



Making the online world safe for children*

Explainer by the Children’s Monitoring Group (CMG)**

“Social media has become a major part of our lives and there’s not that much point in trying to push teenagers away from it. Rather we should focus on making it a better place!!!”

Quote from a child, aged 15–17, Save the Children New Zealand & Netsafe (2025)
Children and Youth Online Safety in Aotearoa New Zealand, page 15.

1. How can we make the online world safe for children?



Children have the right to be safe everywhere, including online. Yet we know that many children are harmed by things they see and experience online. This is because the online world – including social media – has not been designed with the safety of children in mind.



Across Aotearoa New Zealand, parents, whānau and politicians alike are ready to take action to protect children from online harm. There is widespread agreement that we need to make the digital world safe for children.



These concerns about children’s safety and wellbeing online have sparked political interest, in New Zealand and internationally, in restricting social media for children under 16 years old (a social media ban). But being online is a normal part of many children’s everyday lives, and restricting their access alone does not make the internet safer. So, what can be done to keep our children safe online, prevent and address the causes of harm, and make sure children can experience the positives of the digital world?



What changes will make the online world safe for children in Aotearoa New Zealand while ensuring respect for their other rights, like their rights to play, to stay in touch with friends and family, to learn, to access information, have privacy, express who they are, enjoy their rights to culture and to share their ideas? We believe Aotearoa New Zealand can lead the way in making sure that when children are online, they are protected, can participate, and are provided with what they need to grow up safe and well.

2. What are children saying about the digital world?



Children are key stakeholders in the issue of online harm, and they tell us **digital participation is positive for them in many ways**. In the online world they have opportunities to:

- build their identity and express their culture
- connect with peers, family, and communities of belonging
- access information, education, and creative outlets
- exercise agency and take part in the things that are important to them
- access support and wellbeing services.



Children are also some of the loudest voices calling for better safety online, because of the harm that they are too often experiencing in the digital world. They are calling for stronger accountability for social media companies, and more education to help them – and their families and whānau – navigate the digital world and stay safe online, including on social media.

3. How do children's rights apply in the online world?



All children under the age of 18 are rights-holders, meaning they hold specific rights under the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#). Children's rights apply in the digital world as well as the physical world and they are a crucial tool in making sure regulation of the digital world is comprehensive, balanced and effective for children.¹



As they do in the physical world, all children have the right to the following things when they are online (among others):



be guided by their parents and whānau, the people who know and care for them



be protected from all forms of discrimination



grow up safe and well



have their best interests be the primary consideration in decision-making that affects them



to have a say in those decisions.



Applying children's rights to the online world requires us to allow children and their whānau to participate online in ways that are meaningful to them, while upholding their information and privacy rights and their rights to be protected from all forms of harm. This means safeguarding children from:

- the negative impacts of addictive platform design and algorithmic amplification, such as body image pressures, anxiety, depression, sleep disruption, cyberbullying and online aggression
- identity based discrimination (this most often affects Māori, Pacific, rainbow, and disabled children in particular)
- exposure to harmful, violent, extreme, explicit or inappropriate content
- disinformation, misinformation and distressing news that is not age appropriate
- grooming and exploitative interactions, including 'sextortion' and AI manipulation
- breaches of their privacy.



The changing nature of the digital world and growing impact of AI makes it even more important that there are strong, children's rights-based foundations in place for children's safety online. Our current reality is that the online world has not been developed with children's rights in mind, and too many aspects of social media are specifically designed to work in ways that negatively impact children and their rights. It's clear we need to do better to protect children's rights online, and how we do that is important.

4. What needs to happen now to keep children safe online?



The Government has an opportunity now to develop effective legislation to keep children safe online. This should be informed by children's rights, children and young people's ideas, understanding what has worked overseas, and what hasn't.² We need to think in terms of 'safety by design', to prioritise the rights of children and make sure they can be safe while maintaining their rights to participate in the online world, in ways that are appropriate for their ages and stages of development.



A blanket ban on social media for under 16s may appear to be a way to keep our children safe. But the reality is that alone, a ban like this will not address the problem of online harm to children.



There are problems with focusing on a social media ban for under 16s, which include:

- rather than addressing harm and strengthening platform accountability, a ban purely focuses on exclusion and does not make the internet a safer place
- bans can have serious unintended consequences by driving children to even less regulated spaces, and by shifting accountability away from platforms and onto parents
- specific groups of children who are already experiencing exclusion – such as rainbow and disabled children – may find themselves even more isolated from their peers and communities
- a ban would not apply to children of all ages – we need to make the internet a safer place for everyone.



There are better ways to keep mokopuna safe online while still respecting their rights and looking after their wellbeing. We need to:

- **strongly regulate** tech companies to make sure they prevent, report and remove harmful content on their platforms
- **hold social media platforms accountable** when the spaces they create are unsafe and require them to prioritise children’s safety when designing products (e.g. algorithms), avoiding persuasive design that preys on children’s age and stage of development
- **change the business model and encourage tech companies** to create and maintain safe, inclusive, child-friendly and appropriate content and platforms
- **establish an independent national online safety regulator** to monitor and enforce regulation of tech companies, social media platforms and the online world, and to guide best practice
- **review the legislative framework for online safety** to make sure it is fit-for-purpose in our current day digital landscape and able to meet future challenges as they emerge
- **provide digital citizenship education and support for children and their families and whānau throughout children’s different stages of childhood** (from early childhood through to adolescence) so they can stay safe online - this should be a mandatory part of the New Zealand education curriculum
- **provide children with clear, safe pathways for justice**, help and support when online harm occurs, and appropriate systems and supports for children to heal from online harm.



Using children’s rights to guide us, we can put in place effective, balanced and strong protections against online harm. This means listening to children and making sure their ideas and voices are part of the solutions here in Aotearoa New Zealand. It is time to work together, and with children, to uphold their rights and make the digital world safe.

Where to get help



If you or someone you care about needs help dealing with an issue online, contact [Netsafe](#).

Alternatively, if you need other forms of support there are other organisations that can help, please visit [Help and Advice | Mana Mokopuna | Mana Mokopuna](#).

*In this explainer we use the word “children” to refer to everyone under the age of 18, consistent with the definition of a child under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989.

**The Children’s Monitoring Group is convened by the Children’s Commissioner and comprises membership of the organisations below. Its purpose is to collectively monitor children’s rights in New Zealand, and to work with the Children’s Deputy Chief Executives Group across government agencies to progress the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in New Zealand.

1 See [General comment No. 25 \(2021\) on children’s rights in relation to the digital environment | OHCHR](#)
 2 [eSafety Commissioner Social Media Minimum Age: Compliance update March 2026 \(Australia\)](#)