

A digital ban won't solve real world mental health challenges

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Tackling everyday, real-life issues for teenagers may have more impact than banning access to social media, writes **Helen Connolly**.

As the eyes, ears and voice of South Australia's children and young people, I am pleased to hear our government is keen to address mental health and wellbeing challenges our young people face. Given the array of issues impacting their mental health, I'm interested to understand what the government has in mind beyond the [proposed banning of social media for teenagers under 16 years](#).

Whilst it is heartening that government is giving young people's health and wellbeing more attention, we will continue to fail them if we don't include their ideas on the issues they say are the most important.

Although voteless and voiceless, it is imperative the voices of young people are heard alongside those of concerned adults calling for a social media ban, as unsurprisingly, they may have different priorities. If our motivation is to keep young people safe and focused, then perhaps we need to ask them if banning access to social media will make the difference under 16s need?

From what young people tell me, it is feelings of sadness, loneliness, and not belonging at school that are of greater concern. In other words, they're feeling unsafe in their 'offline' lives more often than when they're online.

In fact, young people tell me they're frustrated with commentary from adults around their feelings of disconnection, disrespect, or discrimination being attributed to an over-reliance on digital devices and social media. According to most young people, this is adults jumping to conclusions and not listening to what is happening; a defining feature they tell me is part of their day-to-day interactions with adults.

I share their frustrations. The conclusions being drawn by some adults observing young people, rather than engaging with them, fails to consider myriad factors impacting their lives. It tends to overstate the influence technology has, while understating young people's awareness of the risks it presents.

Like me, teenagers of all ages want to see a more balanced acknowledgement of the positive influence social media has; how being online creates many opportunities for self-expression and can be a great outlet for creativity. It's also a source of inspiration and information for learning, entertainment, health, friendship, and social connections.

By focusing exclusively on risk, we risk turning teenagers off, driving a complacency toward important safety messaging we want them to hear.

Teenagers tell me they want a balanced mix of school-based education, curriculum and technology that expands their digital literacy and critical thinking skills while developing their capacity to manage risks and build resilience.

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When it comes to health and wellbeing, young people say their most pressing needs relate to wanting more time with time-poor families, relieving stress on parents, opportunities to play and hangout, and to be welcomed in their community. They want to be listened to and taken seriously, as well as be invited to participate in decisions being made about their lives.

For me, what's reassuring about this, is how it reveals young people want the same things they've always wanted. What's equally reassuring is that it confirms that the building blocks of a good childhood are the same as they were before the Internet was invented; relationships built on kindness and understanding, validation for who young people are and what they experience, and a sense of purpose and meaning. These qualities are found in positive, affirming, and respectful relationships between teens and their families, teachers, peers, and community leaders.

For those with vulnerabilities due to disability, illness, trauma, gender and sexual diversity, race, and complex family circumstances, school is not always experienced as a safe and nurturing environment. Some young people report feeling disrespected and unprotected while at school, being discriminated against, bullied, and marginalised on a regular basis. They describe school as a place that 'picks on them', 'humiliates' them, and puts a focus on their deficits rather than on their strengths, impacting their motivation to attend and engage with learning.

Some teenagers tell me they're more concerned about issues relating to sexism, sexual assault, and domestic violence. They worry about gender-based peer-to-peer bullying, and unsafe feelings while at school, at work, when socialising, and within their intimate relationships.

Others are concerned about the impact of discrimination relating to skin colour, appearance, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, and ability. Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds want action that transforms racist attitudes and behaviours in their schools, sports clubs, workplaces, and communities.

Others want support to meet their most basic needs, as the impact of rising costs of living and housing stress continue to create family conflict, exposing young people to yelling and stress at home. Young people often tell me they're missing meals, not going to the doctor, and not having much fun.

These offline pressures are real and deserve the same attention being given to their online pressures. Without an IRL (In Real Life) focus, the mental health challenges our kids face will continue to highlight how far we have strayed from our intergenerational promise to provide them with a better life.

Helen Connolly is the South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People.