



# THE CIRCULAR

Social Media Bans and Impacts on  
Adolescent Mental Health

LEARNING CIRCLE #1 | FEBRUARY 2026

UNICEF Adolescent Mental Health Hub &  
MHPSS Collaborative



## ABOUT LEARNING CIRCLES

Learning Circles are a new kind of conversation space, designed for dialogue, not presentation. Unlike traditional webinars or expert panels, these sessions bring together people from diverse contexts and perspectives to explore contentious issues, surface tensions, and co-develop insights. Each Circle opens with **Catalysts** - invited speakers who share evidence, experience, and practical cases to frame key questions. Then participants, called **Sensemakers**, step into dialogue to add context, challenge assumptions, and explore what the conversation means for practice, policy, research, and for the lives of those affected by the issue being examined. The goal is simple: exchange experiences, question what we think we know, and develop new understanding together. After each Circle, we publish **The Circular**: A brief synthesis capturing the key messages, tensions, and insights that emerged.

### How Topics Are Selected

**Learning Circle topics** are chosen based on what practitioners, policymakers, and young people tell us matters most right now. For **this first Circle**, we consulted with the members of the UNICEF Adolescent Mental Health Hub Community of Practice. They helped identify pressing questions in adolescent mental health that deserve deeper exploration. The topic of **social media bans** rose to the top. With governments around the world introducing age-based restrictions, and public debate increasingly polarized, young people wanted space to examine the evidence, explore the tensions and consider what these policies mean for their lives.

### Learning Circle #1: Social Media Bans and Adolescent Mental Health

On February 26, 2026, we convened young people, practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and advocates from around the world. One question brought them together: ***Is restricting or banning social media for adolescents a justified approach to protecting their wellbeing?***

Over 105 minutes, the sensemakers heard from two Catalysts who shared different angles on the evidence and different perspectives on the policy debate. Then they moved into small, facilitated groups - Mini Circles: Three rounds of structured dialogue in a shared workspace with collaborative boards for individual reflection, and time for group harvest. This Circular captures ≈what emerged.





## ABOUT THE ORGANIZERS

### UNICEF Adolescent Mental Health Hub

UNICEF's Adolescent Mental Health Hub is a dynamic global platform designed to equip policymakers, practitioners, caregivers, and young people with the knowledge, tools, and networks needed to drive transformative change for adolescent and caregiver mental health. The hub focuses on preventative and promotive mental health which include early interventions, proactive approaches that build resilience, strengthen support systems, and create environments where adolescents can thrive.

Learn more: [unicef.org/adolescentmentalhealthhub](https://unicef.org/adolescentmentalhealthhub) | Connect: [adolescentmentalhealthhub@unicef.org](mailto:adolescentmentalhealthhub@unicef.org)

### MHPSS Collaborative

The MHPSS Collaborative is a global hub for research, innovation, learning and advocacy in the field of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and wellbeing for children, youth and families. We build connections between local civil society and key academic, development and humanitarian actors to create knowledge and explore new ways to improve the mental health and wellbeing of children, youth and families facing adversity.

Learn more: <https://mhpsscollaborative.org/> | Connect: [LinkedIn page](#)

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This Learning Circle was made possible by many contributors. Young people and community members from the UNICEF Adolescent Mental Health Hub informed topic selection and helped shape the framing questions. Their insights ensured this conversation addressed what matters most to those most affected by these policies.

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**Disclaimer:** The opinions and views expressed in this document are those of the participants and do not necessarily represent the positions of UNICEF, the MHPSS Collaborative, the Catalysts, or any other affiliated organizations.

## HOW TO ENGAGE WITH THIS CIRCULAR

*This publication is designed as a resource for sensemaking, not a blueprint for action.*

### Read it in conversation

The tensions explored here don't have clean resolutions. Use them as prompts for discussion within your own teams, communities, or policy contexts.

### Follow your curiosity

We encourage reading the full Circular to understand the interconnected nature of these issues. But each tension can also stand alone. If a particular question draws you in, start there.

### Look for your stake

Throughout, you'll find insights tailored to different audiences: policymakers, platform companies, practitioners, researchers, funders and the media. But the richest learning often comes from reading beyond your own role and understanding how others see the same issue.

### Sit with complexity

You may finish reading with more questions than answers. That's by design. This Circular captures dialogue in progress, not conclusions.

### Stay connected



This is the first of many Learning Circles. If these questions resonate, we invite you to join future conversations.





## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Learning Circle, convened by the UNICEF Adolescent Mental Health Hub and MHPSS Collaborative, brought together young people, practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and advocates to explore one question: *Is restricting or banning social media for adolescents a justified approach to protecting their wellbeing?*

The dialogue surfaced four core tensions: whether restricting access protects young people or removes more than it protects; whether the evidence base justifies action or requires more time; who holds decision-making power in these debates; and what happens when policy meets the complexity of real lives.

Across all groups, the conversation converged on this: hard bans are unlikely to work. Young people are already embedded in social media. It's where their friendships, communities, and access to information live. Blanket restrictions are more likely to push them toward less regulated platforms than to protect them from harm. And they do nothing to change the platforms themselves.

The evidence base is genuinely contested, not because harms are imaginary, but because structural knowledge gaps are real. Platform companies control the data researchers need to study impacts. Without independent access, researchers cannot identify which subgroups are most vulnerable, distinguish design effects from content effects, or evaluate whether interventions work. In that environment, policymakers reach for visible, blunt tools. Bans become attractive not because they are optimal, but because they signal action.

Equity runs through every tension. For LGBTQ+ youth, young people with disabilities, and those in geographic isolation, digital spaces are not leisure. They are infrastructure. Removing access removes lifelines for some while ostensibly protecting others. Policy that treats all adolescents, all platforms, and all use as equivalent misses this entirely.

Young people are also largely absent from the processes that shape their digital lives and where consultation exists, it is often tokenistic. The gap between intent and influence is structural, not incidental.

The conversation kept returning to one question: if not bans, then what? Directions that emerged include:

- Platform redesign with algorithmic transparency and safety built in by default;
- Digital literacy embedded in school curricula;
- Regulatory approaches that target specific harms rather than removing access; and
- Institutional structures that give young people genuine roles in governance, not just advisory ones.





## SETTING THE SCENE

### The Global Landscape

Something is shifting in how governments approach adolescents and social media. In late 2024, Australia became the first country to implement a nationwide ban on social media for children under 16. The legislation passed quickly with limited public consultation and a short implementation window. By early 2025, other countries signaled similar moves. Calling it a matter of protecting childhood, Norway proposed a 15-year age limit and began public consultation. Malaysia declared intentions to restrict access for under-16s starting in 2026. The European Parliament adopted a non-binding resolution calling for a default minimum age of 16 across the EU. These aren't marginal policy proposals. They represent a global trend toward age-based restrictions as the primary tool for addressing concerns about social media and young people's wellbeing. The momentum builds on genuine concern. Parents worry about cyberbullying, sleep disruption, and mental health impacts. Policymakers face public pressure to act. Researchers debate whether the evidence justifies intervention. Young people report both harms and benefits from their digital lives. But the conversation has become polarized: bans or nothing. Protection or access. Safety or freedom. This Learning Circle created space to examine what gets lost in that binary.

### The Frame for Our Dialogue

Two perspectives opened the conversation, each challenging different assumptions. **One perspective questioned whether bans address the actual problem.** Removing young people from platforms doesn't change the platforms themselves. These are systems designed for profit and engagement, fundamentally in tension with public health. Everyone over the age threshold remains unprotected. Platform companies avoid accountability. Youth consultation is minimal or absent. And what alternatives are being offered? Where are the investments in offline spaces where young people can connect, explore identity, build community? Another perspective introduced a public health parallel worth sitting with: the story of **what happens when the companies being studied control access to the information needed to study them while simultaneously contesting existing evidence and delaying regulatory accountability.** For example, the tobacco industry didn't simply deny harm. To protect profits and delay regulation, it manufactured doubt, demanded impossible standards of proof, funded research designed to fragment the evidence base, claimed the problem is too complex to regulate and redirected attention to individual responsibility. Today, social media platforms control the data researchers need to study impacts. Without access to granular exposure information, we can't identify which





adolescents are most vulnerable, distinguish design effects from content effects, or evaluate whether interventions work. In that environment, when public trust erodes and evidence remains contested, policymakers reach for visible, blunt tools. **Bans become politically attractive not necessarily because they're optimal, but because they are visible and signal action.**

**Both perspectives converged on this:** the question isn't whether to ban. It's how to address the structural conditions that make platforms harmful in the first place. That framing set the stage for the dialogue that followed.



## CORE TENSIONS

### Tension 1: Protection vs. Access

#### The Question

Is restricting social media justified to protect adolescent wellbeing, or does it remove more than it protects?

#### The Stakes

This plays out everywhere. In living rooms where families negotiate screen time. In therapy sessions where practitioners hear young people tell contradictory stories about social media. In parliament chambers where policymakers feel pressure to act. For families, it's the ever-present worries over screen time. The worry about what their 13-year-old encounters on TikTok, the question of whether to allow Instagram at all and the guilt when they hand over a device to buy themselves peace. For practitioners, the stakes cut both ways. They hear young people disclose cyberbullying, sleep disruption, and social comparison that feeds anxiety. But they also hear LGBTQ+ youth describe social media as the only space where they can explore identity safely. They work with kids living with disabilities who find community online they can't access offline, as well as young people in isolated areas who connect with others who share their experiences. For policymakers, there's constituency pressure to act, headlines framing teen mental health crises and the political appeal of visible intervention - do something, show you care, fast. For platform companies, regulatory threat creates real business risk. But so does designing for safety over engagement. Current revenue models depend on time spent, and attention captured. Every safety feature that reduces scrolling touches the bottom line.

#### What the Conversation Surfaced

##### ***Hard bans are unlikely to work.***

This came up across the different groups. **Young people are already embedded in social media. It's the one place where their friendships, communities and access to information live.** Strict prohibitions might push them to less regulated platforms, spaces that are harder to monitor and potentially riskier. One group noted: children are already exposed. Bans may just shift the problem.

##### ***Social media is more complex than the comparisons we use.***

Multiple groups resisted framing social media like alcohol or nicotine. One group put it this way: "Social media functions more like a powerful infrastructure or conduit for communication, one for which we have not yet developed the equivalent of a seat belt." **It's not a substance to eliminate.**





**It's a system to make safer**, and the comparison breaks down because social media serves functions that substances don't: connection, information access, identity exploration, and community building.

***Young people as stakeholders, not just users.***

Frustration surfaced about youth being left out of policy conversations and platform design. Children's perspectives are still largely missing from these debates. They are not just users. They are stakeholders who should be equipped with the skills to articulate their experiences and contribute meaningfully to decisions that affect their lives.

***Financial realities can't be ignored.***

Platforms operate within profit-driven systems that reward longer screen time and higher engagement. Any long-term strategy has to grapple with business models and incentive structures built on attention extraction. Sustainable solutions must balance youth protection with the financial viability of platforms, or they won't be implemented.

***We're already late on AI.***

An unexpected thread: the sensemakers noted that while we debate social media bans, adolescents are already using AI tools daily. The question has shifted from whether they should have access, to how we guide and protect them within that reality. We may already be late.

***Alternatives are missing from the policy conversation.***

Banning or restricting social media without investing in what replaces it risks leaving young people with less, not better. A question that rarely makes it into policy debates: have governments actually ensured that what young people stand to lose (connection, community, creative outlet) exists somewhere else, and potentially somewhere safer? In many contexts, social media isn't leisure, it's infrastructure. Restricting it without building viable alternatives doesn't protect young people but rather just displaces them.

### Surprising Moments

- The consistency across groups in rejecting hard bans, even among participants who entered the session concerned about social media's harms.
- How quickly the conversation moved from 'should we ban?' to 'what's the alternative?'
- The emphasis on economic models. This isn't typically centered in adolescent mental health discussions, but it surfaced repeatedly as a barrier to meaningful change.

### Questions to Consider

#### For Policymakers

- Are you addressing platform design, or just removing young people from the current system?
- What happens at the age threshold? Protection one day, full exposure the next - how do you prepare young people for that cliff edge?
- Have young people been meaningfully consulted, or are decisions being made about them without them?
- What offline alternatives are being invested in alongside digital restrictions?





- Should digital safety for young users follow an ESG-style reporting model - a global framework with independent verification where platforms publicly attest to meeting safety standards?

### **For Platform Companies**

- If bans gain traction because platforms are harmful by design, how will you address the underlying incentive structures?
- What would business models look like that don't depend on maximizing engagement and screen time?
- How transparent are you willing to be about algorithmic systems and their effects on different user groups?

### **For Practitioners**

- When parents ask about restrictions for their children, does your response consider the young person in particular and their circumstances, or are you defaulting to one-size-fits-all recommendations?
- What are they losing if access is removed (e.g., community, identity exploration, information, support networks) - and have you considered whether online spaces might be safer than offline alternatives for some?
- What skills can you help build instead of just recommending removal of exposure? (e.g., critical thinking, emotional regulation, digital literacy)

### **For Researchers**

- How are you accounting for heterogeneity in your studies - not all adolescents, not all use, not all platforms, not all contexts?
- Are you transparent about funding sources for your studies and potential conflicts of interest?
- What advocacy is needed for independent access to platform data?

### **For Parents**

- How are you discussing social media with your adolescent - as something to fear and restrict, or as something to navigate together?
- What do you know about how your child actually uses social media, and have you created space for them to share both positive and negative experiences without judgment?
- Are you modeling healthy digital habits yourself, or does your adolescent see you scrolling endlessly while lecturing them about screen time?
- How can you maintain an involved, secure relationship with your growing adolescent while respecting their need for privacy and autonomy in digital spaces?
- If you restrict access, what alternative ways are you creating for your child to connect with peers, explore identity, and build community?

### **For Funders**

- Are you funding alternatives to bans, or only research that evaluates them?
- What would long-term support for implementation look like, beyond short-term pilots?

### **For Media**

- Are you reporting nuance, not just “social media good vs bad” framings?
- Are you centering young people’s voices and experiences, not just expert commentary?





- Are you covering structural issues (e.g., business models, data access, power dynamics) alongside individual stories of harm?

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### RELATED PATHWAYS FORWARD:

- Platform Redesign (see Pathways Forward section)
  - Education and Literacy (see Pathways Forward section)
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## Tension 2: Evidence vs. Precaution

### The Question

Do we have enough evidence to justify bans, or enough concern to act without definitive proof?

### The Stakes

This tension sits at the heart of every policy conversation about social media and adolescent wellbeing. **Researchers** point to gaps in the evidence: Associations are often small on average, causation is hard to establish, and impacts vary widely across individuals, contexts, types of use. The methodological challenges are real and call for more rigorous research, better data access and longer time horizons. **Policymakers** face political pressure. Constituents demand protection for their children. Headlines frame teen mental health as a crisis. Waiting for perfect evidence feels like inaction, and inaction has political costs. Whereas, visible intervention signals care, regardless of whether it works. **Platform companies** leverage uncertainty. They fund research, demand impossible standards of proof and argue that complexity makes regulation premature. The playbook isn't new; public health has seen it before. **Young people** live with the consequences of decisions made under uncertainty. Their access is shaped by policies grounded in contested evidence. Their communities are potentially disrupted by interventions designed without their input. Their digital futures are determined by adults debating what the science says.

### What the Conversation Surfaced

#### ***Structural knowledge gaps are real.***

Independent researchers lack adequate access to the granular data needed to study impacts rigorously. They rely on self-report measures, proxy indicators, and limited API access. Platform companies control transparency. Without access, researchers can't identify which subgroups are most vulnerable, can't distinguish design effects from content effects, can't evaluate whether regulatory interventions work, and can't assess cumulative exposure patterns over longer periods of time. Additionally, the pace of technological change makes it extra difficult for researchers to continue producing relevant, timely evidence.

#### ***Commercial determinants shape the research landscape.***





Funding sources influence research questions, methods, and conclusions. Platform companies fund academic partnerships that can blur lines between independence and evidence capture. This doesn't mean all research is corrupted. It means structural incentives shape what gets studied, how it gets studied, and how findings get interpreted.

***The precautionary principle has limits and risks.***

Some participants argued that potential risks to adolescent wellbeing are serious enough to justify acting now, even without definitive evidence. Others cautioned that precautionary action can cause its own harm, particularly when it removes access to community and support for marginalized young people. Precaution for whom? Protection from what? These questions matter.

***Heterogeneity is the rule, not the exception.***

Impacts vary by age, gender, mental health history, family context, geographic location, type of platform, type of use (active vs. passive), content encountered, existing social support.

Generalizations obscure the variation that matters. They mask who is helped and who is harmed, treating vastly different experiences as if they cancel each other out. **Policies that treat all adolescents, all platforms, all use, as equivalent, miss this complexity.** One participant noted: we need evidence that accounts for difference, not averages that obscure it.

## Surprising Moments

- How quickly the conversation connected platform behavior to tobacco industry tactics. This framing isn't common in mental health circles, but it resonated.
- The recognition that waiting for perfect evidence may be inaction, but acting on imperfect evidence carries risks of its own. There seems to be no clean path forward.

## Questions to Consider

### For Policymakers

- What level of evidence do you require before acting - and is that threshold consistent across policy domains?
- Who bears the risk of waiting for more evidence? Who bears the risk of acting without it?
- Are you demanding evidence while simultaneously blocking the data access that would generate it?

### For Platform Companies

- What would truly independent data access look like - researchers with no editorial control, no approval rights, no strings attached?
- How transparent are you willing to be about algorithmic systems and their differential effects?
- Can you acknowledge conflicts of interest when you comment on evidence that affects your business model?

### For Researchers

- What collective advocacy is needed for data access rights?





- How transparent are you being about funding sources and potential conflicts as it relates to the questions you ask?
- Are your study designs prioritizing heterogeneity over average effects - capturing who is helped and who is harmed, not just overall trends?

### For Parents

- What conversations are you having with your adolescent about evaluating information they encounter online - helping them develop critical thinking rather than just telling them what to believe?
- When you hear conflicting information about social media's impacts, how are you making sense of what applies to your specific child?
- What types of information sources do you typically rely on (e.g., headlines, research, etc) when considering young people's experiences?
- How can you stay curious about the evidence while also trusting what you observe in your own child's life?

### For Funders

- Are you funding independent research infrastructure (including for data access and analysis), not just partnerships that depend on platform cooperation?
- What would long-term support for longitudinal studies look like?
- Are you prioritizing research on populations typically excluded - marginalized communities, non-Western contexts?
- Would you consider requiring transparency and open data as part of your funding conditions?

### For Media

- How are you reporting uncertainty without false balance - not all claims are equally credible?
- Are you distinguishing association from causation in your coverage?
- Are you highlighting who funds research and flagging potential conflicts of interest?

### For Practitioners

- You see individual variation that averages obscure - are you documenting patterns you observe in clinical practice to inform the evidence base?
- Are you advocating for research that accounts for the young people you serve, not just majority populations?
- Are you translating research findings back to the contexts where you work?
- Are you being transparent with families about what evidence does and doesn't show?

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#### RELATED PATHWAYS FORWARD:

→ Regulatory Approaches (see Pathways Forward section)

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## Tension 3: Who Decides, and How

### The Question



Whose voices shape policies about social media and adolescent wellbeing, and who is systematically excluded?

### The Stakes

This is a question about power, not just influence. **Young people** are the subjects of these policies. Their access, their communities, their digital futures are at stake. **But in most policy processes, they are consulted minimally or not at all, and decisions are made about them without them.** **Policymakers** face competing inputs from constituents, platform companies, researchers, advocacy groups, and media. Whose voice carries weight? Whose framing shapes the question? **Practitioners** see what policies look like when they hit the ground. But the feedback loop is broken and so, frontline insight rarely reaches those designing policies. **Platform companies** have resources, access, and influence that other stakeholders don't. They fund research, employ lobbyists, and shape public narratives. That asymmetry matters. **Researchers** generate evidence, but evidence doesn't speak for itself. Someone interprets, decides what counts as credible, and chooses which findings get amplified. Power shapes knowledge.

### What the Conversation Surfaced

**Youth consultation is minimal in current policy processes.**

Australia's social media ban was passed quickly, with an extremely short consultation window. Any engagement with young people was limited. This pattern repeats across jurisdictions. Policies designed by adults, for adults' ideas of what children need. Without meaningfully involving the people most affected.

#### VOICE FROM THE DIALOGUE

*Children's perspectives are still largely missing from policy discussions. Young people are not just users. They are stakeholders who should be equipped with the skills to articulate their experiences and contribute meaningfully to decisions that affect them.*

**Tokenism is not participation.**

Several groups distinguished between performative youth consultation - asking opinions without decision-making power - versus genuine participation - young people as partners in policy design. Meaningful participation requires infrastructure; young people equipped with skills to articulate their experiences; structures that give them actual influence, not just advisory roles; compensation for their time and expertise; as well as long-term relationships, not one-off consultations.

**Global forums could bridge the gap.**





Creating international spaces where youth voices are genuinely represented, not filtered through adult intermediaries, could shift power dynamics.

### VOICE FROM THE DIALOGUE

*Young people should be equipped with the skills to articulate their experiences and contribute meaningfully to decisions that affect them. Global collective forums and gatherings that genuinely represent youth voices would help bridge this gap and avoid purely adult-centered solutions.*

### **Institutionalizing youth input matters.**

Ad hoc consultation is insufficient. Young people need formal roles in governance structures. This means youth advisory boards with actual authority, youth seats on policy committees and youth-led organizations with funding and platform to influence decisions.

### **Surprising Moments**

- The frustration with tokenistic participation was palpable.
- How often the conversation returned to structure over intentions. Good intentions don't change power dynamics. Institutional design does.

### **Questions to Consider**

#### **For Policymakers**

- Are young people consulted, or do they have decision-making power? What's the difference in your process?
- What resources and support are you providing for meaningful youth participation - not just asking them to volunteer time and expertise?
- How are you ensuring diversity among young people engaged - not just those easiest to reach?
- Are your consultation timelines realistic for meaningful input, or performative?

#### **For Platform Companies**

- What transparency are you providing about your lobbying activities and policy positions?
- How are you supporting independent youth-led advocacy - truly independent, with no strings attached?
- Can you acknowledge the conflicts of interest when you engage in policy debates that affect your business model?
- How open are you to providing data and resources to enable informed public conversation?

#### **For Practitioners**

- How can you amplify the voices of young people you work with - with their consent and support?
- What documentation of how policies play out in practice could inform future design?
- What youth-led organizations working on these issues need your support?





- Are you advocating for structures that center frontline insight?

#### For Researchers

- Are young people involved in study design, not just as subjects?
- How are you making findings accessible to non-academic audiences, including youth?
- Are you studying power dynamics, or just individual outcomes?

#### For Parents

- Are you making decisions about social media access with your adolescent or for them?
- How are you creating opportunities for your child to have genuine input into family rules about digital life, not just comply with decisions made without their perspective?
- What would it look like to treat your adolescent as capable of understanding risks and making informed choices with your guidance, rather than as someone who must simply obey?
- How are you preparing your child for the autonomy they'll eventually have, rather than creating a cliff edge where restriction suddenly becomes total freedom?

#### For Funders

- Are you funding youth-led organizations and initiatives?
- Are you supporting participatory research where young people shape the questions?
- Are you providing resources for youth to engage in policy processes?
- Are you prioritizing funding work that centers marginalized young people, not just those easiest to reach?
- Are you funding initiatives that are intentionally cross-/inter-disciplinary in nature?

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#### RELATED PATHWAYS FORWARD:

→ Youth Participation (see Pathways Forward section)

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## Tension 4: Intended and Unintended Consequences

### The Question

What happens when policy meets the complexity of real lives?

### The Stakes

**Policy** is designed in meeting rooms, debated in legislatures and announced in press releases. It's then implemented in families trying to navigate screen time negotiations, schools managing device policies, clinics supporting young people in crisis and in online spaces where young people actually live. The **gap between intent and reality** is where consequences emerge. Some are anticipated; many are not. Some affect everyone; others fall disproportionately on those already marginalized. **Bans are designed to protect young people from harm. But protection for whom? Harm defined how? And at what cost?** Equity should not be an add-on consideration. It's the lens through which consequences become visible.





### What the Conversation Surfaced

#### ***Age verification is technically and politically fraught.***

How do you verify age online without compromising privacy? Current methods are inaccurate, easy to bypass or require collecting more personal data than many are comfortable with. Young people already falsify ages to access platforms. Stricter verification might mean more invasive data collection, creating new risks while trying to address old ones.

#### ***Platform migration is likely.***

If mainstream platforms ban under-16s, where do they go? To less regulated spaces, private messaging apps, international platforms outside jurisdictional reach, or new tools adults don't understand.

#### VOICE FROM THE DIALOGUE

*Hard bans are unlikely to be effective. Children are already deeply exposed to social media, and strict prohibitions may simply push them toward alternative platforms that are less regulated.*

#### ***Equity matters profoundly.***

Bans don't affect all young people equally. For LGBTQ+ youth, social media may be the only safe space to explore identity and find community. For young people living with disabilities, online connection may be more accessible than physical spaces. For those in geographic isolation - rural areas, small towns, regions with limited resources - digital platforms provide access to information and support otherwise unavailable. Removing access removes lifelines for some while ostensibly protecting others.

#### ***The gap between policy intent and lived experience is wide.***

Policy assumes young people will comply but reality is messier. They develop workarounds, use VPNs, borrow accounts, create secondary profiles. **Adults often don't understand youth digital subcultures** - emoji codes, hidden vocabularies, anonymous accounts used to navigate restrictions. Policy designed without this understanding will fail in predictable ways.

#### ***Sudden exposure at age thresholds is risky.***

If you're protected from social media until your 16th birthday, then suddenly given full access with no preparation, what happens? Protection one day, full exposure the next; no gradual skill-building, no scaffolded experience, just a cliff edge. This came up repeatedly as a design flaw in age-based bans.

#### ***Differential enforcement is inevitable.***

Who will enforce these policies? How? Wealthy families may have resources to manage their children's digital lives through other means. Marginalized families may face more surveillance and





punishment. Schools in well-resourced areas may offer robust digital literacy programs. Under-resourced schools may not. The policy may be universal, but its impacts won't be.

***Knowledge silos mean insufficient diversity of disciplines and perspectives in the room.***

Decisions about social media and adolescent wellbeing sit at the intersection of public health, technology, education, child rights, and digital governance; but these fields rarely talk to each other. Public health experts are largely absent from internet governance conversations, which tend to sit with ICT or communications ministries. Tech sector actors don't routinely involve health or developmental specialists. The result is policy shaped by whichever sector has jurisdictional authority, not by the range of expertise, or lived experience, the problem actually requires.

### Surprising Moments

- How often participants returned to equity, even when prompts didn't explicitly raise it. This suggests it's not peripheral but central to how people evaluate policy.
- The recognition that young people develop sophisticated digital practices adults don't see. Policy designed without understanding youth digital culture will be bypassed.
- The concern about what happens at the age threshold. This wasn't framed as a minor implementation detail but as a fundamental flaw.

### Questions to Consider

#### For Policymakers

- How will age verification work in practice and what privacy trade-offs are you willing to accept?
- What happens to young people at the margins - LGBTQ+ youth, those living with disabilities, those in isolation?
- How will you monitor for platform migration and emerging/unintended risks?
- What support is provided at age thresholds to prepare young people for sudden exposure?
- When making policies, have you ensured that there is a diversity of expertise (technical and lived experience expertise) represented in the processes?

#### For Practitioners

- What are you observing when bans are implemented - can you document this to inform future policy?
- How can you advocate for equity considerations in policy design processes?
- What support do families need when navigating enforcement?

#### For Researchers

- What research on implementation - not just intent - is needed?
- How can you evaluate unintended consequences systematically?
- What equity analyses would surface who is helped and who is harmed?

#### For Parents





## THE CIRCULAR

### Social Media Bans and Impacts on Adolescent Mental Health

- Do you know whether your child belongs to a group for whom digital access might be particularly important - LGBTQ+ youth, young people with disabilities, those experiencing isolation?
- If you restrict access, what might your child be losing alongside the harms you hope to prevent?
- How are you ensuring that offline alternatives you're offering are genuinely safe and welcoming for your specific child?
- Are you building the kind of relationship where your adolescent would come to you if they encounter harm online, or are they more likely to hide problems for fear of losing access entirely?
- What skills are you helping your child develop to navigate digital spaces safely, rather than relying solely on restriction?

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#### **RELATED PATHWAYS FORWARD:**

→ [Offline Alternatives](#) (see Pathways Forward section)

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## PATHWAYS FORWARD

*The conversation kept returning to one question. If not bans, then what?*

This section synthesizes alternatives that emerged across three rounds of dialogue. These aren't fully formed solutions. They are directions worth exploring, approaches that the sensemakers saw as more promising than blanket restrictions.

### Platform Redesign

*The structure of platforms matters as much as access to them.*

**Algorithm-free or decentralized models could reduce pressure for engagement.** Earlier versions of Facebook and Instagram relied more on organic social circles rather than algorithmic amplification driven by engagement metrics. Returning to models that prioritize user choice over algorithmic promotion may reduce harmful comparison and addictive patterns.

#### VOICE FROM THE DIALOGUE

*These platforms once functioned differently. We can design them to function differently again.*

**Transparency requirements for algorithmic systems.** Platform companies should be required to disclose how algorithms work, what they optimize for and how they affect different user groups. This enables independent evaluation and creates accountability for design choices that prioritize engagement over wellbeing.

**Safety standards as infrastructure requirements.** Social media functions like infrastructure. We don't let people drive cars without seat belts. We don't build bridges without safety codes. Digital platforms need equivalent standards, not because platforms are identical to cars or bridges, but because they're systems that shape millions of lives.

#### VOICE FROM THE DIALOGUE

*One good practice we can learn from is the UK Age Appropriate Design Code, which requires digital services likely to be accessed by children to build privacy and safety protections in by default, shifting responsibility onto platforms rather than children or their parents.*

**Business models that don't depend on attention extraction.** Current platforms are built on maximizing screen time to sell advertising. Any long-term solution must grapple with this.





Sustainable alternatives might include subscription models, public utility frameworks or regulatory limits on engagement-maximizing features. Balancing public health priorities with financial viability of platform companies remains a central tension, but it must be addressed.

### Education and Literacy

*Young people need skills, not just restrictions.*

**Mandatory digital literacy in school curricula.** This shouldn't be optional or piecemeal. Digital literacy should be embedded in formal education, teaching students how to evaluate information, protect themselves from digital harms such as harassment, recognize manipulation, and practice digital hygiene. It should be age-appropriate, evidence-based, and updated as platforms evolve. Crucially, the content should reflect how young people actually navigate digital spaces; not only focused on risk and harm, but on how to participate, connect, and thrive online.

**Critical thinking and emotional awareness training.** Cognitive inoculation theory offers a framework: strengthen resilience before exposure to harmful content rather than trying to eliminate exposure entirely. This means helping young people develop emotional regulation skills, recognize social comparison triggers, and question what they encounter online from an early age.

**Age-appropriate risk communication.** Any intervention needs to be explained in ways that are transparent, evidence-based, and make sense to the young people affected. Adolescents and children often question why certain restrictions would benefit them. Treating them as capable of understanding risk, rather than subjects who must simply comply, respects their agency and improves outcomes.

**Parent education programs.** Parents need support to understand digital environments and guide healthy habits at home. Mandatory programs could equip parents with knowledge about platforms, risks, and strategies for supporting their children's digital wellbeing. This shouldn't be about surveillance or control but about informed partnership.

### Regulatory Approaches

*Regulation can target harms without removing access.*

**Partial restrictions focused on specific risks.** Rather than blanket bans, regulations could target specific harms. For example, restrictions on notifications during sleep hours to protect adolescent sleep; limits on features designed to maximize addictive engagement; and requirements for child-focused social media spaces to have stronger moderation and less algorithmic amplification of content.





**Legal frameworks defining platform company responsibilities.** Clear laws specifying what platform companies are responsible for: algorithmic transparency, data protection, harm mitigation and age-appropriate design. This creates accountability without relying on voluntary corporate action.

**Stronger age verification without privacy violations.** If age verification is used, it must be accurate, difficult to bypass, and protect privacy. Current methods often fail on all counts. Investment in better verification systems (such as privacy-preserving technologies) could enable age-appropriate spaces without invasive data collection.

**Multisectoral coordination.** No single sector can solve this. Technology, education, health, and policy must work together. Clear roles and responsibilities should be defined across sectors, embedding protective layers into systems rather than relying on any one intervention. As one sensemaker put it: “it is not feasible to act in only one area.”

## Youth Participation

*Young people must be partners in designing solutions.*

**Institutionalized youth advisory structures.** Move beyond ad hoc consultation to formal governance roles. Youth advisory boards with actual decision-making power. Youth seats on policy committees. Youth-led organizations with funding and platform to influence decisions.

**Equipping young people to articulate experiences.** Young people need support to develop skills for participating in policy processes. This includes training in advocacy, public speaking, research literacy, and policy analysis. The goal is not to make them sound like adults but to ensure they can represent their perspectives effectively.

## Offline Alternatives

*Digital restrictions without offline investment create voids.*

**Investment in safe physical spaces.** Where are young people supposed to go when we restrict digital access? Many communities lack safe, accessible, well-resourced spaces for young people to connect, play, explore interests, and build community. Policy that removes digital access without investing in offline alternatives is incomplete and arguably is a public health risk.

**Non-formal educational programs.** Provide young people with meaningful activities and incentives to engage offline. This includes sports, arts, cultural programs, and peer spaces. The goal is balance, not replacement. Young people need both digital and physical worlds that support their development.

**Support for in-person engagement.** Beyond structured programs, young people need permission and resources for unstructured time with peers. This means rethinking how public





space is designed and who it's designed for. Parks, libraries, community centers - are they actually accessible and welcoming to adolescents?

**Recognition that offline isn't always safer.** For some young people, offline spaces are more dangerous than online ones. LGBTQ+ youth may face rejection or violence in physical spaces where digital spaces offer acceptance. Young people in conflict-affected areas may have more safety online than in their neighborhoods. **Offline alternatives must be genuinely safe, not just assumed to be.**



## WHAT WE'RE STILL WRESTLING WITH

*This Learning Circle didn't produce consensus. It produced even more questions.*

### **How do we build systems that protect without excluding?**

Protection and access don't have to be opposites, but making them compatible requires different thinking. What does protection look like when it doesn't rely on removal? How do we account for the reality that some young people need access to digital communities more than others? What systems allow for difference rather than demanding uniformity?

### **What does meaningful youth participation actually look like in fast-moving policy and tech?**

Everyone agrees young people should be involved. But what does that mean when policy and technology moves quickly and young people have school, work, lives that don't pause for consultation? How do we move from tokenistic input to genuine partnership? What resources and power must shift for participation to be real?

### **How do we regulate when platform companies control the data we need to regulate them?**

Independent researchers can't study what they can't access. Policymakers can't evaluate what they can't measure. Platform companies control exposure data, algorithmic systems, transparency. How do we create the knowledge infrastructure needed for effective regulation when the entities being regulated control the information?

### **What alternatives exist that are politically viable, evidence-informed, and centered on young people?**

Bans are politically attractive because they're visible and simple to communicate. Alternatives are complex, require coordination across sectors, take time to show results. How do we make complexity politically viable? What framing helps policymakers choose difficult, long-term solutions over simple, short-term ones? And how do we ensure alternatives are designed with young people, not just for them?

### **How do we address business models built on engagement?**

Every conversation about platform safety runs into the same barrier. Current business models reward time spent, attention captured, engagement maximized. Regulation can limit the worst practices, but can it fundamentally change the incentive structure? What alternatives exist? Who has the power to force that change?

### **What do we do about AI while we're still debating social media?**

Young people are using AI tools daily. The debate can no longer center on whether they should have access. How do we apply what we're learning from the social media conversation to AI before we repeat the same patterns of acting too slowly?

These questions don't have simple answers. That's the point. They're invitations to keep thinking, keep questioning, keep learning together.





## CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

This is the first of many Learning Circles.

Future Circles will explore other pressing questions in adolescent mental health and psychosocial support. If these conversations resonate with you, we invite you to join future dialogues, contribute your perspective, and help shape the questions we explore together.

### To stay connected:

#### **UNICEF Adolescent Mental Health Hub**

Website: [unicef.org/adolescentmentalhealthhub](https://www.unicef.org/adolescentmentalhealthhub) | Email: [adolescentmentalhealthhub@unicef.org](mailto:adolescentmentalhealthhub@unicef.org)

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# THE CIRCULAR

Social Media Bans and Impacts on  
Adolescent Mental Health

LEARNING CIRCLE #1 | FEBRUARY 2026

