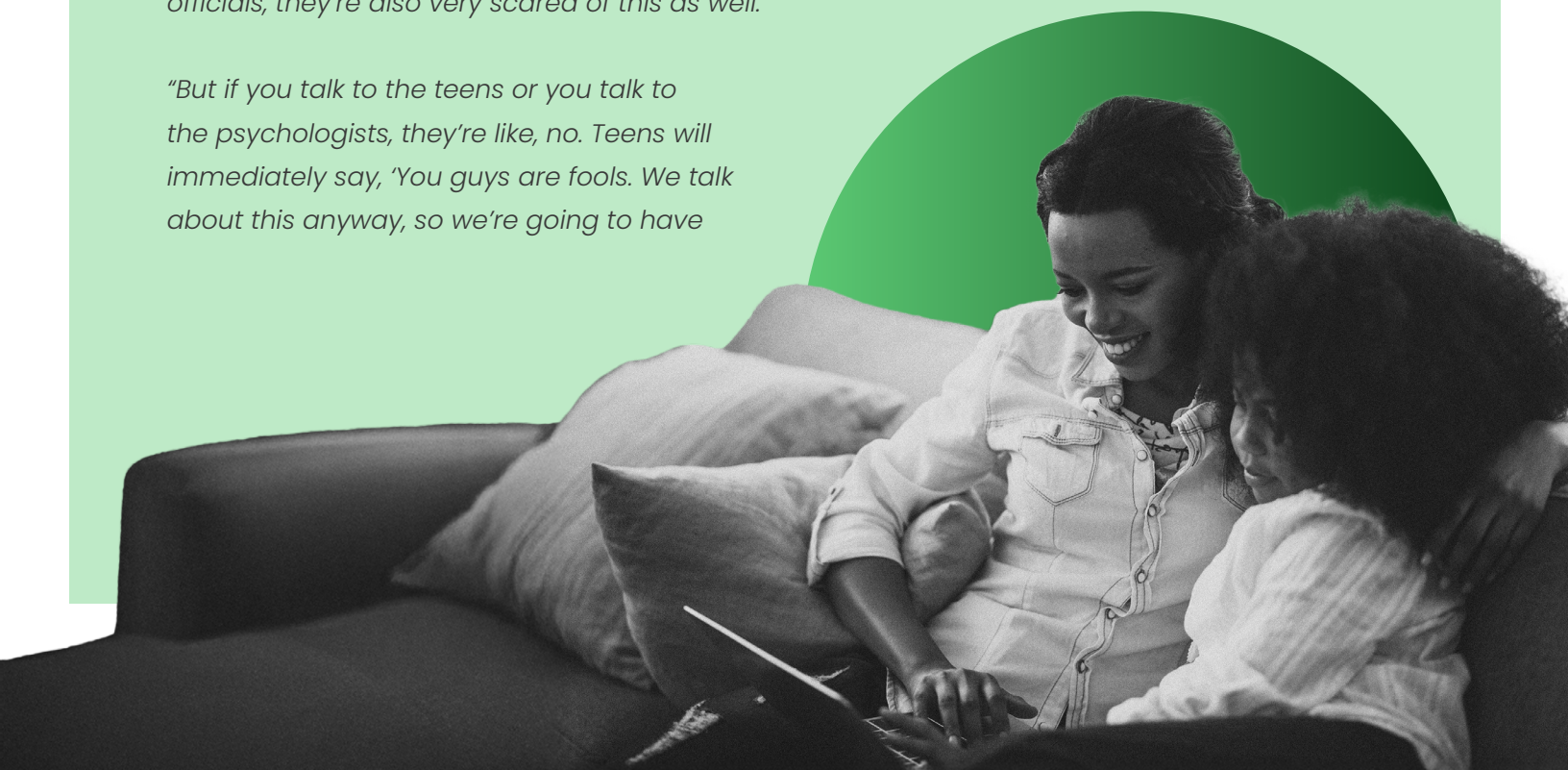
*"Parents were really scared to bring these subjects up because they thought that if they were to mention these concepts to their kids, then their kids would now be aware of suicide and go do it. When you talk to the school officials, they're also very scared of this as well.*

*"But if you talk to the teens or you talk to the psychologists, they're like, no. Teens will immediately say, 'You guys are fools. We talk about this anyway, so we're going to have*

*these conversations and you can either help us work through these big subjects or we'll do it together on our own.*

*"And psychologists would confirm that one of the most effective approaches is to not shy away from these subjects, but to address them head on and engage in open conversations. Don't be judgmental, don't shame them; just have open conversations with teens about these big topics."*

There's also a role for parents in this process – a big role. But they need to get over their fear of talking frankly to their child.





# What might the future of social media look like for young people?





**As technology continues to evolve at a rapid pace around us, the question remains: what does the future of social media look like for teens? Here are our panel's projections, hopes, and fears.**

## **1. Design for, and in collaboration, with young people**

Natasha highlights the importance of young people having a say in the future of digital platforms.

*"A lot of the platforms that we see right now do not design with young people in mind. Instead, they hire people like us to retrofit the policies and practices to implement," she says. Natasha believes that we cannot design policies and online spaces for young people without including them in the conversation. A big believer that digital spaces are conducive to healthy development, rather than banning social media, she suggests a future where young users have the opportunity to help shape the rules and frameworks that govern online communities. This could involve youth advisory boards, where teenagers provide direct feedback on platform policies, or co-creation initiatives where young people are involved in designing safer and more inclusive spaces.*

*"If we are designing policies and practices for young people, they need to be involved in that policy decision. And I fear that what has happened here is that well-intentioned adults, with the objective of protecting and*

*preserving youth and their wellbeing, have in fact excluded them from these policy decisions."*

## **2. Socialization vs cyberbullying conversations will continue**

Niall reiterates the importance of peer dynamics in shaping digital behavior.

*"It's really important that you don't isolate young people from their peers. It's the single worst thing you could do. Loneliness is profound and isolation is profound," he warns. Any future social media regulations must acknowledge the fundamental role digital spaces play in teenage socialization. Cutting young people off entirely could lead to more harm than good, especially for marginalized communities who find connection and belonging online.*



*"Peer support does occur on social media, and I can't deny that," Elili counters, "but the vast majority of interactions I've had on social media have been the opposite of peer support. Cyberbullying is way more common than bullying in person because people are more likely to be awful to people who they haven't seen face to face. And everything on social media that I've seen about any serious topics has typically been misinformation."*

### **3. More people turning away from social media**

*"I have this theory – and it's completely unfounded – but I believe we're going to see what I call a post-digital revolution," Niall says. "I think eventually there is going to be a mass rejection of social media. As Malcolm Gladwell has said, 'The tipping point is well gone.' Social media is now starting to cannibalize itself. And a lot of people – adults I know who swore by it – are now gone. They're done with it. I think we will eventually move past social media."*



### **4. Digital education and awareness will increase**

*"I am aware that they're constantly trying to sell me things," says Elili. "Consumerism is the point. And I think that there are so many consequences of that, and most of those consequences can be removed for the most part if we ban social media for kids. Frankly, I am exhausted by the fact that I need a new T-shirt, and I actively have to opt out of buying a new T-shirt or buying a new water bottle or trying a new hairstyle that everyone is doing that I'm not aware of. Being a child who is a part of this and being a part of the vulnerable group of teenage girls, I genuinely, actively have to remove myself from all of these trends. I have to remove myself from this capitalist ideology that is being pushed towards me on social media. And I think that removing social media will get rid of that."*



## 5. Stronger co-regulation

*"We have to stop thinking of safety as an afterthought and start designing for it from the beginning,"* says Tracy. We need stronger co-regulation between governments and tech companies to ensure that online spaces are built with young people's wellbeing in mind. She believes that platforms should be required to implement child-first design principles, which focus on protecting younger users while still allowing them access to digital communities.

## 6. A natural equilibrium between extremes will occur

Rather than disappearing completely, our panel suggests that social media may shift into something more intentional, with young people choosing platforms that better align with their values rather than being passively consumed by algorithm-driven content.

Ultimately, the future of social media for teens will depend on a combination of regulation, platform responsibility, and cultural shifts in how digital spaces are used.

The conversation needs to move beyond the extremes of banning or unrestricted access and instead focus on sustainable solutions that foment healthy, informed, and engaged online communities for future generations. As Natasha puts it, *"The future of social media can be one where platforms are designed with young people, not just for them – where their voices, needs, and wellbeing are central to how digital communities evolve."*





**WebPurify is the leading content moderation service combining the power of AI and humans to protect communities and brands from the risks of user-generated content**

Since 2007, we've been providing elegant, robust solutions that protect kids, online communities, and our clients' brands. Every day, we moderate 200 million text submissions, 1.2 million images, and 60,000 videos – for small businesses, to [one in seven Fortune 100 companies](#).

And because we believe that all websites and apps should be able to easily and quickly moderate their content, we offer custom-tailored [services](#) and solutions for all budgets.

All of our clients – from individual bloggers to Fortune 500 companies – get the same high-quality service and attention.

## How WebPurify works with e-commerce platforms

"WebPurify uses advanced AI and custom live moderation services to weed out problematic content on e-commerce sites," explains Ailís. "This includes the removal of harmful and inappropriate products for minors, such as drugs, weapons, weight-loss products, and more. We work with many of the largest e-commerce players in the world. We are appreciated for our high accuracy and productivity, as well as our consultative approach and commitment to excellence."

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