



A GENERATION ONLINE

Ensuring children and young people thrive in a digital world

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UNICEF is the world's leading organisation working to protect and improve the lives of every child in over 190 countries. UNICEF is working around the world to deliver cutting-edge research and programming to improve digital environments and keep children and young people safe online. In Australia, we support this global ambition by working with local partners and governments to raise children's voices, defend their rights, and help them reach their potential at all stages of life.

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UNICEF Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands and communities in which we and our partners work throughout Australia, and recognises their connection to their lands, waters, and communities. We pay respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures, and to Elders past and present, and to the children of today who are the Elders of the future.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UNICEF Australia strives to contribute to a world where children and young people are safe and protected online, enabling them to benefit from all the opportunities of an increasingly digital world.

Digital technologies are transforming our world at an accelerating pace and bringing a range of possibilities for the well-being and advancement people and communities all over the world.¹ The boundaries between online and offline worlds are becoming increasingly indistinct, creating a seamless integration of technology within all aspects of life. This has brought about unprecedented opportunities for education, health, entertainment, social connection and civil engagement. Yet the pace and power at which technologies are evolving is also creating new risks, some of which are not yet fully known.

In the centre of all of this are children and young people, who's lives will be profoundly shaped by our ability to respond effectively to the everchanging digital landscape and foster an inclusive, open, sustainable, fair, safe and secure digital future for all. ² While there have been significant advancements in Australia recently, including reviews to the Online Safety Act, Privacy Act and introduction of a social media ban for young people under sixteen, the cohort who will be most impacted by these reforms have been missing from the conversation.

In our groundbreaking new research, UNICEF Australia sheds light on the digital lives of over 2000 children and young people across Australia, including their interactions with social media and age assurance measures, exposure to mis and disinformation and managing their online data and privacy. Some of our most striking insights include:

- 1 Social media:** Children and young people are bypassing age verification mechanisms, with only 43% occasionally or rarely providing their real age and 36% providing a false age.
- 2 Mis/disinformation:** Less than half (43%) of children and young people believe it's important to verify information before sharing it and only 34% feel confident in identifying misinformation online.
- 3 Data and privacy:** Over 70% of children and young people are uncomfortable with how their data is being collected and used online, yet over 55% are still happy to hand over highly sensitive personal information to access online platforms.



Our data underscores the importance of involving children and young people in policy development so that we can create digital environments that genuinely promote their safety and wellbeing. Children and young people in Australia are sophisticated navigators of the online world, participating online in increasingly diverse and complex ways. With so much legislative change in the pipeline, centering their perspectives and experiences is essential to ensure we get things right.

UNICEF Australia will continue to work with the government, industry and civil society using these insights to amplify the voices of children and young people. We will continue to advocate for an online world which minimises risks and harms, while still providing all the positive benefits that allow children and young people to thrive in an increasingly digital world.

A GENERATION ONLINE

Today, in a globally connected world, the lines between online and offline experiences have become increasingly indistinct. For children and young people, this reality is entirely normal, with both realms integrated almost seamlessly into every aspect of their lives.

In Australia, every child will be online by the time they are twelve years old.ⁱⁱⁱ Research indicates that the experiences of children and young people online in Australia are generally positive. In our [2023 survey](#) with 15 - 17 year olds, we found that 81% of social media users and 84% of those playing video games said these things have positive influences on their lives.^{iv} More recently, the first ever Australian Youth Digital Index by the Telstra Foundation highlighted that young people are largely comfortable and proactive in how they approach digital technology - 70% are satisfied with their time on digital devices and 65% say they can control what they see and do online.^v

However, we know now that this digital childhood is also introducing risks. Some of these are old risks which have been translated from the offline world to online, like schoolyard bullying which follows children and young people to wherever they can access the internet. But others are new, like exposure to awful content that no one should see, widespread misinformation that makes discerning the truth harder than ever, and the mass harvesting of children's data which is on sold in untold places to the highest bidder.

In the face of this rapid transformation, governments around the world have sought to quickly adapt, with Australia often leading the charge. In just the past 12 months we have seen a social media ban for those under the age of 16, the announcement of a Children's Online Privacy Code to better protect their data, and commitment to introduce a statutory duty of care so that tech companies must consider the safety of all who use their platforms.

There is a lot to be positive about, yet an untapped resource has been largely missing from this debate, a group of people who – having been born into this digital world we all now inhabit – understand it better than most. The ability of children and young people to adapt to new technologies and digital platforms often surpasses that of adults.^{vi} We all know a parent who has asked for digital help from a child, recognising their innate sense and intuition in navigating the complex online world.

Our research provides insights into the realities of children and young people online in Australia, so that we can influence policy, encourage responsible tech development and ensure that the digital lives of young Australians are filled with opportunities for growth and engagement. Our data highlights the importance of ensuring their unique perspectives and experiences are not overlooked.

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN AUSTRALIA?

SOCIAL MEDIA AGE

In late 2024, Australia passed a law introducing a mandatory minimum age of 16 for accounts on certain social media platforms. This will take effect by December 2025.

ONLINE SAFETY LAWS

The Online Safety Act, which sets the rules for the online world, is currently being reviewed in Australia. The Government has already committed to legislating a new duty of care on digital platforms so they proactively keep Australians safe. The review of the Act also made many more recommendations, which still need to be actioned.

PRIVACY LAWS

The Privacy Act, which governs how our data is used, is also being reviewed. The Government has already committed to develop a Children's Online Privacy Code which will provide stronger protections for children's data. The review also made many more recommendations, which still need to be actioned.



YOUNG VOICES TO DRIVE CHANGE

In November 2024, UNICEF Australia ran a nationally representative survey with children and young people to help platform their voices in the public discourse. Our survey with 2,033 children and young people aged 13 – 17 across Australia, was designed with and for young people. From their views on social media to misinformation, data and privacy, we present the findings here in the hope they can be used to make Australia the best place in the world for children to go online.

YOUTH SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

TOTAL	CHILD GENDER		CHILD AGE					CHILD AGE GROUP		STATE (RECORDED)						5 CAPITAL CITY (RECORDED)	
	MALE	FEMALE	13	14	15	16	17	13-15	16-17	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS/NT/ACT	YES	NO
2033	1092	914	360	360	369	444	500	1089	944	703	446	415	155	208	106	1492	541

SOCIAL MEDIA

The impact of social media on children and young people has gained significant attention and in late 2024 the Australian government announced it would introduce legislation preventing children under the age of 16 from accessing social media. This legislation is intended to better protect children and young people against harms they may face online and to provide greater support to parents worried about their child's safety and wellbeing. Through our research we sought to understand how children are navigating current age restrictions, engaging in protective behaviours online and the potential acceptability and efficacy of various age assurance mechanisms.

What do you do now to verify your age online?



36%

Provide a false age



43%

Occasionally or rarely provide their real age



18%

Always provide their real age



15%

Use borrowed credentials (e.g. from older sibling or parent)



11%

Use a VPN to gain access



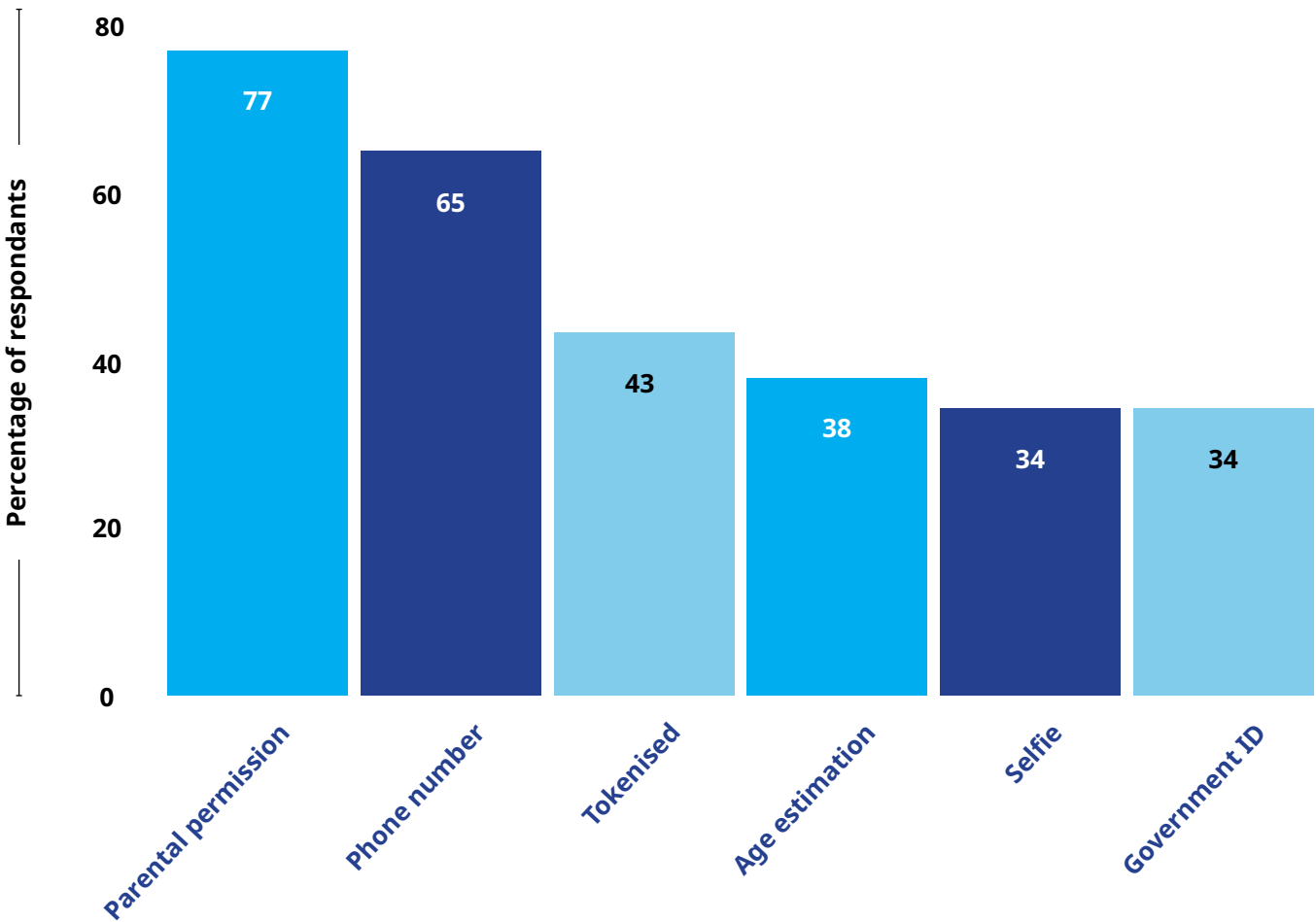
10%

Use another app or website to falsify their age

➔ **YOUNGER TEENS AGED 13-15 YEARS**

are less likely to provide their real age than older teens aged 16-17 and 13-year-olds are the most likely (22%) to say they use borrowed credentials (e.g. from older sibling or parent).

What's your preferred way to prove age for social media?



What do you do about some of the downsides of the online world?



71%

Regularly avoid websites/apps known for harmful content



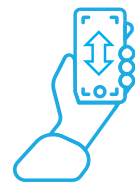
23%

Regularly find ways to bypass blocks on certain sites/content



63%

Monitor the amount of time they spend online



77%

Can recognise they are doomsscrolling and stop



57%

Set specific times of day to avoid their phone/computer



79%

Take regular breaks from screen time



Younger teens aged 13 – 15 years are more likely to monitor the amount of time they spend online, use time management apps and set specific times of day when they avoid using their phone or computer than older teens aged 16 – 17 years.



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

+ Active participation of children and young people is critical in the design and implementation of legislation to ensure it is effective in achieving the intended policy goals. Our data shows that children and young people are autonomous and sophisticated navigators of the online world, not only finding their way around intended restrictions but also taking their own initiative to prevent exposure to unwanted content. Importantly, young people are often falsifying their age through various means to gain access to content online and this is more common for younger teens aged 13 – 15 years. This has significant implications for implementation of new social media ban and we need to learn from these findings to prevent bans pushing young people into environments that aren't designed for them.

+ Platforms need to consider that young people may access them whether they are meant to or not. Our data shows that children and young people are bypassing controls intended to keep them away from inappropriate or harmful content online. By taking a proactive approach to safety, such as built-in safety features, content filters and child-friendly privacy settings, online platforms can ensure that children and young people navigating themselves past intended controls are protected from potential harm. Strong transparency and accountability mechanisms to ensure platforms uphold their responsibilities to monitor, manage and mitigate risks is essential.

MIS/DISINFORMATION

There are many facets of online safety for children and young people, yet a growing area of concern is the increasing proliferation of mis/disinformation such as fake news and deepfake content. Children and young people are particularly vulnerable to mis and disinformation as their cognitive functioning develops and they learn to navigate the complexities of the online world. Mis and disinformation can have significant implications for their wellbeing, inciting anxiety, fear, distrust and even harmful practices.^{vii} Our research sought to understand the experiences and beliefs of children and young people relating to information they encounter online.

What do you think about mis/disinformation and fake content?



43%

Think it's important to verify information before sharing



34%

Feel confident in their ability to identify misinformation



56%

Have been exposed to deepfake content



15%

Have seen deepfake content shared or created by friends



42%

Believe content shared by well-known organisations



38%

Believe content shared by adults like parents or teachers



22%

Believe content shared by popular influencers



40%

Think social media companies should protect them from misinformation



36%

Believe the government should protect them from misinformation



CONTENT THAT IS VIRAL

Younger teens aged 13 – 15 are more likely to believe content that has a lot of likes and shares, or content that is shared by popular influencers than older teens aged 16 – 17.



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

+ Greater transparency and accountability mechanisms are required to ensure platforms are regularly monitoring and moderating mis/disinformation. This includes undertaking active steps to prevent its circulation and mitigating risks to children and young people. This is especially important given we know children and young people are often targets of mis/disinformation and are more likely to play a role in its' circulation.^{viii} Our data shows that children and young people believe this is a responsibility of both governments and digital platforms and could include requirements on platforms for content moderation, regular public audits of their algorithms, child-friendly reporting mechanisms and content policies.

+ Education to support media and information literacy is key to equip children and young people with the skills necessary to navigate the complexities of the online world, identify mis/disinformation, and know how and when to report it.^{ix} The Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No.25 calls for "critical understanding, [provide] guidance on how to find trusted sources of information, and to identify mis/disinformation and other forms of biased or false content". Our data shows that younger teens may be more susceptible to potential mis/disinformation, so investing in education from a young age along with public awareness raising for parents, carers and teachers is essential to help them interact skilfully and critically both in the online and offline worlds.

DATA AND PRIVACY

We know that data from children and young people is treated as a commodity - collected, traded and sold at unprecedented rates. It is estimated that by age 13, advertisers will have collected 72 million data points on a child.* The long-term implications and risks of this for children and young people are significant and include data monetisation, microtargeted advertising, profiling and automated decision-making.^{xi} Yet for young children, concepts like privacy can be difficult to understand, and they may unwittingly divulge information to third parties that places them at risk. Through our research we sought to understand the awareness and adaptive behaviours of children and young people in Australia when it comes to their data and privacy online.

What do you think about privacy and handing over your data online?



86%

Regularly take steps to protect their privacy



14%

Do nothing to protect their privacy



72%

Are uncomfortable with their personal data being collected by apps and websites



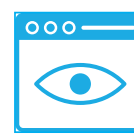
71%

Are uncomfortable with their friends sharing pictures/ videos of them online without their permission.



66%

Are uncomfortable with companies predicting their behaviours and preferences based on personal data



82%

Are uncomfortable with photos and/ or videos of themselves being used to train AI



55%

Are willing to provide personal information (e.g. phone number, selfie) to access social media



11%

Are willing to provide social media platforms with their school name



9%

Are willing to provide social media platforms with their home address

It is estimated that by age 13, advertisers will have collected **72 million data points** on a child.^{xi}

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WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

+ Australia needs stronger online privacy protections particularly in relation to the collection and use of children's data by platforms. Our data shows that children and young people remain highly uncomfortable with how their information is being collected and used online, although many are still relatively happy handing over sensitive personal information to access online platforms, particularly social media platforms. Interestingly, many teenagers are uncomfortable with friends sharing content of them without their permission, showing their high concerns for privacy in the face of what has become a socially acceptable practice. Stronger legislation that limits the collection and use of children and young people's personal information to what is necessary and in their best interests is essential.

+ Awareness raising on data and privacy online is critical to help children and young people understand the implications of sharing their personal information online. Our data shows that younger teens are more likely to share personal information to access social media platforms. This highlights the importance of education from primary school, when we know children are starting to have an online presence, to prevent them handing over highly sensitive personal data to platforms.^{xii} Through public awareness raising and education on data and privacy protections, we can empower children and young people to be active participants in shaping their digital experiences and navigating the online world safely.



YOUNGER TEENS AGED 13-15 YEARS

were more likely to be willing to share personal information with social media platforms and were more likely to be comfortable with their data being used in ways they don't know about.

OUR PATH FORWARD

Our data shows the children and young people are savvy in navigating the online world, easily and regularly overcoming safety protections and barriers intended to restrict their access.

They are overall aware and uncomfortable with some of the threats the online world presents, and many demonstrate a level of proactivity in navigating these. Yet our data also reveals some gaps in awareness and behaviours, particularly around the handing over of sensitive information and potential engagement with mis and disinformation. Some children and young people are intentionally bypassing parental controls and falsifying their age to get through safety barriers. Importantly, younger teens are more likely to share sensitive personal data to access certain platforms and to believe viral content, shared by popular influencers or with a high like-count.

The need for digital literacy and education from a young age is clear, so children and young people are equipped with the skills necessary to navigate the online world safely. We also need online platforms to be taking a proactive approach in anticipating risks and designing safer and

more protective systems that prevent harms to children and young people, before they occur. Rather than simply restricting access for children and young people, it is crucial to design digital spaces that inherently prioritise safety and privacy, rather than placing the responsibility on the individual to avoid harms or report issues.

Reforms to online safety and privacy laws, including the development of an overarching duty of care in the Online Safety Act and a Children's Online Privacy Code under the Privacy Act, are important steps towards ensuring real action and accountability for platforms to safeguard and protect the best interests of children and young people. However, the development and implementation of this legislation must be undertaken in consultation with children and young people. In parallel with education, co-designing child-friendly systems is essential for protecting children and young people online, while also enabling them to access their full spectrum of rights including safety, expression, education, participation and play.

Our data indicates the awareness and behaviour of children and young people online is evolving, with younger teens doing more to monitor their time online, manage distractions and productivity and balance online with offline activities. Growing levels of self-regulation demonstrates autonomy and expertise in younger teens that should not be overlooked. It is also crucial to recognise the diversity of experiences and activities of young people online, as demonstrated by our data. There is no 'one size fits all' approach to designing better online systems and only through elevating the voices of children and young people can we properly understand the broad range of risks and opportunities the online world presents and ensure they thrive in an increasingly digital world.



Children's rights should be at the forefront of regulation concerning digital spaces, children and young people should have as many guarantees of their rights logged onto their devices as they do logged off."

- Chelsea, 18

With so much change in the pipeline in Australia, the prospect of getting things right for children and young people can be a daunting one. Thankfully, we have the most ratified international treaty in the world to help light the way – the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

With near-universal agreement across the globe, the CRC is the map that guides us as we plot a pathway towards a better future for Australia's children and young people. As we make decisions affecting children and young people, the CRC compels us to consider whether they are in children's best interests.^{xiii} It also encourages us to constantly balance the competing rights and needs that children and young people have, being careful to not elevate one at the expense of all others. We are seeing this play out currently in Australia with the discourse around social media access, debating how we balance a child's right to safety over their access to information, connection, and expression.

Another particularly helpful principle from the CRC is a child's right to having their voice heard,^{xiv} which goes to the heart of what UNICEF Australia is trying to achieve with our research in this paper. Our hope is that by listening and amplifying the views of children and young people, who have such an innate sense for how the online world works, we may better design solutions that will make a positive impact on their lives.

PILLARS FOR CHANGE

Building on our existing research on the digital lives of children and the data we have presented here, we offer some practical guidance on how Australia may realise our vision of being the best place in the world for children to go online:

1 Online Safety

As Australia grapples with how to properly implement a ban on social media, we need to be guided by evidence (like the data in this paper) to ensure it actually helps children and young people, rather than pushing them into unregulated spaces where risk may be even greater. This makes broader online safety reforms even more urgent, so that the digital platforms which children and young people will inevitably access, are being designed in a systemic way which promotes their safety.

2 Data and Privacy

There have been promising early steps towards providing greater protections for the data of Australian children and young people, but broader changes to our outdated privacy laws remain at large. This full suite of reforms to bring Australia's privacy laws into the 21st century are a pressing need, particularly as children and young people express a simultaneous dislike of mass data collection, contrasted with a relative willingness to hand over their personal information.



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Much like the online world itself, the approach to improving digital wellbeing and safety is multifaceted; regardless of how we interact with it, we all have a part in ensuring accountability, protection and safety for children.”

– Ashwini, 16

3 Children's Voices

Children and young people know the online world better than anyone and have an innate sense for how it works. As our insights in this paper show, hearing directly from children and young people about how they experience the online world is going to be crucial. This goes beyond the principle of a child's right to be heard - if we are to design policy solutions that we actually want to work, then we better speak to the people they will affect if there is any hope of them being effective. In this regard, children and young people will offer insights that few others can provide.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP?

We want to make Australia the best place in the world for children to go online and you can help us on this journey in three simple ways:

1

Follow

Use across our social media channels to stay updated about our work to improve the online world for Aussie kids.



2

Learn

More about how you can keep yourself or your child safe online at unicef.org.au/parents/online-safety

3

Share

With your networks tips and information from our [website](https://unicef.org.au/parents/online-safety) on how to keep children safe online to help spread the message.



If your organisation is interested in learning more about the data covered in this paper, please reach out to us at support@unicef.org.au

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