

What would a social media ban *really* mean for under-16s?

Jeanine Connor responds to the recent Government announcement

As this September issue went into production in June, Prime Minister Keir Starmer announced a ban on social media for under-16s, which is likely to come into force from spring 2027. His intention is to prohibit under-16s from accessing 'user-to-user' platforms including TikTok, Snapchat, YouTube, Instagram, X, Facebook and Reddit – but not WhatsApp. There will also be prohibitions on livestreaming and communication on gaming sites such as *Roblox*. Starmer announced his resignation as leader of the Labour Party a few weeks later, leaving the details of the proposed ban under new leadership unclear. BACP was quick to respond, with a statement claiming, 'A blanket ban on social media for under-16s will not address the root causes of online harm and risks diverting attention from the responsibility of social media platforms, effectively letting them "off the hook".'¹ Months prior to the announcement, I was commissioned to research the effect of Big Tech on young lives for BACP *Therapy Today*, and my article is published this month.²

I agree that prohibition is not the answer, and have argued that it simply won't work.³ In Australia, where under-16s were banned from social media six months ago, about three-quarters are still using it.⁴ According to one report, in the 24 hours immediately following the UK announcement, searches for virtual private networks (VPNs), which are tools that hide users' IP addresses and identities, increased by 165%.⁴ Adolescents are digital natives, familiar with hacks and loopholes to override parental – and government – controls. There are already age restrictions for under-13s across most platforms, but that doesn't mean children under 13 haven't been using them; it means

they've been lying about their date of birth, just as young people have always lied about their date of birth, to bypass so-called 'age gates'.

Starmer's Government has been under pressure from campaign groups formed by concerned parents for some time, many of whom have been influenced by sensationalist headlines and Netflix dramas, notably *Adolescence*. Sure, social media has the potential to be a harmful influence, but it also enables young people to expand their horizons, connect and grow. For some, such as those who are socially or psychologically isolated, online platforms are a lifeline, providing support and community. A ban,

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should they adhere to it, will isolate them further and make them more vulnerable.

If a ban is implemented, it won't keep under-16s safe online, as is the stated aim; it will expose them to even greater risk. Young people will still use social media, but they won't feel able to tell adults where they are or what they're up to. They will lie about their age and so the algorithm will treat them as adults, exposing them to adult content. Some young people will stop using the 'banned' platforms and turn instead to unregulated sites. When they get into risky situations, they won't ask for help, because they'll believe they're doing something illegal and will feel like it's their own fault.

What will a social media ban *really* mean for under-16s? I truly dread to think. ■

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References

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- 2 Connor J. Big Tech, young lives. BACP *Therapy Today* 2026; 37(7): 22–27.
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- 4 LBC. Can I get around the social media ban with a VPN? LBC 2026; 16 June. <https://tinyurl.com/5fc5uta2> (accessed 30 June 2026).

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