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International Context: Legal and Policy Changes on Social Media Use

The rapid international shift toward regulating children's access to social media is reshaping expectations of schools, families and technology providers. In this evolving landscape, school leaders may increasingly be reflecting on:

- How global legislative changes may influence future policy, including potential statutory requirements for schools.
- How digital safeguarding frameworks might adapt, particularly in relation to misogyny, harmful content and online harassment **and the gendered nature of many online risks disproportionately affecting girls.**
- What effective digital literacy now requires, given the influence of algorithmic feeds, addictive design features and AI-driven content.
- How best to support parents and carers, many of whom are seeking clearer guidance on age-appropriate digital use.
- How school culture and mobile-device policies align with wider societal debates about children's digital wellbeing.

This issue has particular significance for girls and girls' schools. A growing body of international research indicates that girls are disproportionately affected by certain online harms, including appearance-based comparison, body-image pressure, sexual harassment, misogynistic content and algorithmically amplified self-harm material. Studies in the UK, United States and Australia suggest stronger associations for girls between intensive social media use and anxiety, depression, disordered eating and reduced self-esteem, particularly during early and mid-adolescence. Girls' schools—long recognised as innovative spaces for girls' learning, leadership and healthy development—are often at the forefront of responding to these challenges. Through research-informed practice, values-driven policy and intentional school culture, girls' schools are leading important work in shaping healthier digital environments and supporting girls' wellbeing, agency and identity formation online.

These patterns are increasingly shaping national policy debates, prompting governments to consider stronger regulatory approaches to protect young people online. For girls' schools,

understanding these developments is essential: it enables leaders to interpret emerging requirements, engage confidently with policymakers and parents, and advocate for responses that reflect girls' lived digital experiences.

Australia: Under-16 Social Media Ban

Australia has become the first country in the world to introduce a national ban on social media use for under-16s, with legislation taking effect in December 2025. The law requires platforms to:

- Deactivate accounts belonging to children under 16, and
- Implement robust age-verification systems.

The policy aims to reduce exposure to harmful content, online harassment and addictive platform features. It has attracted global attention as a potential model for other nations considering stronger protections for minors. Impact research is likely to become available overtime.

United Kingdom: Evidence-Led Policy Debate

The UK is actively exploring whether stronger restrictions on children's social media use are needed, informed by government-commissioned research and parliamentary scrutiny:

- A formal government consultation is underway on whether to introduce an Australia-style under-16 ban.
- The Online Safety Act places new duties on platforms to protect children from harmful content.
- The House of Commons Library has analysed the Protection of Children (Digital Safety and Data Protection) Bill, outlining potential policy options such as:
 - strengthened age-assurance requirements,
 - restrictions on addictive design features,
 - enhanced data protections for minors.
- The UK Government has commissioned major research programmes—including work led by the MRC Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit (University of Cambridge)—to build a stronger evidence base on the impact of smartphones and social media on young people.
- Ofcom's Children's Media Literacy Report provides detailed data on children's online behaviours, risks and parental concerns.

The UK debate is increasingly shaped by evidence and regulatory analysis, with policymakers considering whether age-based restrictions, platform design changes or enhanced safeguarding duties offer the most effective protection.

United States: Policy Considerations and Research Activity

While the USA has not introduced a national ban, it is a major centre of state-level legislation and academic research on youth social media use:

- Several states—including Utah, Arkansas and Louisiana—have enacted laws requiring parental consent for minors to hold social media accounts, alongside strengthened age-verification requirements.
 - Utah: Social Media Regulation Act (2023) requires parental consent for users under 18 and mandates age verification.
 - Arkansas: Social Media Safety Act (2023) requires parental consent for under-18s and obliges platforms to verify users' ages.

- Louisiana: HB61 (2023) requires age verification for access to digital services, including social media platforms.
- These laws may face legal challenges, particularly around free-speech and privacy concerns.
- The US Surgeon General's Advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health (2023) calls for urgent action to address harms, including consideration of age-based restrictions and stronger platform accountability.
- Leading research institutions—including Harvard, Stanford, and UCLA—are conducting large-scale studies on the links between social media use, mental health, attention, sleep and identity development.
- US academic commentary highlights concerns about feasibility, enforceability and equity of age-based bans, with many researchers emphasising the need for platform-level regulation and improved digital literacy.

The US landscape is characterised by policy experimentation, strong academic engagement and ongoing legal debate. While no national ban is in place, the direction of travel is toward greater scrutiny of platform design and stronger protections for minors.

The Role of Social Media and Internet Providers

Research and regulatory analysis seem to consistently highlight that platform design—not just user behaviour—drives many of the risks young people face online. Key findings include:

- Addictive design features (e.g., infinite scroll, algorithmic feeds, streaks) are linked to increased compulsive use and reduced wellbeing among adolescents (UK Government, 2026; US Surgeon General, 2023).
- Age-assurance systems remain inconsistent. Ofcom's regulatory assessments show that many platforms rely on self-declaration or weak verification methods, leaving under-age users exposed.
- Content-recommendation algorithms can amplify harmful material, including misogynistic content, body-image pressures and self-harm material—issues highlighted in both UK and US research and all of which research suggests girls encounter more frequently and experience more intensely than boys.
- Children's data is often used to optimise engagement. The House of Commons Library notes that minors' data is routinely processed in ways that raise ethical and safeguarding concerns.
- Platform accountability is a growing focus internationally. Regulators increasingly argue that meaningful safety improvements require system-level changes, not just user-level restrictions.

The emerging research consensus is that platforms need to redesign systems to reduce harm, and that legislative pressure is accelerating this shift. Understanding these dynamics can help schools contextualize conversations with students, parents and policymakers and enables girls' schools in particular to advocate from an evidence-based position that reflects girls' lived digital experiences.

This ebrief provides a limited overview of this topic in a rapidly evolving and highly complex international policy landscape related to the topic. It does not attempt to capture all global legislation, commercial practices, regulatory frameworks or academic research on the topic, nor

does it include developments across every jurisdiction represented within ICGS member schools. Its purpose is to support schools in engaging thoughtfully with an important and developing area, drawing on reputable public sources to highlight key themes and emerging trends to support member schools. The International Coalition of Girls' Schools (ICGS) provides this summary for its members for informational and educational purposes only, without endorsing any specific policy position or legislative approach.

References

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