



## US health experts divided on social media age restrictions

Some medical associations support restrictions on social media use to protect adolescent's health, while others focus on making companies provide safer platforms. Susan Jaffe reports.

Laws intended to protect adolescents from the harms of social media are spreading across the USA but, among some of the nation's leading medical and public health associations, there is not yet a consensus on the introduction of limits and bans on social media access for young people.

Nearly two dozen states are considering legislation. Several have already enacted a patchwork of age restrictions and partial bans. From March 1, 2024, under 18s in Utah will need parental consent to use social media apps, and will be banned from sites at night. Parents or guardians must be able to view their children's accounts. Under an Arkansas law, social media users younger than 18 years will also need parental consent to create accounts after Sept 1, 2023. In California, lawmakers are requiring social media companies to ensure that content is appropriate for children and refrain from using strategies that might incentivise users to stay online for long periods of time.

"There's no way—at least visible to the user—in which the platforms have been designed to make the experience of an eight year old any different from an eighty year old", said Mitch Prinstein, Chief Science Officer at the American Psychological Association (APA). "There's nothing that's developmentally sensitive or attuned to the unique vulnerabilities or needs of young people. It's like a car that doesn't have seatbelts."

The American Academy of Pediatrics' (AAP) supports creating a safer digital environment rather than trying to restrict social media use according to Nusheen Ameenuddin, a Mayo Clinic pediatrician and Chair of the AAP's Council on Communications and Media. "If going online affects their mood, sleep habits or schoolwork negatively",

she said "families can set up some guard rails at home...to limit overall exposure."

So far, the APA and AAP are the only national medical organisations to publicly endorse *The Kids Online Safety Act*, introduced in the US Senate by a bipartisan group of 34 members on May 2. Instead of restricting teenagers' access, the legislation places greater responsibility on social media platforms to monitor content. It would require companies to rely on "evidence-informed medical information" to protect users younger than 17 years from experiencing "anxiety, depression, eating disorders, substance use disorders, and suicidal behaviors" as well as "patterns of use that indicate or encourage addiction-like behaviors". The companies would also have to take steps to prevent online bullying, harassment, sexual exploitation, and abuse. If the bill becomes law, social media companies would have to install new parental controls, allow adolescents an option to disable addictive features that keep them online, and conduct independent audits to verify the effectiveness of such safeguards.

The American Academy of Family Physicians and American Psychiatric Association do not have policies concerning social media restrictions for adolescents, their respective spokespeople said. The American Medical Association declined to answer questions about whether it supports age restrictions and instead urged social networks to develop safeguards for users, supports the education of physicians on the health impacts of social media, and called on schools to help students recognise and mitigate those impacts.

"I think prohibitions are a good way for politicians to feel as if they're doing something", said Sterling Ransone,

Board Chair of the American Academy of Family Physicians, who was not speaking on behalf of his organisation because it does not have a social media policy. Evading some restrictions isn't difficult, he continued. Teenagers living in a state that limits access can use a virtual private network to hide their location. For some adolescents, he said, social media is "a great way to build friendships, to learn about different subjects and learn how to express yourself".

Government alone cannot effectively address the problem according to the APA's Health Advisory on Social Media Use in Adolescence, issued earlier this month. It includes ten detailed recommendations targeted to adolescents, social media companies, parents or guardians, physicians, and other stakeholders.

Although there appears to be an association between social media use and adverse health effects, a causal relationship is still unclear, said Prinstein. Establishing causality "would involve random assignment and there are no ethical ways to do that", he said. The APA's health advisory urges "substantial resources" to support further scientific research on the benefits and risks of social media on adolescent development.

The American Public Health Association has not endorsed the Senate legislation. But Georges Benjamin, Executive Director, said that although more research is needed, as an interim preventive measure, "regulating the use of social media for adolescents using the science and evidence we have today about benefits and harms is an appropriate first step". "In some cases that may mean restricting access."

Susan Jaffe

For the APA's advisory see <https://www.apa.org/topics/social-media-internet/health-advisory-adolescent-social-media-use>