

Supporting Your Teen for the Social Media Age Restriction

Social media is a big part of many teens' lives - to connect with friends and like-minded people, share what they care about, de-stress after school, find answers to questions, be creative, and express themselves. However, social media can also bring challenges, ranging from exposure to harmful content and online pressure, to disrupted sleep and reduced face-to-face connection, with negative implications for youth mental health.

During adolescence, the brain's reward systems are especially sensitive to social feedback and belonging, making online connections feel powerfully engaging. At the same time, the brain regions responsible for planning and self-control are still developing, which can make stepping away from social media particularly challenging. Understanding this helps adults respond with empathy and support, rather than judgment, as teens navigate the transition.

With the Australian government change that seeks to give families and schools more support in helping teens build healthy digital habits, the restriction for social media use for those under 16, may bring up big feelings. A number of good guides have been put together that contain information on how parents and carers can support their teen to find out the facts and understand what the ban will mean (please see below for website links).

For many young people the imminent ban can bring up a range of emotions. Emotion coaching can support conversations about how teens feel about the upcoming changes and help them find ways to keep their connections alive, find other ways to share and express themselves, and de-stress. The following information is intended to support parents' use of emotion coaching during this time.

CONNECT & VALIDATE (Ideally before the ban)

Goal: Use emotion coaching conversations to talk about the upcoming changes and find out how your teen feels about the changes and how you can support them.

Teens will have a range of emotions about the upcoming ban - they may be feeling confused, sad, worried, pressured, powerless, helpless and disappointed and angry or relieved and not fussed at all. Here are a number of tips for an emotion coaching conversation:

1. Find the right time to talk:

When you and your teen are calm and have time to talk without feeling rushed. Invite your teen to chat with you so that you can plan ahead. Retain an emotion coaching focus: Notice & name any feelings, even if they are saying they do not want to talk.

e.g. *"Dec 2025, when kids under 16 won't be allowed accounts on some apps - is just around the corner. How are you feeling about the change? Shall we have a chat together? I'm really interested in your opinion and want to hear how you feel about the ban. Do you have time now or shall we talk after dinner?"*

2. Ask open questions:

"What do you like most about being online?" "What will be hardest to lose?" Keep using the emotion coaching steps: Try to listen more than you talk. Notice their emotions - are they sad, disappointed, angry or worried? Avoid using explanations to defend the ban at this point, or if you do, still keep the focus on the teen (e.g., *It feels like punishment, even though it's about safety - it feels unfair*). Pause and listen.

3. Normalize emotion:

Accepting that they may not feel happy about the changes helps to validate their experience.

"Feeling angry or sad makes total sense. I'd feel that too. You have really enjoyed being on ..." (insert the social media they enjoy)

4. Share your own experience:

Talk about your own social-media habits or a time you had to give something up (or had it taken away). Model vulnerability by letting the teen know that this is difficult.

5. Consider the function of their social media use:

Was it to connect with friends? To find out information? To know what everyone else is doing or talking about (and not to miss out)? To have things to talk about at school? To destress? To create content? This information will help to find activities that can hold a similar function.

COACH COPING & PROBLEM-SOLVING (Ideally before the ban)

Goal: Provide problem solving prompts as part of step 5 of Emotion Coaching. Build skills and alternatives before accounts close.

1. Brainstorm together:

Once you know the role that social media played for your young person and you have shown empathy and named feelings, you could brainstorm together. For example, you could ask: *“What are some ways you could keep in touch with friends when this happens?”*

2. Create a transition plan:

Prepare for the ban. Agree on small steps - downloading photos to keep memories, finding new hobbies, finding new ways to connect, and new ways to be creative or find out information.

3. Explore why governments made this change (algorithm pressure, safety, wellbeing).

Show curiosity and try to find out what they think about the reasons. Acknowledge their ability to put arguments together. Gently question and reframe the change: Help them see growth opportunities (e.g., finding new ways to connect), but do continue to acknowledge that they may not agree, that this feels hard/unfair - some things are out of our control. We don't need to give advice (teens often feel that advice is criticism). Sometimes it just feels better to feel understood.

“What will be different for you with the ban? ”, “What are some good things?”, “What will you miss?”

PHASE 3: SUPPORT & RECONNECT (When the ban takes effect)

Goal: Help them adapt emotionally and socially.

1. Expect mixed emotions:

Even though this has been coming for a long time, expect sadness, grief, anxiety, anger, relief, and boredom – all are normal emotional reactions. The first two weeks of change are often the hardest, especially if social media use has stopped suddenly. Most social media sites are designed with addiction to keep us ‘hooked’ - it is normal to have withdrawal symptoms. Boredom can feel painful! Use emotion coaching to support your teen. Separate feelings from behaviours - support them with their feelings, but you can set limits around the behaviours that are not okay (e.g., sneaking use; faking ID to get access, etc).

2. Create connection rituals:

Plan fun shared activities in the first couple of weeks – keep busy! Find activities that have a similar function as the social media had for the teen. Let your teen design a wish list of fun things they would like to do that meet the needs that social media has been filling (e.g., invite friends around; meet up after school; have more face time phone calls; etc). Use what you planned. You can also offer connection: cook together, plan a day trip to the city, beach, or the country. Visit a coffee shop, play board games, watch movies.

3. Problem-solve setbacks:

Emotion coaching focus: Guide, don't punish. If they sneak access or struggle socially, stay calm. Acknowledge that it is difficult to manage the impulse to sneak access (their brains are still developing!). Acknowledge emotions, state the limit *"I can't let you...."* Use prompts to facilitate problem solving: *"Let's figure out what's missing for you."*

4. Provide reassurance:

If teens manage the ban well it is important to acknowledge this. This can reinforce resilience and pride through allowing the teens' efforts to feel noticed. E.g., *"You've been handling this so maturely and you've found other ways to stay in touch."*

Emotion Coaching Phrases You Can Use

- You really wish you could keep your account – that makes total sense.
- It sounds like you're feeling left out. That's a hard feeling.
- I can tell this matters a lot to you. Let's think about what you still can control.
- You're upset. Do you want me to just listen, or help you to problem-solve?
- Thanks for telling me how you feel. I love that we can talk about hard stuff.

The impact of using emotion coaching

- Your teen feels heard and understood, even if they don't like the rule.
- They have a plan for staying connected and expressing themselves.
- They start to internalize healthy media habits that last beyond the ban.
- Your relationship grows stronger through empathy and teamwork.

USEFUL LINKS

- The [e-Safety Commissioner](#) website explains why the rules were brought in and how they will work. They emphasize that the new rules place responsibility on social-media platforms to restrict under-16 accounts, rather than penalising young people or their parents.
- [headspace](#) provide 7 tips for navigating the social media ban.

Other websites have also focused on supporting learning about healthy online habits:

- Tips for digital wellness: <https://digitalwellnesslab.org/tools/5-ms-digital-wellness/> and <https://digitalwellnesslab.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/5Ms-Digital-Wellness.pdf>
- Setting up a contract with your teen for their mobile phone use <https://cybersafetyproject.com/my-first-mobile-phone-agreement/>