We know social media bans are unlikely to work. So how can we keep young people safe online?

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A war has erupted around young people's use of social media and it is messy. In the United States, surgeon general Vivek Murthy has recommended cigarette packet-like warnings for platforms like Instagram to remind teens and parents social media "has not proved safe". In Australia, Opposition Leader Peter Dutton says he would ban social media for those under

5 16 within 100 days, if the Coalition wins the next election. Announcing the policy, Dutton argued social media is to blame for "a high prevalence of many health conditions, issues around body image [and] bullying online".

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese also backs a ban "if it can be effective". Meanwhile, Education Minister Jason Clare describes social media as a "cesspit".

10 Technology experts have already noted legal bans and age verification is very hard to enforce. But we also need to view this from a digital literacy perspective. A social media ban only delays young people's exposure to these platforms, it does not help them to manage or learn anything. When they eventually start using these platforms, the same algorithms will still be at work, shaping their perceptions and behaviours.

15 If we want to keep children safe online, we need to approach this differently.

What is the big picture?
It is understandable there is concern about young people's safety and health on social media. The massive uptake of social media over the past decade has seen human interactions change drastically. This is because it puts us in contact with a huge range of

20 people. It creates new relationships and connections with others, and reshapes existing ones.

At the same time, depression and anxiety have reached unprecedented levels among young people. So it is often assumed social media is the sole cause. This overlooks all the other factors that contribute to the stress and burden young people feel. For example, survey

25 research shows young Australians are also worried about the cost of living, violence in public places, the environment and discrimination.

Young people also use social media to understand these issues, share their struggles with each other and escape from them. So it does not work to simply say "less social media will see improved mental health".

30 Underpinning calls for a social media ban is the idea young people are "not able to control themselves" and need adult intervention. But we forget platforms are run by corporate giants who use aggressive approaches and algorithms to keep users, both young and old, engaged.

In theory, algorithms only present content a user may be interested in. What actually happens
35 is content is shaped to encourage longer time on the app, consumer spending, extreme reactions and sharing.

What is working?
So there is "good" and "bad" use of social media and it is important to be able to differentiate this in our discussions. We know it can help young people by providing connection and
40 support. A 2022 research review showed social media platforms can provide LGBTQ young people with their own space, potentially helping mental health and wellbeing. It can help young people connect with their peers and support marginalised identities.

Studies also show social media interventions (or programs run through these platforms) can significantly decrease the severity of anxiety and depression in young people.
45 But it needs to be the right platform and quality content (based on evidence) and delivered in ways young people will respond to. Just because it is on TikTok does not mean it will automatically be meaningful for them.

What's not working
But some things are not helping young people on social media at the moment.
50 A 2022 study, based on interviews with teenagers, found young people see the need to respond quickly to notifications as a significant stressor. But they also noted being constantly available is often seen as a key part of friendship. They said leaving an online interaction is hard and it is less stressful to just stay on it.

The teenagers also said while social media can help their wellbeing by providing information,
55 entertainment, inspiration and social connection, it was not all positive. They also felt worried about their passive, "meaningless" scrolling. As the study notes:
> *One participant spoke of feeling trapped by passively scrolling through images on Instagram, conveying a sense of regret at failing to spend her time more wisely.*

60 Young people in this study also talked about being exposed to stressful and harmful content via social media. This includes expectations of perfection, threatening chain-mail posts and others talking about self-harm. The difficulty is young people have very little control over what goes into their feed and neither do we.
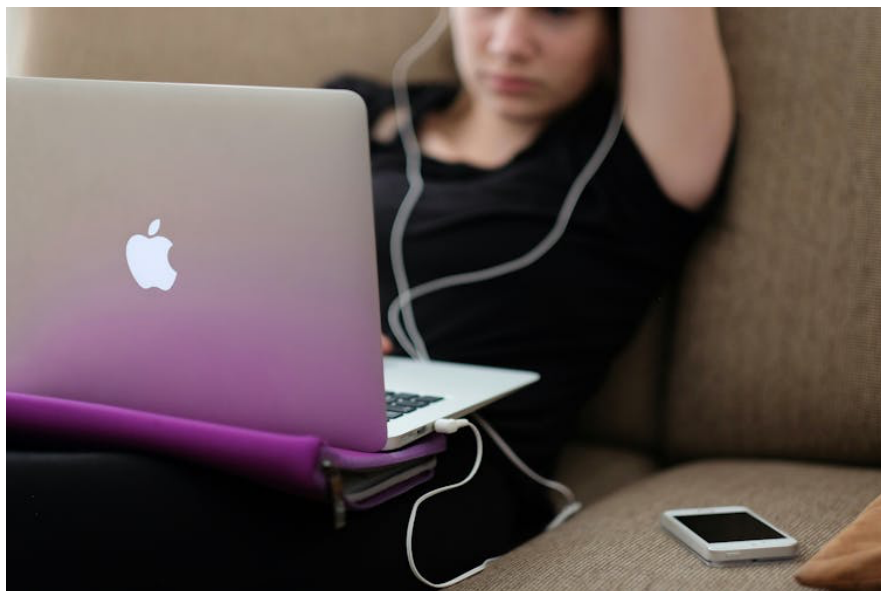
Teenagers say leaving online interactions with friends can be stressful. Steinar Engeland/Unsplash, CC BY

So, what can we do?

65 We are at a crossroads with social media. There is a lot of community concern, but some of our responses are not based on evidence. While there are obvious risks associated with social media, it is essential to understand its value and guide young people to use it positively. By banning it or dismissing the benefits, we risk driving young people "underground" in their use of social media. This makes it less likely they will seek help from adults if they need it.

This means we need targeted digital literacy education, covering multiple issues, including:

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- algorithms and why content posted online is needed. The more a teen understands why they see the content they see, the more control they will have
- how young people can identify and can respond if they come across harmful content
- how to identify reliable, evidence-based groups if they are looking for support online
- how we understand and define friendship in the digital age.

75 A ban seems simple, but to really keep our kids safe online we need to do more complex work to reclaim control on social media. This is something the entire community needs to contribute to: schools, parents, governments and industry.

Beyond educating kids (and their parents and teachers), the next step is to exert more control over what content is shown to us via algorithms. This requires new collaborations between

80 governments and the community to challenge social media companies. Young people need to be part of this approach, so the responses are meaningful for them, not just us.