



PARENT & CARER GUIDE - THE AUSTRALIAN 16+ AGE DELAY

Author - Kirra Pendergast

Before you speak to your child, take a moment with yourself, because parenting through the digital era has been like trying to build a fence around a cyclone. It's been fast, chaotic, and often steeped in guilt. Many of us have felt like we were failing, too late to act, too unsure to intervene, too overwhelmed to keep up.

So, before you speak to your kids about the Australian Social Media Age Restriction, ask yourself:

- What role has social media played in my child's life?
- What have I seen it bring, connection or anxiety, joy or comparison, self-expression or self-doubt?

This new legal shift to delay social media access until age 16 is not a critique of your parenting. It's an infrastructure upgrade.

From 10 December 2025, the Australian Government will require social media platforms to take reasonable steps to prevent anyone under 16 from creating or keeping an account. Not as punishment. Not to control, but to create a buffer, a developmental pause, in a system that has, until now, let children be shaped by digital forces far more powerful than most adults realise.

This has not been an overnight decision it's been years in the making. It's also not a crackdown on kids or taking a parent's rights away, it's a law for platforms to change the way they interact with our kids. Rather than leaving families to fight algorithmic giants from the kitchen table, this law flips the burden. Children won't be punished.

Parents won't be blamed. But platforms, especially those whose business models rely on hooking young attention and harvesting engagement, will be held accountable. If they fail to comply, they risk penalties of up to \$49.5 million AUD.

The law applies to any platform that:

- Exists primarily to facilitate online social interaction.
- Allows users to link or interact.
- And lets them post their own content.

That's potentially apps like Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, YouTube, Facebook, X/Twitter, and likely a quite a few more.

THE WAY FORWARD

1. Begin before the 10th of December.

Start the conversation now - long before December 10 creeps up on you. Not once. Not in a rush. But gently, over time. Don't begin with "you can't" or "you won't be allowed." Begin with curiosity. Ask them: What do you love about the apps you use? What do you think will be the hardest part if things change? Is anything worrying you about it?

This isn't just a new law, it's a big change in how they connect, belong, and feel seen. It might feel like the ground is shifting beneath them. They need your steadiness. Your calm. Your willingness to listen, again and again. You don't have to have all the answers. You just have to stay beside them while they find their own.

2. Make the plan with them, not for them.

Top-down rules often hit a wall. But when kids help shape the plan, they're far more likely to walk it with you. So sit down with your child and ask: Because of the new age delay we need to start winding back your social media, how would you want to do it? Could they choose their favourite Insta photos and turn them into a printed keepsake? Let them help design what comes next. It doesn't mean giving up your role as the adult. It means growing their sense of agency, and that's where real resilience begins.

3. Taper, don't cut.

Withdrawal isn't just something that happens with substances. Sudden social disconnection, especially for young people, can trigger real emotional fallout: anxiety, anger, even shame. So don't rip the Band-Aid. Phase things out slowly. One app at a time. Set screen hours and gently reduce them over days or weeks. Let your child know what to expect, because predictability soothes the nervous system far more than perfection ever could.

And don't just take things away. Offer safer alternatives. Look for platforms without algorithms designed to keep them hooked. Pixelfed, for example, is a photo-sharing app like Instagram but without the hidden levers that shape what they see and how they feel. It's not about going backwards. It's about building a healthier digital future, together.

What's not included, for now, are messaging apps like WhatsApp or iMessage, or gaming environments like Minecraft or Roblox. Unless they begin to behave more like social networks, they're outside the scope.

The law will be watching function, not brand name.

4. Name the grief.

For some kids this is loss. Not just less screen time, not just unplugging. It's friends they might drift from. Posts they were proud of. A version of themselves they carefully built, now fading from view. If we brush past that, call it a break or "just a rule," we miss the point. They're grieving something real. And if we don't name that grief, they'll carry it alone, quietly, heavily. So make space for the sadness. Honour what mattered to them. Let them tell the story of what they're letting go of. That's how they'll find their footing in whatever comes next.

5. Replace, don't just restrict.

Belonging. Identity. Expression.

These aren't extras, they're the deep drivers behind every scroll, like, and DM. Social media didn't just waste time. It met real needs. So when it goes, even partly, those needs don't disappear. They shift. And they need somewhere safe to land. Help your child find what else can fill the gap. Not as a reward for good behaviour not as a trade. But as a bridge to something else. A team, a class, a creative project, a space to show up and be seen. Because when connection is taken away, it must also be rebuilt. Not later. Now.

6. Rebuild analogue connection together.

Talk to other families. This can't be done in isolation.

Coordinate digital-free afternoons. Bring back weekend meetups, after-school hangs, shared dinners spaces where kids can connect without needing an app to mediate it. Because the shift won't stick if it's just your child. It has to be social. The norm doesn't move one kid at a time, it moves when the whole peer group shifts with them. So rally the village. Make the offline moments just as magnetic as the online ones used to be. That's how new habits become culture.

7. Build new routines before the old ones end.

Don't wait for the age delay from December 10th to drop before you start building what comes next.

That empty space social media leaves behind? It needs tending, deliberately, gently, now. Add rhythm before the rupture. Set up small rituals: regular check-ins, quiet evening wind-downs, activities that offer focus, movement, or creativity. Things with flow. Things with meaning. This isn't about micromanaging them. It's about making sure disconnection doesn't turn into disarray. Young people don't just need less screen time. They need more of what steadies them when the scroll is gone.

8. Watch the quiet kids.

The ones who "seem fine" are often the ones hiding it best.

Not all distress is loud. Some kids won't rage or cry.....they'll go quiet. They'll bottle it. And what they're losing might be more than just an app: fan communities where they felt understood, DMs that felt like lifelines, support groups that knew the parts of them they hadn't shared anywhere else. So stay close. Especially to the ones who shrug and say, "I'm fine."

Check in, not just once, but over time. Listen between the lines. Because some losses don't show until after the silence sets in.

9. Model the shift.

Your child is watching you....closer than you think.

They see how often your phone's in your hand. How quickly you respond to pings. How often you scroll just to fill the silence. And they'll notice the gap between what you say and what you do, long before they listen to your reasoning. So start with yourself. If you want them to shift, show them how. Replace your scroll-time with presence. With conversation and with quiet. You don't have to be perfect. But you do have to be real. Don't just demand the change, demonstrate it. That's what they'll remember.

10. Hold your ground and your compassion.

When the pushback comes, and it will, don't retreat. But don't harden either. You're not just there to enforce a rule handed down from somewhere else. You're there to walk your child through a change they didn't choose, with steadiness, clarity, and care. This won't be simple. There may be anger, sadness, or silence. But your job isn't to win, it's to hold the line with warmth. To stay grounded. To be the calm they can return to, even when they're full of storm. That's how they learn to ride out change, not by force, but by feeling safe enough to face it.

AGE ASSURANCE NOT ID CHECKS

One of the biggest challenges is how to verify a child's age without compromising their privacy. That's why the government isn't mandating ID uploads. Instead, it's backing a national Age Assurance Technology Trial exploring tools like:

- Facial age estimation (not recognition),
- Device-level behavioural analysis,
- And third-party age checks that protect anonymity while still enforcing boundaries.

These technologies are being tested now, slowly, transparently, and with independent oversight. No one is pretending this will be perfect. But that's not the goal, the goal is harm reduction at scale.

This is not a standalone policy. It's part of a bigger system.

The delay to 16 is just one part of a broader ecosystem overhaul alongside:

- Enforcement of the Online Safety Act,
- A proposed Digital Duty of Care,
- A new Restricted Access System for R18+ content,
- And governance from the eSafety Commissioner, supported by the National Online Safety Education Council.

In short: this is not a moral panic, it's a signal to platforms that access to children is no longer guaranteed, and must be earned through safety, not scale.

SOME ALTERNATIVE PLATFORMS FOR YOU TO RESEARCH AND CONSIDER

What to look for in safer alternatives:

- No algorithmic feed (chronological or curated by the user only).
- No ads or data tracking.
- Strong, transparent moderation.
- Clear boundaries around messaging and visibility.
- Designed for creativity or community - not performance.

Remember: The goal isn't to cut kids off from connection it's to rebuild it in healthier ways. These tools give them back control, reduce harm, and protect their developing minds from systems designed to exploit them.

Here are some alternative platforms that meet kids where they are - creative, social, expressive - without feeding them to the algorithm.

Each of these options strips out the mechanics that most mainstream platforms rely on to drive addiction, anxiety, and polarisation. They're not perfect - but they're safer by design, and they give young people space to create, connect, and explore without being nudged every five seconds to scroll further or perform more.

1. Pixelfed

A photo-sharing platform that looks and feels like Instagram - but with no ads, no algorithm, and no data harvesting. It's open-source, privacy-focused, and part of the Fediverse (which means it can connect to other decentralised platforms if needed). Kids can post, follow, and engage - without being targeted or tracked.

2. Scratch (MIT Media Lab)

A creative coding platform where kids build their own games, animations, and interactive stories. While it's not a "social media" site, it has a thriving moderated community where kids can share projects, give feedback, and collaborate safely.

3. PopJam (for younger users)

A creative community for kids aged 7–12, moderated and built with safety at the core. It offers drawing tools, quizzes, challenges, and channels created by trusted brands (e.g. BBC, Nat Geo Kids). Everything is vetted, and direct messaging is restricted.

4. Mighty Networks (Private Communities)

For teens ready to engage in more focused communities (clubs, teams, interest groups), Mighty Networks allows adults to set up private, invite-only digital spaces without ads, surveillance, or public pressure.

5. Jami or Signal (for private messaging)

If connection with close friends is the goal, consider safer messaging tools like Signal or Jami, both end-to-end encrypted and free from surveillance capitalism. No feeds, no likes, no nudges. Just intentional communication.

6. Vimeo instead of YouTube

If your child has used YouTube to post their creative work - videos, animations, commentary - consider helping them migrate that content to Vimeo instead. Why Vimeo? Because unlike YouTube, Vimeo doesn't push ads mid-video. It doesn't harvest viewing habits to feed an algorithm. And it doesn't manipulate attention with autoplay traps or engagement bait. Vimeo is built for creators, not for clicks. It's calm. It's deliberate. It's safer by design.

FAQ's

1. My child turns 16 just after December 10. Will their account still be there waiting?

Not likely. If your child is under 16 when the age delay comes into effect, platforms must take reasonable steps to prevent them from keeping an account, even if their birthday is weeks away. Some may offer appeals, but others may deactivate accounts entirely. Treat it as a clean break, not a holding pattern.

2. Will my child lose their photos, messages, streaks or creative work?

Possibly, yes. Depending on how each platform handles deactivation, your child may lose access to saved content. Help them export what matters before December 10....photos, messages, creative projects....so that the transition isn't a wipeout, but a conscious close of one chapter and the beginning of another.

3. Can I just give permission as their parent?

No. This isn't about parental consent. It's about platforms meeting new legal obligations. The delay creates a minimum age floor, not an opt-in process. Parental permission won't override it.

4. What if my child lies about their age?

Stronger age assurance systems are being introduced, including facial estimation, device analysis, and third-party checks. Platforms are under pressure to block known workarounds. It won't be as easy to bypass the rules.

5. Is this forever?

The delay will be reviewed independently within two years of implementation and will evolve as platforms change, as technologies improve, and as evidence is gathered. Think of this as a dynamic safeguard, not a static ban. Build your family's plan as if it's long-term, as it is law now, and that will help create stability.

6. What's included - and what's not?

The delay applies to platforms where the primary or significant function is social interaction, user-generated content, and connection. This includes Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, YouTube, and Facebook. Messaging apps like WhatsApp or iMessage, or tools like Zoom and gaming platforms, are currently excluded, unless they evolve to meet the criteria. This is function-based law. It targets platform mechanics, not brand names.

7. Who's being held accountable?

Not your child. Not you. The responsibility sits with platforms. If they don't take reasonable steps to enforce the age minimum, they face fines of up to \$49.5 million AUD. This approach shifts the burden off families and onto the system-level actors where it belongs.

8. Is there more positives in all this other than the obvious child safety?

Yes. This is a unique chance for your child to clean up their digital footprint before it follows them into adulthood. Old posts, impulsive DMs, embarrassing photos, gone. They get to choose what to carry forward. It's not just a delay. It's a fresh start. One most adults wish they'd had.

9. What should I do now?

Start talking, planning, scaffolding. This delay isn't just about restriction it's an invitation to build. Structure downtime, encourage creative outlets, explore safe digital alternatives, and co-design new routines together. Use this time not to tighten control, but to grow their capacity. Because the most powerful thing you can give your child in this moment isn't a rule. It's readiness.

10. What about gaming?

The age delay does not apply to gaming platforms, unless those platforms evolve to behave like social media.

Most games, even those with chat functions, don't meet all three criteria. Platforms like Roblox, Fortnite, and Minecraft, for example, are being monitored, but they are not automatically included.

This is a function-based law, not a blanket ban on apps young people love. If a game starts acting like a social platform, with endless feeds, public posting, or algorithm-driven interaction, it could be reviewed and included later.

So no, games are not banned.

But yes, they're being watched, and if a gaming platform begins to cross into social media mechanics, it could come under future regulation. For now, families should focus on how games are used, who your child is talking to, what content is shared, and what moderation exists, rather than assuming all games are exempt or all are dangerous. It's about mechanics and meaning, not moral panic.

SUMMARY

The law comes into force on December 10. It will be reviewed within two years. Platforms will resist, yes workarounds will surface. Misinformation will spread and the internet will keep evolving. But this moment matters. It's not just a regulatory milestone, it's a message: *We're drawing a line by protecting space for children to develop before we hand them over to systems that weren't built for their brains, bodies, or safety.*

If you're a parent, carer, educator, business owner that works with children, this is your window to help children Under 16yrs to prepare now. Let's shift the conversation from "what they're losing" to "what they're building." This isn't about cutting kids off, it's about clearing space for them to grow up connected without being consumed. It's not about fewer tools, it's about tools that respect their pace, their privacy, and their potential. This delay doesn't end digital childhood. It reclaims it with their safety in mind, and a future they can trust. For ongoing updates visit: www.esafety.gov.au