

# Social media & youth mental health

## *A youth led policy brief*

### Introduction

At Jigsaw, Ireland's National Centre for Youth Mental Health, we support young people aged 12 to 25 through primary care talk therapy and mental health promotion<sup>1</sup>. In recent years, both in Ireland and globally, rates of mental health difficulties among young people have risen sharply, accompanied by a significant increase in demand for services<sup>2</sup>. One area of growing concern—raised repeatedly in our work with young people, families and teachers—is the role of social media in shaping youth mental health.

As international debate around this issue has intensified, young people's own perspectives remain too often overlooked<sup>3</sup>. This youth-led policy brief seeks to place young peoples' lived experiences and ideas at the heart of efforts to build healthier, safer digital environments.

### Our approach

This policy brief is based on a youth-led consultation involving young people aged 15 to 24, drawn from Jigsaw Youth Advocates and Comhairle na nÓg. Participants engaged with the latest research and current policy developments in Ireland and internationally. Through facilitated discussion, young people developed policy recommendations grounded in their lived experience. This brief reflects their insights and priorities on online safety and youth mental health and was co-authored by Jigsaw researchers and two Youth Advocates.

### Move Beyond Blanket Restrictions:

#### Support young people with smart, flexible policies

Young people are keenly aware of both the risks and benefits of social media—acknowledging its potential to cause harm, such as exposure to harmful content and online bullying, while also recognising its powerful role in fostering connection, identity, and support. These concerns are deeply felt and warrant thoughtful, sustained attention in both policy and practice. At the same time, young people questioned the effectiveness of blanket bans and overly restrictive controls. They felt such approaches are unrealistic and counterproductive—difficult to implement effectively, such as enforcing age restrictions, and likely to disproportionately impact marginalised youth who rely on social media for connection and support. Instead, they called for guidance, support, and access to tools that allow them to use social media in safe, informed, and meaningful ways.

Young people want to build digital resilience—not be excluded from online spaces that offer connection, identity, creativity, and community. Social media policies must move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches and reflect the complex,

<sup>1</sup> [www.jigsaw.ie](http://www.jigsaw.ie)

<sup>2</sup> [The Lancet Psychiatry Commission on youth mental health - The Lancet Psychiatry](#)

<sup>3</sup> [“Good Social Media?”: Underrepresented Youth Perspectives on the Ethical and Equitable Design of Social Media Platforms - Melissa Brough, Ioana Literat, Amanda Ikin, 2020](#)

diverse ways young people engage with digital life. The following recommendations reflect the priorities identified by young people: practical, flexible, and rights-based actions that respond to the real challenges they face—and the opportunities they value—within digital life.

## **1. Make online safety and education age-appropriate and inclusive**

Young people acknowledged the potential mental health risks associated with social media, while also recognising its benefits and value in their lives. Most agreed that parental oversight is important—particularly for younger children—but emphasised the importance of open, honest conversations grounded in trust and mutual respect between parents and young people. They stressed the importance of equipping caregivers to offer informed, supportive guidance—helping them engage in open reflection with young people about their digital habits, set appropriate boundaries together, and support mental wellbeing without undermining young people's autonomy.

Young people noted that education often generalises the digital experiences of youth, overlooking the diverse needs and realities. For instance, younger children may use platforms for games or learning, but risk exposure to ads or inappropriate content. Adolescents often turn to social media for connection and self-expression yet face pressures like comparison and cyberbullying. Thus, educational efforts must be developmentally and age appropriate as engagement will change as young people move from their teenage years to young adulthood. Young people stressed the need for digital education curricula to be updated regularly to reflect new platforms, trends (e.g. AI-generated content), and emerging risks.

## **2. Adopt a harm-reduction approach to digital education**

Young people shared that much of the current

education around social media focuses on worst-case scenarios or encourages them to avoid platforms altogether. They felt this approach overlooks the reality of their daily online lives and fails to equip them with the tools they need to support their well-being. Instead, they called for a harm-reduction approach—one that accepts that young people will use social media and focuses on helping them do so safely, confidently, and with support for their mental health.

Young people recommended that education include guidance on both high-risk issues—such as cyberbullying and online harassment—and everyday challenges like managing comparisons, navigating algorithm-driven content, adjusting privacy settings, identifying and countering misinformation, setting personal boundaries, flagging concerns, and practising self-care online. While social media education is largely delivered in schools, young people noted the challenges teachers face in keeping up with the fast-changing digital landscape. They felt this education should include more specialist input, recognising both the importance of digital life in young people's everyday experiences and the need for up-to-date and relevant guidance.

## **3. Strengthen shared responsibility for safer, rights-based digital spaces**

Young people consistently called for a rights-based approach to online safety—one that upholds their rights to protection, privacy, participation, and access to information. They emphasised that responsibility for keeping them safe online must be shared across social media platforms, policymakers, educators, families, and young people themselves—not left to individuals or families alone.

Participants voiced serious concerns about the lack of transparency in content moderation, citing regular exposure to misinformation, AI-generated content, and harmful material that often goes unregulated. Young people recognised that many online harms are not incidental but stem from platform design—amplifying harmful content, encouraging compulsive use, and prioritising

engagement over wellbeing. They called for safety to be built into platforms by design, including greater transparency, user control, and accountability. This includes limiting features that are designed to maximise time, attention, and engagement at the expense of mental health. While national policy has a critical role to play, we acknowledge that meaningful progress also requires international social media companies to accept their responsibility in this space—proactively designing platforms that prioritise safety, transparency, and the digital rights of young people

Young people acknowledged the important role of parents and caregivers in providing structure and boundaries—especially for younger children. A degree of monitoring was seen as appropriate when grounded in trust, communication, and mutual respect, with boundaries evolving as young people mature. They also called for improved parental digital literacy, so caregivers can offer informed, supportive guidance and reflection.

## 4. Embedding youth voices in policy development

Young people are among those most affected by digital policies—yet their voices are often absent from the decision-making process. To ensure digital policies are effective, relevant, and rights-based, young people must be meaningfully involved at every stage of development, from early consultation to final implementation and review.

This includes the introduction of youth-informed impact assessments for any new legislation or policy affecting social media and youth mental health. These assessments should evaluate potential outcomes on wellbeing, privacy, and equity, ensuring that policies do not unintentionally harm the very people they aim to protect. Involving young people not only strengthens policy design—it enhances legitimacy, trust, and impact.

## 5. Greater investment in Irish research co-designed with young people to help identify the relevant risks and required supports for digital wellbeing

Greater investment is needed in Irish research that is co-designed with young people to identify specific risks and develop effective supports for digital wellbeing. Young people strongly related to the harmful aspects identified in studies—such as impacts on self-esteem and exposure to harmful content—but also highlighted the many benefits, including connection, creativity, and community.

Young people showed a strong ability to engage critically with the research on social media and youth mental health, recognising the often mixed and inconclusive findings, and questioning simplistic narratives or overgeneralised conclusions. They challenged the usefulness of broad, reductive measures like ‘screen time,’ which often fail to capture the complexity of young people’s real-world digital lives. They also questioned how policies to limit the harm of social media were being evaluated. Their insight reflects a sophisticated understanding of the need for research to be contextualised and reflective of their lived experiences.

Future research must go beyond risk-focused narratives. Investment is needed in Irish specific studies that examine protective factors, positive digital experiences, and effective interventions. Young people should not only be participants in this work—but active partners in shaping the questions, methods, and outcomes of research that directly affects them.

# Summary and Policy Recommendations

Jigsaw is committed to advocating for the voice of young people to be included in national conversations on mental health. This youth-led policy brief outlines how policy can better support young people in navigating digital spaces. It calls for a shift away from restrictive measures toward rights-based, youth-informed, and harm-reduction approaches. These recommendations outline the beginning of a collaborative partnership between all stakeholders - young people, policy makers, caregivers, educators and social media companies – to make social media safer for young people.

## Key Recommendations:

- **Build policies that reflect both the harms and benefits of social media**

Social media can cause real harm and distress, especially for vulnerable young people — but it also offers connection, creativity, and community. Policies must take a balanced, evidence-based approach that addresses risks while supporting positive digital experiences.

- **Invest in digital resilience, not blanket bans.**

Young people want smart, flexible policies that equip them to engage safely online. All future policies should undergo youth-informed impact assessments to evaluate potential effects on mental health, equity, and rights.

- **Ensure digital education is inclusive, age-appropriate, and up to date.**

Curricula should reflect the diverse realities of young people and keep pace with evolving technologies. Both young people and caregivers should have access to appropriate educational supports.

- **Adopt a harm-reduction approach to digital education.**

Support young people to navigate digital life safely and realistically by providing non-judgemental tools to manage risk, build resilience, and make informed choices—rather than aiming to restrict or avoid use altogether.

- **Promote shared responsibility for safer digital spaces.**

Strengthen regulation of platforms, improve transparency in content moderation, and avoid surveillance-based parental controls that undermine trust and drive risky behaviours underground.

- **Protect and promote youth rights online.**

Uphold young people's rights to privacy, participation, and access to information. Provide transparent tools for managing data, algorithms, and digital preferences.

- **Embed youth participation in all policy development.**

Ensure young people are actively involved in shaping the policies that affect them—from consultation to implementation and evaluation—through structured, meaningful, and ongoing engagement.

- **Fund youth-led, action-oriented research.**

Invest in research that is co-designed with young people, focused on both risks and positive outcomes, and designed to inform policy, education, clinical practice, and platform standards.

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