



Children, Smartphones and Social Media: Is Britain Falling Behind?

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Executive summary

This report examines how France, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands and Australia are addressing children's social media and smartphone use. It considers what lessons, if any, Britain might draw from these five countries as it develops its own policy response. No single country has a complete solution to this problem, nor has any single country sufficiently resolved the tensions among the protection of children online, statutory guidance, parental responsibility and children's autonomy. Together, however, the five countries analysed illustrate a range of tools that Britain could consider as it debates what further measures to implement to protect children in the digital age.

The international picture at a glance

All five countries compared have moved, at varying paces, toward tackling children's increased use of social media and smartphones. Australia became the first country in the world to adopt a law prohibiting children under 16 from creating their own social media accounts, with the law taking effect in December 2025.¹ The French government commissioned an independent expert panel in 2024, drawing on specialists in addiction medicine, developmental psychology, neurology, and digital technology. The panel's report produced age-specific guidance that parents could implement to regulate children's screen time. Denmark established a cross-disciplinary body to understand why children's wellbeing had declined. Finland ensured that digital literacy was integrated across the national curriculum rather than siloed into a single subject. In the Netherlands, the Smartphone-Free Childhood movement secured voluntary pledges from parents across tens of thousands of households, co-ordinating behavioural change through social expectations rather than legal mandates. Across all five countries, governments have pursued children's digital regulation through different instruments, ranging from laws prohibiting social media accounts to expert-led guidance, institutional inquiry, curriculum reform and voluntary social coordination.

Britain's current position

Britain's existing legislation to protect children online is the Online Safety Act 2023, with its children's safety provisions taking effect in July 2025.² In March 2026, the government launched a three-month national consultation titled Growing Up in the Online World.³ During this consultation, the government will explore whether to require a minimum age for social media access, potentially set at 16, as well as additional measures, including overnight curfews, age-verification enforcement and restrictions on addictive design features such as infinite scrolling and autoplay.⁴ Separately, the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act has been the focus of significant parliamentary debate recently. In January 2026, the House of Lords voted in favour of an amendment that would, in practice, mirror Australia's social media ban for children under the age of 16, while the House of Commons voted in March to reject this proposed Australia-style social media ban.⁵ The Department for Education has

¹ eSafety Commissioner (2026) *Social media age restrictions*. Available at: <https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/industry-regulation/social-media-age-restrictions>.

² Legislation.gov.uk (2023) *Online Safety Act 2023*. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/50>.

³ Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (2026) 'Growing up in the online world: a national consultation', on Gov.uk, 2 March. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/growing-up-in-the-online-world-a-national-consultation>

⁴ Department for Science, Innovation and Technology *et al.* (2026) 'Government to drive action to improve children's relationship with mobile phones and social media', on Gov.uk, 19 January. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-to-drive-action-to-improve-childrens-relationship-with-mobile-phones-and-social-media>

⁵ Woodhouse, J. (2026) *Proposals to ban social media for children*. House of Commons Library. Available at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-10468/CBP-10468.pdf>

strengthened guidance directing schools to be mobile phone-free environments by default.⁶ On 20th April, Education Minister Baroness Smith confirmed that the government intends to make the no-phone-in-schools policy across England a legal requirement via an amendment to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act.⁷

Key lessons for Britain

This comparative review draws several lessons from the international evidence. First, all five countries have, or have stated an intention to, move beyond voluntary self-regulation of technology companies and placed the legal burden of compliance directly on social media platforms. Britain's current position, which relies heavily on Ofcom's codes of practice under the Online Safety Act, has not yet shifted to this stance. However, the government is considering legislative restrictions on children's social media use as part of its consultation.

Second, France, Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands have each published specific, age-based national guidance on children's screen time and smartphone use. Britain's Chief Medical Officers declined to do so in their 2019 commentary, finding the evidence insufficiently conclusive to support time-based thresholds.⁸ However, new guidance for children under five was released in March 2026.⁹ Further guidance for children aged five to 16 is expected to follow.¹⁰

Third, Finland's implementation of digital literacy across its national curriculum offers an education-led model that Britain has not yet replicated with equivalent depth. Britain's curriculum review, which recommends making media literacy compulsory, will not take effect until September 2028.¹¹

Fourth, the parent-led community movements in the Netherlands and Denmark demonstrate that legislation alone is insufficient without broader engagement from civil society. Voluntary co-ordination among parents, in particular, can drive behavioural change in society in a way that government actions have not.

Fifth, Australia's experience confirms that a law restricting access to social media can be enforced in practice. It also exposes unsettled questions about age-verification technology, online privacy and the risk that children are displaced to less-regulated platforms rather than disengaged from harmful environments altogether.

⁶ Long, R. (2026) *Mobile phones in schools (England)*. House of Commons Library. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10241/>

⁷ Standley, N. (2026) 'Phones to be banned in schools by law in England under government plans', on BBC News, 20 April. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5y7vd6ggq1o>

⁸ Department of Health and Social Care (2019) *United Kingdom Chief Medical Officers' commentary on 'Screen-based activities and children and young people's mental health and psychosocial wellbeing: a systematic map of reviews'*. Gov.uk. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c5b1510e5274a316cee5be8/UK_CMO_commentary_on_screentime_and_social_media_map_of_reviews.pdf page 2.

⁹ Department for Education *et al.* (2026) 'New screen time guidance for parents of under-5s', on Gov.uk, 26 March. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-screen-time-guidance-for-parents-of-under-5s>

¹⁰ Department for Science, Innovation and Technology *et al.* (2026) 'Government to drive action to improve children's relationship with mobile phones and social media', on Gov.uk, 19 January. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-to-drive-action-to-improve-childrens-relationship-with-mobile-phones-and-social-media>

¹¹ Department for Education and Phillipson, B. (2025) 'New curriculum to give young people the skills for life and work', on Gov.uk, 4 November. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-curriculum-to-give-young-people-the-skills-for-life-and-work>

Introduction

Smartphones, social media and online platforms now form an ordinary part of childhood across the developed world. In Britain, Ofcom data show that mobile phone ownership reaches approximately 90 per cent by age 11 and 96 per cent among 12- to 15-year-olds.¹² Children in Britain spend an average of three to four hours per day on recreational screen time, and 37 per cent of children aged three to five use at least one social media application, up from 29 per cent a year earlier.¹³ The same pattern holds internationally. In France, 98 per cent of the population aged 12 and over owned a mobile phone in 2024, and 91 per cent owned a smartphone, according to Arcep, the French electronic communications regulator.¹⁴ In Finland, 97 per cent of children have access to a smartphone.¹⁵ Across all countries examined in this report, children are accessing the digital world earlier and spending more time there than ever before.

The scale and pace of change have shifted children's digital lives from largely being left to parental discretion and technology companies' self-regulation toward regulatory intervention, official guidance, and curriculum reform. Governments across multiple countries are now regulating or preparing to legislate on children's access to social media, moving in the same broad direction even where specific measures differ.

Britain is at a decision point in this debate. The Online Safety Act 2023 established a regulatory framework for platform duties. The public conversation has, however, moved beyond content moderation toward a more fundamental question: should children be on social media at all? There is considerable pressure for firmer action, alongside genuine disagreement over whether some form of restriction on children's social media use would successfully tackle the problem or merely drive them toward less-regulated alternatives.¹⁶ Whilst there should be a particular focus on social media, it is useful to consider it within a holistic framework for addressing children's overall smartphone use, with social media as an important issue in that discussion.

This report provides a snapshot of the policy levers that France, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands and Australia are proposing or implementing, set against the approach Britain is currently pursuing. These countries were selected because each offers a meaningfully distinct policy response, and together they span the range of interventions available to British policymakers. All five are liberal democracies with high levels of online use among school-age children, strong public institutions and broadly comparable standards of living. This reduces, though does not eliminate, the extent to which broad contextual differences can explain variation in policy approach. The question Britain faces is not which tool to adopt, but how to combine tools in ways that are proportionate, enforceable, and responsive to what the evidence actually supports.

¹² Ofcom (2024) *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report*. Available at: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/children/children-media-use-and-attitudes-2024/childrens-media-literacy-report-2024.pdf?v=368229> page 10.

¹³ Ofcom (2025) *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report*. Available at: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/children/childrens-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2025/childrens-media-literacy-report-2025.pdf?v=396621> page 4.

¹⁴ Arcep (2025) 'Digital Device Ownership and Usage', 19 March. Available at: <https://en.arcep.fr/news/press-releases/view/n/digital-device-ownership-and-usage-190325.html>

¹⁵ LSE. *Finland*. Available at: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/research/research-projects/eu-kids-online/participating-countries/finland>

¹⁶ Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (2026) 'Growing up in the online world: a national consultation', on Gov.uk, 2 March. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/growing-up-in-the-online-world-a-national-consultation>

This report argues that the countries that have made the most enduring progress are not those that have legislated alone, but those that have combined clear national guidance, a strong civil society, empowered parents and curriculum-based digital literacy. The evidence from these countries suggests that there is no single transferable solution; instead, progress has come from combining tools that are proportionate, enforceable, and evidence-based.

Comparative framework

For each country, this report reviews the same set of questions to enable direct comparison. The questions cover social media restrictions for children; the age limits that exist or are proposed for children's social media access; the rules governing mobile phones in schools; recommendations to help parents monitor their children's smartphone and social media use; and whether children are taught digital literacy in schools. Table 1.1 summarises the comparison across the key policy dimensions.

Country exclusion

Several countries active in this space were considered but ultimately excluded. Norway presents a Nordic profile broadly similar to that of Denmark and Finland, but has not produced sufficiently distinct policy developments to warrant a separate chapter, without duplicating analysis already covered. South Korea has introduced restrictions on children's internet use, but its regulatory architecture, cultural context and administrative structures differ substantially from those of Britain, limiting the practical transferability of lessons. The United States was excluded because it lacks a centralised national response. (In the United States, social media regulation remains fragmented across state legislatures, federal inaction persists, and ongoing litigation complicates the landscape, making it difficult to compare with the system examined in this report.)

Limitations

Several limitations apply to this analysis. The policy landscape in this area is moving rapidly. Between the initial research phase and publication, policy developments occurred in multiple countries, and some information in this report reflects the position as understood in early April 2026. Where possible, this report draws on primary sources: official government publications, legislative texts and parliamentary records. For fast-moving developments, it draws on reputable news sources and national press in the countries examined. These sources are reliable for tracking policy announcements but may not include subsequent amendments or implementation decisions.

A further difficulty emerges from comparing countries at different stages of the legislative process. Enacted law, proposed legislation, advisory guidance and political statements from individual ministers are not equivalent, and this report takes care throughout to distinguish between them.

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Table 1.1: Comparison of social media and mobile phone policies for children across countries

Policy dimension	France	Australia	Netherlands	Denmark	Finland	Britain
Social media restriction for children	Passed, but the two chambers are reconciling their texts to get a final unified version of the Bill.	Enacted (Dec 2025)	The government is actively pursuing	Cross-party agreement; legislation pending	PM supports; no bill yet	Under consultation (as of April 2026)
Age threshold for social media restriction	Under 15 (proposed)	Under 16	Under 15 (proposed)	Under 15 (parental opt-in from 13; proposed)	Under 15 (proposed)	Under 16 (under consultation)
Who must comply	Platforms	Platforms (no parental override)	To be determined	To be determined	To be determined	To be determined
School phone ban	Yes, statutory since 2018; expanding to high schools	Yes, all government schools	Yes, voluntary agreement; not a statutory ban (Jan 2024)	Yes, legislation for the 2026/27 school year	Yes, statutory (Aug 2025)	Currently non-statutory guidance; will be a legal requirement in England from June 2026
National guidance	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	As of April 2026, guidance for under-5s

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Digital literacy in the curriculum	Safer Internet Centre; Ministry guidance	National Curriculum + eSafety Commissioner	Dutch Media Literacy Network	School-level discretion	Integrated across all subjects	RSHE + Computing; major reform due 2028
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Source: Author analysis.

1. Britain

The Online Safety Act

The United Kingdom's primary legislative framework for protecting children online is the Online Safety Act, which was enacted on 26th October 2023.¹⁷ Ofcom, as the online safety regulator, has overseen the implementation of the Online Safety Act in phases.¹⁸ Under the first phase, which reached its enforcement milestone in March 2025, online platforms are required to conduct risk assessments for illegal content and take proportionate steps to prevent all users from encountering it.¹⁹ The second phase, covering children's safety provisions, took effect on 25th July 2025. From July 2025, platforms likely to be accessed by children became required to prevent children of any age from accessing 'primary priority content' such as content that promotes self-harm, suicide, eating disorders and pornography.²⁰ In practice, social media platforms have to implement measures to prevent children from encountering such content. Social media platforms must also implement age assurance measures and provide reporting systems. Social media companies that fail to comply with the regulations set out in the Online Safety Act could face fines of up to 10 per cent of their qualifying worldwide revenue or £18 million, whichever is greater.²¹

The social media consultation and the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act

In March 2026, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, along with the Department for Education, launched a three-month national consultation on children's digital lives, titled Growing Up in the Online World, led by Secretary of State Liz Kendall.²² One of the options under consideration in the government's consultation is an Australia-style ban on certain social media platforms for children under the age of 16. Other measures under consideration by the government include daily screen time limits for certain social media applications, stricter age verification enforcement, restrictions on children's access to AI chatbots, limits on overnight social media access, raising the online age of consent from 13 under the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), restrictions on VPN use by children, and age-related limits on addictive design features such as infinite scrolling, streaks and autoplay.

¹⁷ Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (2025) *Online Safety Act: explainer*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/online-safety-act-explainer/online-safety-act-explainer>

¹⁸ Woodhouse, J. (2025) *Implementation of the Online Safety Act*. House of Commons Library. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2025-0043/>

¹⁹ Ofcom (2025) 'Statement: Protecting children from harms online', 24 April. Available at: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/online-safety/illegal-and-harmful-content/statement-protecting-children-from-harms-online>

²⁰ Legislation.gov.uk (2023) *Online Safety Act 2023*. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/50/2026-01-08>

²¹ Internet Watch Foundation. *The Online Safety Act (OSA) Explained*. Available at: <https://www.iwf.org.uk/policy-work/the-online-safety-act-osa-explained/>

²² Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (2026) 'Growing up in the online world: a national consultation', on Gov.uk, 2 March. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/growing-up-in-the-online-world-a-national-consultation>

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The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act has prompted parliamentary debate. On 21st January 2026, the House of Lords voted 261 to 150 in favour of an amendment requiring social media companies to use age assurance measures to prevent anyone under 16 from becoming or being a user on certain social media platforms, effectively mirroring Australia's recent social media ban.²³ On 9th March, the House of Commons then voted 307 to 173 to reject an amendment that would have imposed an Australia-style social media ban for children under 16.²⁴ However, the House of Commons supported a government amendment granting the Secretary of State, Liz Kendall, additional powers to introduce such restrictions through secondary legislation in the future. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act received Royal Assent on 29th April 2026, and, with reference to any social media restrictions, it requires the government to publish a progress report by 29th July 2026, setting out the steps taken so far to make the first set of regulations. Following that progress report, the government will have 12 months to set out any regulations related to a social media ban.²⁵

Mobile phones in schools

The Department for Education issued guidance in February 2024 directing schools to develop policies prohibiting the use of mobile phones and other smart technologies during the school day, including break times. Updated guidance provided in January 2026 uses stronger language, directing that all schools should be mobile phone-free by default, with exceptions permitted only.²⁶ As of April 2026, Ofsted will assess schools' mobile phone policies as part of every inspection.²⁷ Currently, 99.8 per cent of primary schools and 90 per cent of secondary schools have policies in place.²⁸ However, 58 per cent of secondary pupils report phones being used without permission in some lessons.²⁹ The current consultation asks whether that guidance should be placed on a statutory footing, making compliance mandatory rather than advisory. As of April 2026, an amendment to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act has been implemented, making the no-phones-in-school policy in England a legal requirement, which will come into effect on 29th June 2026.³⁰

National guidance

In 2019, the UK Chief Medical Officers published commentary and guidance on children's screen time. At the time, it concluded that the scientific research was insufficiently conclusive to support evidence-based guidelines for screen use.³¹ The commentary presented practical advice, such as keeping phones

²³ Seddon, P. (2026) 'Lords back UK social media ban for under-16s', on BBC News, 21 January. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cz0pnekxpn8o>

²⁴ Badshah, N. (2026) 'MPs reject ban on social media for under-16s', in *The Guardian*, 9 March. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2026/mar/09/proposed-ban-on-social-media-for-under-16s-rejected-by-mps>

²⁵ Lewis Silkin (2026) 'UK government commits to introducing social media restrictions for children – regardless of consultation outcome', 6 May. Available at: <https://www.lewissilkin.com/insights/2026/05/06/uk-government-commits-to-introducing-social-media-restrictions-for-children-reg-102mrv7>

²⁶ Department for Education (2026) *Mobile phones in schools*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/mobile-phones-in-schools/mobile-phones-in-schools>

²⁷ Owston, L. (2026) 'What the government's updated guidance on mobile phones means for school inspections', on Ofsted blog, Gov.uk, 23 January. Available at: <https://educationinspection.blog.gov.uk/2026/01/23/what-the-governments-updated-guidance-on-mobile-phones-means-for-school-inspections/>

²⁸ Children's Commissioner (2025) *School phone policies in England: Findings from the Children's Commissioner's School and College Survey*. Available at: <https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2025/04/cco-school-survey-smartphone-policies.pdf> page 3.

²⁹ Department for Science, Innovation and Technology *et al.* (2026) 'Government to drive action to improve children's relationship with mobile phones and social media', on Gov.uk, 19 January. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-to-drive-action-to-improve-childrens-relationship-with-mobile-phones-and-social-media>

³⁰ Long, R. (2026) *Mobile phones in schools (England)*. House of Commons Library. Available at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-10241/CBP-10241.pdf>

³¹ Department of Health and Social Care (2019) *United Kingdom Chief Medical Officers' commentary on 'Screen-based activities and children and young people's mental health and psychosocial wellbeing: a systematic map of reviews'*. Gov.uk. Available at:

outside bedrooms at bedtime and having screen-free mealtimes, but it declined to set time-based thresholds. In March 2026, the government released new evidence-based screen time guidance for parents to implement with children under the age of five. Among the advice, the guidance states that screen time should be limited for children under two, except for shared activities with family that encourage bonding, interaction and conversation, and recommends only one hour of screen time per day for children aged two to five years.³² The guidance also recommends avoiding screen time at mealtimes and for an hour before bed. This guidance will be available through the family hubs, which will provide parents with face-to-face and online advice. Separately, the government has committed to producing evidence-based guidance for children aged five to 16.

Digital literacy

Online safety is currently taught through computing and Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE). The Independent Curriculum and Assessment Review, published in November 2025, recommended making citizenship compulsory in the national curriculum from Years 1 to 6 (primary school), with media literacy as a core component of the subject.^{33,34} RSHE covers a distinct yet complementary dimension: the social, emotional, and ethical aspects of children in the online world. Updated statutory guidance from the Department for Education, published in 2025, strengthened RSHE's online safety content and is due to come into force later in the year.³⁵

2. France

Moving toward a regulatory social media ban

In January 2026, France's National Assembly passed a universal ban on social media platforms for all users under the age of 15, which applies to all social media platforms. The Senate passed a substantively different version of the Bill, with a two-tier system rather than a blanket ban. The two chambers must now reconcile their texts to get a final unified version of the Bill.³⁶

The Bill would also extend France's existing school phone ban to senior secondary schools (ages 15 to 18), adding to the prohibition already in force for primary and middle schools.³⁷

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c5b1510e5274a316cee5be8/UK_CMO_commentary_on_screentime_and_social_media_map_of_reviews.pdf page 2.

³² Best Start In Life (2026) *Screen time guidance for under 5s*. Available at: <https://beststartinlife.gov.uk/screen-time-under-5s/>

³³ Department for Education and Phillipson, B. (2025) 'New curriculum to give young people the skills for life and work', on Gov.uk, 4 November. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-curriculum-to-give-young-people-the-skills-for-life-and-work>

³⁴ Department for Education (2025) *Curriculum and Assessment Review: Building a world-class curriculum for all: Final Report*. Gov.uk. Available at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/690b96bbc22e4ed8b051854d/Curriculum_and_Assessment_Review_final_report_-_Building_a_world-class_curriculum_for_all.pdf Also: Department for Education (2025) 'What you need to know about the changes to the National Curriculum', on The Education Hub, 5 November 2025. Available at: <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2025/11/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-changes-to-the-national-curriculum/>

³⁵ Department for Education (2025) *Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education: Statutory guidance for governing bodies, proprietors, head teachers, principals, senior leadership teams, and teachers*. Gov.uk. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6970e7e67e827090d02d42e0/Relationships_education_relationships_and_sex_education_RSE_and_health_education_for_intro_1_September_2026.pdf

³⁶ Davies, P. (2026) 'France moves closer to social media ban for children under 15 — but houses divided on details', on Euronews, 1 April. Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/next/2026/04/01/france-moves-closer-to-social-media-ban-for-children-under-15-but-houses-divided-on-detail>

³⁷ Pineau, E. (2026) 'France's National Assembly approves banning under-15s from social media', on Reuters, 27 January. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/society-equity/frances-national-assembly-debates-banning-under-15s-social-media-2026-01-26/>

National guidance for parents

France has invested in providing families with guidance on monitoring their children's screen time and social media use. In 2024, President Macron established an expert commission that brought together specialists from addiction, education, neurology, developmental psychology, epidemiology, law, video game design and digital technology. The commission's report, published in April 2024, concluded that excessive device and screen time carries measurable risks for children's cognitive and social development.³⁸

The commission's recommendations for parents were explicit. Children under three should have no screen exposure. Screen time should be strictly limited until age six. No child should own a mobile phone before age 11, and no child under 13 should have an internet-connected device. From age 13, a connected phone is permissible, but access to social media should remain restricted until age 15.³⁹

These recommendations draw on a longer tradition of specialist guidance in France. The psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Serge Tisseron developed the '3-6-9-12' rule for children and screens.⁴⁰ Under this guideline, children should not be exposed to screens before the age of three, should not have personal games consoles before six, should not access the internet unaccompanied before nine and should not use the internet unsupervised before age 12. The commission's guidelines are broadly consistent with and, in some respects, update Tisseron's original framework.

Two further pillars of national guidance are worth noting. The French Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the ministries of health and digital affairs, has published guidance for parents entitled '*Bien grandir avec les écrans: des repères pour chaque âge*' ('*Growing up well with screens: benchmarks for each age*'), providing age-specific advice on managing children's digital environments.⁴¹ Since February 2021, the government has also operated a national parental platform, *Je protège mon enfant* ('*I protect my child*'). It provides practical, step-by-step guidance on parental controls, content filtering on social media and managing screen time.⁴²

The Studer Law

France has introduced a device-level protection that none of the other countries in this report has yet matched. The Studer Law, which took effect in 2024, requires that every device sold in France with an operating system and an app store include pre-installed parental controls, which are made available to users at the time of device activation. Under the law, when initially setting up the device, the system must prompt the user to choose whether to activate parental controls. Still, activation remains optional and at the parents' discretion. This shifts at least part of child safety from software purchased

³⁸ Santi, P. (2024) 'Kids and screentime: What the committee appointed by Macron recommends', in *Le Monde*, 2 May. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article/2024/05/02/kids-and-screentime-what-the-committee-appointed-by-macron-recommends_6670225_7.html

³⁹ Elysee.fr (2024) *Children and Screens: In Search of Lost Time*. Available at: <https://www.elysee.fr/admin/upload/default/0001/17/4069cfa0f4e11a7f00bc29bdc9501eebb671537d.pdf> page 10-11.

⁴⁰ De Robien, M. (2019) 'Guide your children's screen use with the 3-6-9-12 rule', on Aleteia, 17 February. Available at: <https://aleteia.org/2019/02/17/guide-your-childrens-screen-use-with-the-3-6-9-12-rule/>

⁴¹ French Ministry of National Education (2025) *Growing up well with screens: benchmarks for each age*. Available at: <https://www.education.gouv.fr/bien-grandir-avec-les-ecrans-des-reperes-pour-chaque-age-451121>

⁴² *Je protège mon enfant* (I Protect My Child). Available at: <https://jeprotegemonenfant.gouv.fr/>

separately or from parents navigating settings independently to the device itself at the moment it is first used.⁴³

Mobile phones in schools

France has been one of Europe's early movers on school phone restrictions. Since 2018, the use of mobile phones has been prohibited in all nurseries, elementary schools and middle schools.⁴⁴ Schools retained some discretion over how to implement the ban, with phones typically stored in bags rather than confiscated.

In September 2024, the French government went a step further. A pilot programme known as '*pause numérique*' was introduced in middle schools, requiring students to hand in their phones upon arrival and retrieve them only upon departure. Where the 2018 law required phones to be switched off, the 'digital pause' required physical removal.⁴⁵ Following the pilot, the French government announced the programme would be extended across all middle schools from September 2025.⁴⁶ The January 2026 Bill includes a provision to extend the regulatory ban to high schools in France, which currently operate under discretionary internal school policies.⁴⁷

Civil society and digital literacy

The French Safer Internet Centre works at the national level to promote safer, better use of the internet for children and young people.⁴⁸ The Safer Internet Centre operates under the aegis of the European Commission as part of a three-pillar framework: the Awareness Centre, the hotline for reporting illegal content, and the helpline (a toll-free number for the protection of young people online).⁴⁹ Together, these services aim to keep children and young people safe online.⁵⁰

Media and information literacy (known in France as EMI, or '*éducation aux médias et à l'information*') was formally introduced into the French national school curriculum in 2015 and generalised across all school grades through a circular issued in January 2022.^{51,52} EMI focuses, among other things, on digital citizenship, critical thinking, and combating misinformation online.

⁴³ Service Public (2024) *Parental control: new obligations for connected hardware manufacturers*. Available at: <https://www.service-public.gouv.fr/particuliers/actualites/A17487?lang=en>

⁴⁴ Chrisafis, A. (2025) 'France to tighten mobile phone ban in middle schools', in *The Guardian*, 10 April. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/apr/10/france-mobile-phone-ban-middle-schools> and RFI (2024) 'France rolls out trial ban on using mobile phones in secondary schools', 5 September. Available at: <https://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20240905-france-rolls-out-trial-ban-on-using-mobile-phones-in-secondary-schools>

⁴⁵ France 24 (2024) ' "Digital Pause": France pilots school mobile phone ban', 4 September. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20240904-digital-pause-france-pilots-school-mobile-phone-ban>

⁴⁶ Tanti, C. (2025) 'Mobile phone ban in collèges: What parents and students need to know', on Monaco Life, 29 August. Available at: <https://monacolife.net/mobile-phone-ban-in-colleges-what-parents-and-students-need-to-know/>

⁴⁷ Tual, M. and Morin, V. (2026) 'France's Assemblée Nationale approves social media ban for under-15s', in *Le Monde*, 27 January. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article/2026/01/27/french-lawmakers-approve-social-media-ban-for-under-15s_6749844_7.html

⁴⁸ French Safer Internet Centre (2025) 'Protecting children in the digital age: insights from France's educational and regulatory initiatives', on Better Internet for Kids, 10 December. Available at: <https://better-internet-for-kids.europa.eu/en/news/protecting-children-digital-age-insights-frances-educational-and-regulatory-initiatives>

⁴⁹ Better Internet for Kids (2026) *French Safer Internet Centre*. Available at: <https://better-internet-for-kids.europa.eu/en/sic/france>

⁵⁰ Better Internet for Kids (2026) *Internet Sans Crainte - French Safer Internet Centre*. Available at: <https://better-internet-for-kids.europa.eu/en/saferinternetday/france>

⁵¹ European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) *France*. Available at: <https://edmo.eu/resources/repositories/mapping-the-media-literacy-sector/france/>

⁵² Ministry of National Education (2022) *Generalization of media and information literacy*. Available at: <https://www.education.gouv.fr/bo/22/Hebdo4/MENE2202370C.htm>

What can Britain learn from France?

Currently, the main focus of digital policy for children has been primarily a regulatory question: what online platforms should be required to do, what age limits should restrict access to social media, and how compliance will be enforced. However, France's approach of producing detailed national parental guidance and its civil society suggest looking at other solutions, ones that do not focus solely on outright prohibition.

France's expert commission model is instructive because it separated the question of what parents should know from the question of what the law should require. Rather than issuing a blanket statutory restriction on children's screen time, the commission produced clear, age-specific guidance backed by evidence that parents could use to make informed decisions. The guidelines produced by the commission equip parents with an evidence-based framework and leave decision-making with families. A comparable commission in Britain would give parents considerably more than they currently have.

France's civil society offers another lesson for Britain. The three-pillar Safer Internet Centre and the integration of media and information literacy into the school curriculum both represent investments in what families and teachers can do, rather than relying solely on what social media platforms must prevent. These are not substitutes for regulation, and France has pursued both tracks. The point is that civil society and parental competence can reduce dependence on unworkable models of state enforcement. Whilst Britain has digital literacy provisions and online safety education, it remains under-resourced relative to the Online Safety Act's legislative ambitions. Building the civic and educational foundations that help children, parents and teachers navigate the online environment is not a soft option. It is a precondition for any approach that takes parental responsibility seriously rather than simply displacing it onto regulators.

3. Denmark

Proposed social media ban with parental flexibility

In November 2025, the Danish government announced a cross-party political agreement to restrict children under 15 from self-registering on social media platforms. The agreement includes a parental consent provision where children aged 13 and over may access certain platforms if a parent or guardian explicitly authorises them to do so.⁵³

The legislation has not yet been enacted, but the political agreement states that it will target the largest social media platforms that allow the creation of public user profiles and are associated with documented risks to children and young people, such as addictive design and harmful content.⁵⁴

⁵³ Hubenko, D. (2025) 'Denmark to ban social media for children under 15', on DW, 11 July. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/denmark-to-ban-social-media-for-children-under-15/a-74666210>

⁵⁴ Jurcenoks, E. *et al.* (2025) 'Several legal initiatives on digital protection of children, including a social media age limit, are on their way in Denmark', on Plesner, 1 December. Available at: <https://plesner.com/en/news/several-legal-initiatives-digital-protection-children-including-social-media-age-limit-are>

The Well-Being Commission and national guidance for parents

Denmark's Commission for the Well-Being of Children and Young People provided a report, published in February 2025,⁵⁵ that set out 35 recommendations to help ensure that children and young people have better conditions for wellbeing.⁵⁶ The recommendations included duties requiring primary and lower secondary schools to be smartphone-free, including after-school care and recreational centres. In contrast, upper secondary schools are required to have a clear screen policy.⁵⁷ The commission also recommended that children should not receive smartphones until age 13.⁵⁸

In 2024, the Danish Health Authority published revised recommendations on screen use during leisure time for children, adolescents and adults. The guidance advises avoiding screen use before bedtime, spending time away from screens, prioritising physical activity, and being aware of social media and its impact on wellbeing. It also states that any screen use for children under two should be accompanied by active adult engagement, and that parents should minimise their own screen use when with their child. Separately, the Danish government introduced restrictions on the use of screens in crèches (nurseries) and kindergartens for children aged two and under.⁵⁹

Mobile phones in schools

A parliamentary majority agreed on a new rule requiring primary and lower secondary schools and after-school clubs to be mobile-free from the 2026/2027 academic year.⁶⁰ School boards and parents' groups are required to develop policies to achieve compliance within their schools, but they have the flexibility to decide on the specific form the policy takes.⁶¹ The Education Ministry is expected to produce a standard template to support schools in meeting their requirement.⁶²

Civil society and digital literacy

A parent-led grassroots movement has emerged in Denmark, advocating for societal change. The movement's mission is to free their children from the grip of smartphones and social media and to inspire them to replace screens with play-based childhood. The activities of the organisation include expanding the national conversation about screen-healthy habits, helping parents, schools and

⁵⁵ Bryant, M. (2025) 'Denmark to ban mobile phones in schools and after-school clubs', in *The Guardian*, 25 February. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/25/denmark-to-ban-mobile-phones-in-schools-and-after-school-clubs>

⁵⁶ The Commission for the Well-Being of Children and Young People (2025) *A Summary of The Final Report of The Commission for the Well-Being of Children and Young People: A Danish Answer to a Western Challenge*. Uvm.dk. Available at: <https://uvm.dk/media/nnrpeurh/251008-a-summary-of-the-final-report-of-the-commission-for-the-wellbeing-of-children-and-young-peop.pdf> page 12-17.

⁵⁷ The Commission for the Well-Being of Children and Young People (2025) *A Summary of The Final Report of The Commission for the Well-Being of Children and Young People: A Danish Answer to a Western Challenge*. Uvm.dk. Available at: <https://uvm.dk/media/nnrpeurh/251008-a-summary-of-the-final-report-of-the-commission-for-the-wellbeing-of-children-and-young-peop.pdf> page 13, recommendation 8.

⁵⁸ The Commission for the Well-Being of Children and Young People (2025) *A Summary of The Final Report of The Commission for the Well-Being of Children and Young People: A Danish Answer to a Western Challenge*. Uvm.dk. Available at: <https://uvm.dk/media/nnrpeurh/251008-a-summary-of-the-final-report-of-the-commission-for-the-wellbeing-of-children-and-young-peop.pdf> page 13, recommendation 6.

⁵⁹ Lewis, A. (2024) 'The War on Screens: How Denmark is paving the way for a healthier relationship between young people and technology', in *Last Week in Denmark*, 19 October. Available at: <https://lwid.dk/the-war-on-screens-how-denmark-is-paving-the-way-for-a-healthier-relationship-between-young-people-and-technology/>

⁶⁰ Bryant, M. (2025) 'Denmark to ban mobile phones in schools and after-school clubs', in *The Guardian*, 25 February. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/25/denmark-to-ban-mobile-phones-in-schools-and-after-school-clubs>

⁶¹ Mokrani, F. (2025) 'Denmark says goodbye to smartphones in schools from 2026', in *Euro Weekly News*, 2 October. Available at: <https://euroweeklynnews.com/2025/10/02/denmark-says-goodbye-to-smartphones-in-schools-from-2026/>

⁶² Eurydice (2025) 'Denmark: Agreement on mobile-free primary and lower secondary schools, and school-based leisure time facilities', 8 December. Available at: <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/news/denmark-agreement-mobile-free-primary-and-lower-secondary-schools-and-school-based-leisure>

institutions create change at the local level and putting pressure on government and tech companies to protect children.⁶³

In Denmark's upper secondary school level, digital competencies such as ethics, law and digital behaviour are formally embedded in all relevant subject curricula.⁶⁴ In 2021, the Danish government allocated money for a specific national digital and media literacy initiative.⁶⁵ In 2023, a new centre in Denmark for digital literacy received funding 'to equip primary and secondary school students with knowledge about digital technology in collaboration with a range of stakeholders and research environments'.⁶⁶

What can Britain learn from Denmark?

Denmark's Well-Being Commission is worth examining on its own terms, independent of the policy programme that it produced. The commission was a cross-disciplinary body tasked with understanding why children's wellbeing had declined in a prosperous, high-functioning democracy. Britain has not produced a review with a mandate as broad as Denmark's, and it should be asking: what general conditions allow children to live good lives? The value of the commission lies less in producing a list of legislative proposals and more in forcing a sustained public conversation about what children need to thrive, before reaching for regulatory tools. Britain would benefit from a similar exercise, one that treats digital policy as one element of a wider set of questions about childhood rather than the dominant organising principle of children's policy.

The parental consent provision in Denmark's proposed social media prohibition for children under 15 represents a considered middle position, one that Britain's ongoing consultation would do well to examine closely. A blanket prohibition deprives parents of the capacity to make decisions for their own children. However, the Danish model, which permits access from age 13 with explicit parental authorisation, preserves a role for parental judgment while still establishing a clear default. The Danish model offers Britain a workable middle position that does not require choosing between protection and parental autonomy.

4. Finland

Social media ban under active consideration

Public support in Finland for a social media ban for under-15s grew over the second half of 2025.⁶⁷ In January 2026, the Prime Minister, Petteri Orpo, backed such a restriction, expressing concern about the decline in physical activity among children and young people and pointing to social media's role in displacing time spent on sport and play.⁶⁸ As of April 2026, no formal bill has been introduced to the

⁶³ *Skærmsund Barndom*. Available at: <https://www.skaermsundbarndom.dk/en-home>

⁶⁴ National Policies Platform (2026) *Youth Wiki*, 'Denmark', '6.8 Media literacy and safe use of new media'. Available at: <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/denmark/68-media-literacy-and-safe-use-of-new-media>

⁶⁵ European Digital Media Observatory. *Denmark*. Available at: <https://edmo.eu/resources/repositories/mapping-the-media-literacy-sector/denmark>

⁶⁶ Stevnhøj, H. (2023) 'New knowledge centre will improve digital literacy among children and young people', on Aarhus Universitet, 16 August. Available at: <https://medarbejdere.au.dk/en/news-articles/news/artikel/nyt-videnscenter-skal-sikre-digital-teknologiforstaelse-til-alle-boern-og-unge>

⁶⁷ Yle News (2026) 'Survey finds more support in Finland for social media ban for under-15s', 26 January. Available at: <https://yle.fi/a/74-20206519>

⁶⁸ Browne, R. (2026) 'Finland looks to end "uncontrolled human experiment" with Australia-style ban on social media', on YLE, 31 January. Available at: <https://yle.fi/a/74-20207494>

Finnish parliament, though the government has indicated its intention to legislate before the current parliamentary term ends in spring 2027.⁶⁹

Finland's existing legal baseline is currently permissive: under the EU General Data Protection Regulation, Finland set the digital age of consent at 13.⁷⁰ Any social media ban for under-15s would therefore create a new, separate legal framework beyond existing data protection law.

National guidance

Finland has produced national guidance on screens and social media use that stands among the strictest in Europe. In January 2026, the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) and the National Agency for Education (OPH) jointly published national recommendations on children's use of digital devices. The recommendations advise that children under two should have no screen time; children aged two to 10 should have a maximum of one hour per day; children aged 11 to 13 should have a maximum of two hours per day; and children under 13 should not have a personal smartphone and should not be allowed to use social media. These guidelines apply to leisure time only and do not cover homework or school-related tasks. They are recommendations, not legal requirements, and carry no formal enforcement mechanism. THL and OPH have announced that a further set of recommendations for children aged 13 to 18 is planned for later in 2026.⁷¹

The recommendations were developed by a network of experts drawn from public authorities, research organisations, and civil society.

Mobile phones in schools

In August 2025, Finland enacted an amendment to the Basic Education Act that restricts the use of mobile phones, tablets, laptops and other smart devices during school hours across the comprehensive school system.⁷² The law restricts pupils from using phones during lessons without explicit teacher permission, with exceptions for learning purposes or healthcare needs.⁷³ Teachers and principals have the authority to confiscate devices. Schools retain discretion over how they manage device use during breaks and lunch. Upper secondary schools (high schools) in Finland are governed by separate legislation and are not covered by the restriction.⁷⁴

Digital literacy and civil society

Finland has ranked first on the European Media Literacy Index for several consecutive years.⁷⁵ The index, published by the Open Society Institute in Sofia, measures countries' resilience to disinformation based on the quality of education systems, media freedom and levels of public trust.

⁶⁹ Yle News (2026) 'Finland sets tougher guidelines: No social media or smartphones for under-13s', 22 January. Available at: <https://yle.fi/a/74-20205877>

⁷⁰ Caglar, C. (2021) 'Digital Age of Consent under the GDPR', on euCONSENT, 26 October. Available at: <https://euconsent.eu/digital-age-of-consent-under-the-gdpr/>

⁷¹ Finnish National Agency for Education (OPH) and Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) (2026) 'Recommendations for children on the use of digital devices completed – personal smartphones not recommended for children under the age of 13', 22 January. Available at: <https://www.oph.fi/en/news/2026/recommendations-children-use-digital-devices-completed-personal-smartphones-not>

⁷² Mustaniemi-Laakso, M. *et al.* (2025) 'Finland Banning Phones in Schools: Striking a Balance Between Right to Education and Digital Access on an Equal Basis for All', on Talking Rights, 28 August. Available at: <https://talkingrights.org/2025/08/28/finland-cellphone-ban/>

⁷³ Fouda, M. (2025) 'Finland to restrict the use of smartphones during the school day', on Euronews, 1 May. Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/05/01/finland-to-restrict-the-use-of-smartphones-in-school-during-the-day>

⁷⁴ *Daily Finland* (2025) 'Mobile phone ban kicks in for Finnish school students', 7 August. Available at: <https://www.dailyfinland.fi/education/44557/Mobile-phone-ban-kicks-in-for-Finnish-school-students>

⁷⁵ Open Society Institute Sofia (2026) *The Media Literacy Index 2026: Measuring Vulnerability of Societies to Disinformation*. Available at: <https://osis.bg/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Media-Literacy-Index-2026.pdf> page 2.

Digital competence is one of seven transversal competence areas in the 2014 National Core Curriculum, integrated across all subjects rather than taught as a standalone topic. This means that every teacher, regardless of subject, is expected to develop pupils' multiliteracy skills, including their ability to critically evaluate online information, understand how media content is produced and behave responsibly in digital environments.^{76,77}

Finland is one of only two countries in Europe (the other is Spain) where all aspects of early digital literacy are covered in the early childhood education framework.⁷⁸

The Finnish Safer Internet Centre, a joint project of the National Audiovisual Institute, Save the Children Finland and the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare, provides educational resources, helplines, and a hotline for reporting illegal content.^{79,80}

The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare runs a peer support programme in 93 per cent of secondary schools in Finland, training older pupils to support younger ones with issues such as online safety and cyberbullying.⁸¹

What can Britain learn from Finland?

Finland's most helpful lesson for Britain on national guidance is that voluntary guidance carries more weight when institutions speak with one co-ordinated voice. The THL and OPH recommendations were developed from a network of experts, giving them a legitimacy that top-down mandates rarely achieve. Guidance that informs parental choice is preferable to legislation that substitutes government judgment for it. Britain has produced advisory material on children's screen use, but it has come from multiple bodies with overlapping remits and no common framing, which dilutes its practical reach.

On digital literacy, Finland demonstrates what sustained, cross-curricular investment produces over time. Finland's repeated first place on the European Media Literacy Index reflects decades of building critical media skills into every subject, not a single policy intervention. Britain's planned curriculum reforms do not take effect until September 2028, and they remain concentrated on secondary-age pupils. Finland's experience suggests that the earlier digital literacy is introduced, and the more consistently it is distributed across subjects rather than confined to a discrete lesson, the more durable the outcomes.

Civil society is the part of Finland's approach that receives the least attention in British policy discussion, and it may be the most transferable. The Finnish Safer Internet Centre pools the resources of a public authority, a children's charity and a welfare organisation into a single operational structure, rather than leaving each body to duplicate the other's work. Britain has organisations capable of

⁷⁶ Kivinen, K. and Verfürth, E. (2025) 'How Finland is preparing its citizens for a world swamped by fake news', on Development and Cooperation, 24 June. Available at: <https://www.dandc.eu/en/article/finland-has-been-world-leader-media-literacy-many-years-children-young-kindergarten-age-are>

⁷⁷ VisitEDUfinn (2025) 'What digital literacy skills are emphasized in Finnish education?', 16 October. Available at: <https://www.visiteduinn.com/what-digital-literacy-skills-are-emphasized-in-finnish-education/>

⁷⁸ OECD (2023) *Finland – Starting Strong VII Country Note*. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/about/programmes/edu/ecec/migrate/starting-strong-vii/Finland.pdf> page 5.

⁷⁹ The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare. *Finnish Safer Internet Centre*. Available at: <https://www.mll.fi/en/about-mll/media-education/finnish-safer-internet-centre/>

⁸⁰ Better Internet for Kids (2026) *Finnish Safer Internet Centre*. Available at: <https://better-internet-for-kids.europa.eu/en/sic/finland>

⁸¹ The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (2024) *MLL Peer Support program*. Available at: <https://www.mll.fi/en/home-page/ml-peer-support-program/>

performing comparable roles, but they operate without the formal co-ordination that makes the Finnish model effective. The lesson is not that Britain should replicate Finnish institutions, but that investing in civil society is a more proportionate and durable response to children's use of smartphones and social media than focusing solely on regulation.

5. The Netherlands

Pursuit of a social media restriction

The Netherlands has not introduced legislation to prohibit social media use by children, though there is political and public pressure for action. A survey published in January 2026 found that nearly two-thirds of Dutch citizens support a ban on social media for children under 16.⁸² The new coalition government has included in its coalition agreement a pledge to pursue an enforceable European minimum age of 15 for social media, accompanied by privacy-friendly age verification.⁸³ Rather than seeking a unilateral domestic ban, the coalition is directing its effort at the EU level, reflecting the cross-border nature of the platforms it seeks to regulate.⁸⁴

National health guidance

In June 2025, the Dutch government published research-based recommendations for healthy and responsible screen and social media use. These recommendations advise parents and caregivers that children under 15 should not use social media platforms such as Instagram or TikTok. The guidance also recommends that parents avoid giving children a smartphone before they reach group 8 in primary school, which corresponds to approximately ages 11 to 12.⁸⁵ The guidelines are explicitly advisory. They place decision-making authority in the hands of families and encourage parents to model responsible screen use, keep devices out of bedrooms, and avoid screens at mealtimes.⁸⁶

Mobile phones in schools

In July 2023, the Dutch Education Minister announced that mobile phones, tablets and smartwatches would no longer be permitted in secondary schools from January 2024. At the start of the 2024 to 2025 school year, the policy was extended to primary schools and schools for pupils with special needs. This policy serves as a national agreement among the government, education organisations, teachers' unions and parents, with individual schools retaining the flexibility to set their own implementation rules.^{87,88}

⁸² NL Times (2026) 'Nearly two-thirds of Dutch support social media ban for children and teenagers', 23 January. Available at: <https://nltimes.nl/2026/01/23/nearly-two-thirds-dutch-support-social-media-ban-children-teenagers>

⁸³ Haeck, P. (2026) 'New Dutch government to push for EU social media ban for under-15s', in *Politico*, 30 January. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/d66-cda-vvd-dutch-government-aims-to-keep-under-15s-off-social-media/>

⁸⁴ Boulton, L.O. (2026) 'Dutch Government Proposes EU-Wide Ban on Social Media Use for Under-15s', on SumsSub, 2 February. Available at: <https://sumsub.com/media/news/dutch-government-proposes-ban-on-social-media-for-under-15s/>

⁸⁵ Jacobs, S. (2025) 'Official Dutch guidelines set minimum age for social media at 15', on IamExpat, 18 June. Available at: <https://www.iamexpat.nl/expat-info/dutch-news/official-dutch-guidelines-set-minimum-age-social-media-15>

⁸⁶ DutchNews (2025) 'No social media for under-15s, Dutch government tells parents', 17 June. Available at: <https://www.dutchnews.nl/2025/06/no-social-media-for-under-15s-dutch-government-tells-parents/>

⁸⁷ Eurydice (2025) 'Netherlands: A ban on mobile phones in the classroom', 26 June. Available at: <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/news/netherlands-ban-mobile-phones-classroom>

⁸⁸ CNE.news (2023) 'The Netherlands bans smartphone from primary schools', 9 November. Available at: <https://cne.news/article/3855-the-netherlands-bans-smartphone-from-primary-schools>

Civil society

In 2024, a group of Dutch parents founded *Smartphonevrij Opgroeien* (Growing Up Smartphone Free), collectively committing to delaying the provision of smartphones to their children until at least age 14.⁸⁹ The movement has since grown to over 60,000 signatories. The movement responds to the early peer pressure children face when classmates receive smartphones. The parent pact is a way to reduce peer pressure by having parents join together to delay providing their children with smartphones. The Netherlands also has the Dutch Media Literacy Network, founded at the initiative of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, which brings together member organisations, including libraries, schools, research institutes, broadcasters and technology companies.⁹⁰

Digital literacy

Digital literacy is not currently mandatory in Dutch schools. Schools are encouraged to teach pupils about media literacy and online safety, but legal enforcement is not expected to begin until 2031.⁹¹

What can Britain learn from the Netherlands?

The *Smartphonevrij Opgroeien* movement offers a lesson for Britain. Over 60,000 Dutch parents have voluntarily committed to withholding smartphones from their children until the age of 14, not because the state required it, but because co-ordinated collective action within school communities made the commitment socially sustainable. This is civil society operating as intended, solving a shared problem through voluntary co-ordination rather than state compulsion. Britain has an equivalent movement in Smartphone Free Childhood, but it has not yet received formal government recognition or been incorporated into any official guidance framework. The government could support such efforts by publicly engaging with their aims and objectives and including parent pledge schemes in any forthcoming guidance on children's digital wellbeing, without infringing on parental authority.

6. Australia

The Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act

The Australian government passed the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024 in late November 2024, introducing a minimum age of 16 for certain age-restricted social media platforms.⁹² This legislation made Australia one of the first countries in the world to mandate a national minimum age for social media access. The Act requires providers of age-restricted social media platforms to take reasonable steps to prevent children in Australia under the age of 16 from creating new accounts or keeping existing ones.⁹³

The obligation to comply with the Online Safety Amendment rests entirely with platforms, not with children or parents. Social media platforms that do not take reasonable steps to prevent under-16s

⁸⁹ *Smartphonevrij Opgroeien* (Growing Up Smartphone Free). Available at: <https://smartphonevrijopgroeien.nl/>

⁹⁰ Network Mediawijsheid. *About the Dutch Media Literacy Network*. Available at: <https://netwerkmediawijsheid.nl/over-ons/about-dutch-media-literacy-network/>

⁹¹ *NL Times* (2025) 'The Tweede Kamer adopts law for more reading, writing, maths at school', 14 December. Available at: <https://nltimes.nl/2025/12/14/tweede-kamer-adopts-law-reading-writing-maths-school>

⁹² Practical Law Data Protection and Cybersecurity (2024) *Social media minimum age legislation passes both Houses of Parliament*. Practical Law UK - Thomson Reuters. Available at: [https://uk.practicallaw.thomsonreuters.com/w-045-1845?transitionType=Default&contextData=\(sc.Default\)&firstPage=true](https://uk.practicallaw.thomsonreuters.com/w-045-1845?transitionType=Default&contextData=(sc.Default)&firstPage=true)

⁹³ eSafety Commissioner. *Social media age restrictions*. Available at: <https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/industry-regulation/social-media-age-restrictions>

from having accounts on their platforms can face civil penalties of up to AU\$49.5 million.⁹⁴ The Online Safety Amendment currently does not provide any parental consent override. The eSafety Commissioner currently designates 10 platforms as age-restricted: Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Threads, TikTok, Twitch, X, YouTube, Kick and Reddit. Exemptions include messaging apps, online gaming platforms, educational platforms, health services, YouTube Kids and professional networking platforms.⁹⁵ As of 25th March 2026, the Australian government now clearly defines social media platforms as having an account-based recommender feature and/or at least one of the logged-in features (endless feeds, feedback features or time-limited features).⁹⁶

Current enforcement results

Within days of the enforcement of the social media restriction on children under 16 in Australia, platforms deactivated, removed or restricted around 4.7 million accounts.⁹⁷ All 10 designated platforms submitted the required data to the eSafety Commissioner on time and stated that they would comply with the law. However, the ban has not been without controversy. Two High Court challenges are underway: one by two 15-year-old plaintiffs arguing that the ban disproportionately burdens the implied freedom of political communication, and one by the social media platform Reddit, arguing, among other points, that the law forces intrusive verification processes on adults as well as minors.^{98,99} Privacy advocates have raised concerns that verifying all users' ages risks mass surveillance, and cybersecurity experts note that children can circumvent restrictions by using VPNs, borrowed accounts, or makeup to fool facial-estimation systems.

Mobile phones in schools

Australia has implemented mobile phone bans in state (public) primary and secondary schools across all states.¹⁰⁰ State primary and secondary schools are expected to ban mobile phones during the school day, but schools have flexibility in how they implement the ban.¹⁰¹ Education ministers agreed to ban, restrict or manage mobile phones in all government schools in Australia from the start of the 2024 term, as part of a co-ordinated national commitment.¹⁰² Victoria was the first mover in 2020, with other states following between 2020 and 2024.¹⁰³ Implementation methods for the phone ban in

⁹⁴ Birkett, S. and Kwee, C. (2026) 'Australia's Social Media "Ban" and the eSafety Commissioner's Social Media Minimum Age Regulatory Guidance', on Privacy Matters – DLA Piper, 17 February. Available at: <https://privacymatters.dlapiper.com/2026/02/australias-social-media-ban-and-the-esafety-commissioners-social-media-minimum-age-regulatory-guidance/>

⁹⁵ eSafety Commissioner. *Social media 'ban' or delay FAQs*. Available at: <https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/industry-regulation/social-media-age-restrictions/faqs>

⁹⁶ Aldred, M. and Clennell, A. (2026) 'Albanese government quietly bolsters under-16s social media ban definitions ahead of filing its defence in a High Court challenge', on Sky News Australia, 26 March. Available at: <https://www.skynews.com.au/australia-news/politics/albanese-government-quietly-bolsters-under16s-social-media-ban-definitions-ahead-of-filing-its-defence-in-a-high-court-challenge/news-story/8d8004ccc1c70488e4d3e798dd98aa25>

⁹⁷ Albanese, A. and Wells, A. (2026) '4.7 million accounts deactivated, removed or restricted', on Prime Minister of Australia, 16 January. Available at: <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/4-7-million-accounts-deactivated-removed-or-restricted>

⁹⁸ France 24 (2025) 'Reddit challenges Australia's new under-16 social media ban in High Court', 12 December. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20251212-reddit-challenges-australia-s-new-under-16-social-media-ban-in-high-court>

⁹⁹ Byrne, E. and Toomey, J. (2025) 'High Court agrees to hear teenagers' challenge to under 16s social media ban', on ABC News, 4 December. Available at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-12-04/court-agrees-hear-teens-challenge-to-under-16-social-media-ban/106103338>

¹⁰⁰ Phone Locker (2023) 'Australia bans mobile phones in class', 31 October. Available at: <https://phonelocker.com/australia-bans-mobile-phones-in-class/>

¹⁰¹ Arnup, J. *et al.* (2025) 'Mobile Phone Policies in Australian Secondary Schools', on Generation Survey, 6 November. Available at: https://generationsurvey.org.au/data_story/mobile-phone-policies-in-australian-secondary-schools/

¹⁰² Clare, J. *et al.* (2025) 'School behaviour improving after mobile phone ban and vaping reforms', on Ministers' Media Centre, 15 February. Available at: <https://ministers.education.gov.au/clare/school-behaviour-improving-after-mobile-phone-ban-and-vaping-reforms>

¹⁰³ Ayoub, S. (2025) 'Two years after school phone bans were implemented in Australia, what has changed?', in *The Guardian*, 12 October. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/oct/13/two-years-after-school-phone-bans-were-implemented-in-australia-whats-changed-the-impacts-were-clear>

schools include lockable magnetic phone pouches, secure phone lockers and 'off and away' policies. Exemptions are provided for students with medical, disability or specific educational needs.¹⁰⁴

The role of the eSafety Commissioner

A distinctive feature of Australia's approach is the role of the eSafety Commissioner, a dedicated statutory office established in 2015 and, since 2017, headed by Julie Inman Grant. The Commissioner's office combines regulatory enforcement powers with extensive educational programmes. These include the Toolkit for Schools, built around four pillars of prepare, engage, educate and respond;¹⁰⁵ a Virtual Classroom programme;¹⁰⁶ the eSafety Champions Network for teachers;¹⁰⁷ and the National Online Safety Education Council.¹⁰⁸ The Commissioner also administers a complaints and enforcement scheme for cyberbullying and image-based abuse.¹⁰⁹ The eSafety Commissioner received AU\$132.1 million in additional funding over four years from the 2023 Budget,¹¹⁰ indicating the Australian government's pledge to invest in enforcement capacity alongside legislation.

Other associations outside the eSafety Commissioner

Australia's civil society ecosystem includes the Alannah and Madeline Foundation,¹¹¹ whose eSmart programme reaches over 2,200 schools,¹¹² and Dolly's Dream, founded after 14-year-old Dolly Everett's suicide from cyberbullying, which runs anti-bullying workshops particularly in rural communities.¹¹³

National guidance and digital literacy

The Australian 24-hour movement guidelines, released by the Department of Health, provide age-specific screen time guidance, among other recommendations (like physical activity), no screen time for children under two, no more than one hour per day for ages two to five, and no more than two hours per day of recreational screen time for ages five to 17.¹¹⁴ The Australian Curriculum (Version 9) addresses online safety through its digital technologies, health and physical education, and media arts.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁴ See each state's government or Department of Education website for details on how schools in each state may implement the ban. For instance, in New South Wales, high school students are now required to leave their phones in lockable pouches, in lockers, switched off and in bags, or hand their phone to staff at the start of the school day, but it is up to schools to determine how to enforce the ban. New South Wales Government (2023) 'Mobile phones now banned in all NSW public schools', 9 October. Available at: <https://education.nsw.gov.au/news/latest-news/mobile-phones-now-banned-in-all-nsw-public-schools>

¹⁰⁵ eSafety Commissioner. *Toolkit for Schools*. Available at: <https://www.esafety.gov.au/educators/toolkit-schools>

¹⁰⁶ eSafety Commissioner. *Webinars for schools*. Available at: <https://www.esafety.gov.au/educators/webinars-for-schools>

¹⁰⁷ eSafety Commissioner. *The eSafety Champions Network*. Available at: <https://www.esafety.gov.au/educators/training-for-educators/the-esafety-champions-network>

¹⁰⁸ eSafety Commissioner. *eSafety's National Online Safety Education Council (NOSEC)*. Available at: <https://www.esafety.gov.au/educators/national-online-safety-education-council>

¹⁰⁹ eSafety Commissioner. Available at: <https://www.esafety.gov.au/>

¹¹⁰ Rowland, M. (2023) 'Record investment to improve the safety of Australians online', on Minister for Infrastructure, 16 May. Available at: <https://minister.infrastructure.gov.au/rowland/media-release/record-investment-improve-safety-australians-online>

¹¹¹ Alannah and Madeline Foundation. Available at: <https://www.alannahandmadeline.org.au/>

¹¹² Heydon, S. (2018) *Keyboard punches: a school's duty of care in the domain of cyberbullying*. Emil Ford Lawyers. Available at: <https://www.emilford.com.au/imagesDB/wysiwyg/SarahHeydon-Keyboardsdutycareinthedomainofcyberbullying.pdf> page 34.

¹¹³ Dolly's Dream. Available at: <https://dollysdream.org.au/>

¹¹⁴ Australian Government Department of Health, Disability and Ageing. *24-hour movement guidelines for all Australians*. Available at: <https://www.health.gov.au/topics/physical-activity/24-hour-movement-guidelines-for-all-australians?language=en>

¹¹⁵ V9 Australian Curriculum. *Understand this Curriculum connection - Online safety*. Available at: <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/curriculum-information/understand-this-curriculum-connection/online-safety>

What can Britain learn from Australia?

The most instructive feature of Australia's approach is not the social media ban itself but the institutional architecture behind it. The Online Safety Amendment places the legal obligation on platforms, not on parents or children. No penalty falls on a family whose child bypasses the law. The eSafety Commissioner gives Australia's legal framework genuine force. By combining enforcement powers, educational programmes, a complaints scheme and research capacity within a single statutory body, the eSafety Commissioner represents a government that invested in the structure needed to make legislation work.

Australia's eSafety Commissioner provides a model of a dedicated, well-funded institution with regulatory power, educational reach and enforcement capacity. With AU\$132.1 million in additional funding over four years, the Commissioner's office combines regulation with education and community outreach. Denmark's Well-Being Commission examined children's dissatisfaction holistically, connecting digital harms to wider questions of childhood wellbeing. Britain's current approach distributes responsibility across Ofcom, the Department for Education and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. Under this structure, there are risks of fragmentation and gaps in co-ordination. No comparator country in this report has yet to replicate, at the same scale, a dedicated statutory institution that combines regulatory enforcement with educational outreach.

7. Comparative analyses

When comparing these countries against what is being done in Britain, a pattern emerges. Some of the countries have moved, or are moving, further and faster than Britain on at least one dimension of the children-and-digital-technology debate. The question for the British government is not whether to act, as that question has effectively been settled, but which combination of levers to pull, and how quickly.

These five countries represent different political traditions and different constitutional arrangements. The fact that they are converging on broadly similar policy directions suggests that the underlying problem goes beyond cultural and institutional contexts.

National guidance

Of the countries examined in this report, five have issued official, age-specific national guidance on children's screen time and smartphone use. Finland's January 2026 recommendations include no screen time for under-twos; a maximum of one hour per day for children aged two to 10; and no personal smartphone or social media access before age 13. France's expert commission reached broadly comparable conclusions. The Netherlands published research-based guidelines advising against social media use before age 15. Australia's guidelines advise no screen time for children under two and no more than two hours of recreational screen time per day for ages five to 17. Denmark recommended no smartphone use before age 13.

A common feature of these countries' approaches is that each has framed its recommendations as advisory and subject to revision as evidence develops. Equally important is that the national guidance provided by each country does not stand alone. It is embedded within a wider infrastructure of parental support tools, public health campaigns and civil society engagement.

Britain's position is still evolving. The 2019 commentary explicitly declined to set time-based thresholds. In March 2026, the government published new guidance for parents of children under five and announced that separate guidance for ages five to 16 is expected. These are meaningful steps. However, any such guidance should be accompanied by parental support and reinforcement from civil society. Without this guidance for children ages five to 16, Britain is falling behind.

Device-level protections

France's Studer law requires that every internet-enabled device sold in the country come pre-installed with parental controls.¹¹⁶ This is a supply-side intervention that does not depend on parental technical competence or platform compliance. It ensures that basic protections are in place from the moment a device is activated. Britain has no equivalent requirement on the manufacturer side, where there is a device-level pre-installation mandate. Given that Ofcom data shows only a third of British parents know the correct minimum age requirements for social media platforms, device-level protections could represent a meaningful additional layer that does not rely on parental knowledge or action.¹¹⁷ However, the regulator is considering requiring online platforms to offer parental controls under the Online Safety Act.¹¹⁸

School mobile phone bans

The countries have pursued school phone restrictions through three different mechanisms: statutory legislation, co-ordinated national agreement, and non-statutory guidance. France, Australia and Finland have each enacted statutory bans, though the scope and enforcement models differ across all three. Denmark has legislated ahead of the 2026/27 academic year. The Netherlands has achieved broad compliance through a structured stakeholder agreement rather than through primary legislation, demonstrating that consistent national outcomes do not necessarily require primary legislation, provided the agreement is official, publicly co-ordinated and includes named institutional parties with clear expectations. In England, as of April 2026, an amendment to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act has been implemented, making the no-phones-in-school policy a legal requirement, which will come into effect on 29th June 2026.

Civil society

The civil society dimension reveals a meaningful divergence across the five comparator countries, one that Britain can continue to translate into policy. The Netherlands and Denmark provide clear examples of parent-led civic mobilisation operating independently of, and in some respects ahead of, government action. In the Netherlands, the durability of the Growing Up Smartphone Free movement rests on a logic of co-ordination. When an entire school cohort makes the same commitment simultaneously, the social pressure on individual parents diminishes considerably, making the norm easier to sustain. Denmark's equivalent grassroots movement, Screen Healthy Childhood, operates on a similar premise, working to expand the national conversation about screen-healthy habits, support

¹¹⁶ Service Public (2024) *Parental control: new obligations for connected hardware manufacturers*. Available at: <https://www.service-public.gouv.fr/particuliers/actualites/A17487?lang=en>

¹¹⁷ Ofcom (2025) *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report*. Available at: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/children/childrens-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2025/childrens-media-literacy-report-2025.pdf?v=396621> page 61.

¹¹⁸ Sud, M. (2025) '5 ways the Online Safety Act is changing how children experience the online world', on Internet Matters, 4 November. Available at: <https://www.internetmatters.org/hub/research/online-safety-act-changing-childrens-online-experiences/>

parents and institutions in creating change at the local level, and apply pressure on government and technology companies from below.

France and Finland have structured civil society through more institutionalised frameworks. France's three-pillar Safer Internet Centre, which combines an awareness centre, a hotline for illegal content and a helpline, provides a co-ordinated national infrastructure for parents, teachers and children. Finland takes a comparable approach, pooling the resources of the National Audiovisual Institute, Save the Children Finland and the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare within its Safer Internet Centre.

Australia has concentrated these functions within a statutory body. The eSafety Commissioner's educational programmes, including its Toolkit for Schools, a Virtual Classroom programme and an eSafety Champions Network for teachers, are funded and co-ordinated by the Australian government. The Commissioner received AU\$132.1 million in additional funding over four years, a level of resource commitment that positions civil society support as a core pillar of national strategy.¹¹⁹

Britain has civil society organisations that perform comparable functions, including the UK Safer Internet Centre and Smartphone Free Childhood, the closest British equivalents to the Dutch and Danish grassroots movements. However, these bodies operate without the formal co-ordination or institutional embedding found in Finland, France or Australia, and Smartphone Free Childhood has not yet received formal government recognition or been incorporated into any official guidance. The contrast with the Netherlands provides Britain with some guidance, not because the Dutch model is more ambitious in terms of legislation, but because it is more socially embedded. Britain's government could take meaningful steps short of legislation by formally endorsing and signposting parent pledge schemes, supporting co-ordination among existing civil society bodies, and integrating parental support levers into the forthcoming guidance on children's screen time and digital wellbeing. None of these requires primary legislation. Each option could reduce dependence on state enforcement by strengthening the civic and community foundations.

Digital literacy as a curriculum priority

None of the countries examined in this report has integrated digital literacy as systematically as Finland. The 2014 National Core Curriculum defines digital competence as one of seven transversal competence areas running across all subjects and all school years. Every teacher, regardless of subject, is expected to develop pupils' capacity to critically evaluate online information, understand how digital content is produced and behave responsibly in digital environments. The result is a model in which digital literacy is incorporated into how students learn every subject, at every stage, from early childhood.

The other four comparator countries take broadly comparable structural approaches but at different stages of development. Australia integrates digital safety and wellbeing across all eight learning areas of its national curriculum, preventing it from becoming one teacher's sole responsibility, in a manner that closely resembles the Finnish model. France introduced media and information literacy into the national curriculum in 2015 and extended it across all grades in 2022. The Netherlands and Denmark are more recent movers. The Netherlands expects digital literacy to become legally mandatory from 2027, with enforcement not anticipated until 2031. Denmark's provision remains the least systematic

¹¹⁹ Rowland, M. (2023) 'Record investment to improve the safety of Australians online', on Minister for Infrastructure, 16 May. Available at: <https://minister.infrastructure.gov.au/rowland/media-release/record-investment-improve-safety-australians-online>

at the compulsory school level, with digital competencies formally incorporated at the upper secondary level but patchy in primary and lower secondary schools, despite a government-funded national initiative that has been running since 2021.

Britain's direction is sound, but its timeline requires examination. The Independent Curriculum and Assessment Review, published in November 2025, recommended making citizenship, including media literacy, compulsory from years 1 to 6, with the revised curriculum published in spring 2027 and taught from September 2028. As the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee found in its July 2025 report, the current provision is a postcode lottery, with quality and consistency varying considerably between schools.¹²⁰

Finland's experience points to two conditions that make the difference: digital competence must be distributed across subjects rather than assigned to computing or citizenship alone, and it must begin in early childhood rather than in secondary school. Britain's forthcoming reforms should be tested against both conditions.

Social media statutory restriction

This report does not offer a comparative examination of statutory social media restrictions or prohibitions across all six countries.

As of April 2026, only one country in this comparison, Australia, has enacted and brought into force a law restricting social media access for children under a certain age. Additionally, Australia's Online Safety Amendment took effect in December 2025, meaning the ban has been in effect for less than six months. The remaining countries are at varying stages of legislative consideration. At the time of writing this report, France is working towards a final unified version of its social media restriction legislation. Denmark announced its intention to legislate in November 2025, but no bill has yet been passed. The Netherlands and Finland have not introduced primary legislation. Britain has launched a consultation and has not yet introduced a bill.

To draw comparative conclusions about effectiveness, enforceability or design of such a restriction or prohibition in this context would require evidence that does not yet exist. The early compliance data from Australia, while instructive, reflect the immediate aftermath of implementation rather than sustained behavioural change.

There is also further reason for caution, as it is more useful to provide time for evidence before evaluating interventions. Assessing a social media ban as a success or failure based on six months of platform compliance data would endorse the same impatience for conclusions that often drive ineffective policy in the first place. Britain would be better served by a clear-eyed account of what the Australian experience has set in motion, along with a commitment to thoroughly evaluating its results over time, than by drawing premature lessons from early data.

The comparative study conducted in this report, covering national guidance, school smartphone restrictions, civil society, and digital literacy provision, rests on evidence that is more developed, more

¹²⁰ UK Parliament (2025) 'Failure to prioritise media literacy in the UK presents a risk to social cohesion and democracy', 25 July. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/170/communications-and-digital-committee/news/208665/failure-to-prioritise-media-literacy-in-the-uk-presents-a-risk-to-social-cohesion-and-democracy/>

varied in its institutional forms and more amenable to substantive cross-country comparison. These are the dimensions on which Britain can draw practical lessons now.

Conclusion

Britain has the regulatory infrastructure to act. The Online Safety Act 2023 created a platform accountability framework that most of the countries examined in this report lack, and Ofcom has genuine enforcement capacity. Whether that framework needs to be supplemented by further state intervention is a separate, and genuinely contested, question. What this comparative study suggests is that the countries which have made the most durable progress on children's digital wellbeing are not necessarily those that have legislated most aggressively. They are the ones that have combined clear national guidance with strong civil society, empowered parents to act collectively and allowed communities to develop norms that legislation would struggle to replicate.

The current debate over whether Britain should follow Australia's lead and enact a statutory prohibition on children's access to social media is not the main focus of this report. Still, it is worth stating here that although there may currently be political momentum behind a ban, that does not mean such a ban would solve the problems children are encountering in the digital world; there are issues to consider, such as children trying to circumvent the ban and moving to less-regulated parts of the internet. In addition, a blanket ban could reduce pressure on social media platforms to address issues with the design features. The issue is not simply that children are on social media, but that they are on platforms with settings such as infinite scroll and notifications that shape what children see and how long they engage. A minimum age restriction does not address what children encounter on social media platforms once they reach that age. The government's policy response should look beyond a single statutory restriction. Whilst there could be room for targeted rules that address clear harms, a blanket ban on social media platforms overrides the judgment of parents, who should be the leaders in managing their children online.

This observation matters for how the British government reads the international evidence for future policy actions. Australia enacted the world's first statutory social media ban for under-16s. It demonstrated that enforcement is technically feasible. But early compliance data gathered in the first weeks of a ban are not evidence of changed behaviour, improved wellbeing or reduced exposure to harm. Reddit's High Court challenge to the legislation remained unresolved at the time of writing, and the risk that children migrate to less-regulated platforms rather than disengaging from harmful content altogether has not been adequately tested. A government that treats the Australian case as settled proof of effectiveness, or as a sufficient template for British policy, would be drawing a conclusion that the evidence does not yet support.

The more instructive comparisons are those that produced meaningful change without extending the state's statutory overreach. The Netherlands achieved broad, durable compliance on school smartphone use through a co-ordinated stakeholder agreement rather than a law. Its Growing Up Smartphone Free movement succeeded not because the government mandated behaviour, but because it created the conditions in which parents could co-ordinate at scale, reducing the social pressure on individual families to hand phones to children before they were ready. Denmark's equivalent movement, *Skærmsund Barndom*, operated on the same premise. Both cases illustrate a principle that is often overlooked in this debate: collective action among parents, when clearly

organised and publicly endorsed, can produce behavioural change more quickly and with greater legitimacy than top-down restrictions.

Britain has its own equivalent in Smartphone Free Childhood. Unlike its Dutch and Danish counterparts, it operates without formal government recognition, co-ordinated institutional backing or integration into any official guidance. That is a gap the government could close at minimal cost and without primary legislation. Formally endorsing the movement, co-ordinating existing civil society bodies and incorporating parental-support levers into the forthcoming screen-time guidance for five- to 16-year-olds would not extend the regulatory state. Each step would instead reduce the state's dependence on enforcement by strengthening the civic foundations that make any rule, statutory or otherwise, more effective in practice.

The same logic applies to national guidance. All five comparator countries in this study have published specific, age-based recommendations on children's screen time and smartphone use. Britain's 2019 commentary from the UK Chief Medical Officers declined to do so, and the argument for caution at the time was reasonable. But guidance does not require certainty. It requires a reasonable reading of the balance of evidence, combined with honest acknowledgement of its limits. The comparator countries have all issued guidance covering children ages five to 16 on that basis, framed explicitly as advisory and subject to revision. Britain has yet to do so. Britain's guidance for five- to 16-year-olds should do the same. Its credibility will rest not on the state's authority to make cumbersome or excessive demands, but on the quality of the evidence it cites and the transparency with which it presents uncertainty.

The digital literacy gap is the most serious structural problem this report identifies, given Finland's long-term results and Britain's delayed implementation timetable. Finland's sustained advantage in this area rests on a curriculum decision made in 2014: digital competence is defined as a transversal capability that spans all subjects, not assigned to computing or citizenship alone. Britain's curriculum reforms are sound in their direction, but will not take effect until September 2028. The current provision, which the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee described as a postcode lottery, leaves children without consistent preparation for the online environments they already inhabit. Accelerating that curriculum reform and ensuring it distributes responsibility for digital literacy across subjects rather than concentrating it in one would do more for children's long-term resilience than any platform restriction.

The case for restraint on statutory social media restrictions is not a case for inaction. Britain can publish clear national guidance for all ages, formally embed civil society in its delivery and accelerate curriculum reform, all without legislating for a ban. Taken together, those steps would address the gaps identified in this comparative study. They would also leave room for the Australian evidence to mature before Britain commits to a model that carries unresolved risks of displacement and enforcement failure. Britain can also consider how social media platforms can target, recommend and notify users under a certain age. Rather than blanket bans, we should be looking at digital literacy, support to parents and caregivers, requiring the social media companies to address their design features, especially for children's accounts, on how to reshape the digital environment that children are growing up in.

No country in this study has resolved the tension between protecting children and respecting families' autonomy to make decisions about their children's lives. The countries that have come closest to a

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workable balance are those that have treated government as one actor among several, providing clear guidance and a co-ordinating function, while enabling parents, schools and civil society to do the work that legislation alone cannot. British policymakers should be pursuing solutions that educate and empower children and parents to navigate the digital environment. Britain has the institutions to take that approach. The question is whether its current consultation produces a strategy built on that foundation, or whether it resorts to statutory restrictions before the less coercive options have been given a proper chance.

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