

Submission to the Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society

Introduction

Eating Disorders Families Australia (EDFA) is a national not-for-profit organisation and registered charity that was formed in 2016 by a group of parents concerned about the lack of recognition and assistance for families caring for loved ones with eating disorders. EDFA is now the only national organisation that provides support, education, advocacy and counselling services solely for families and carers of those with an eating disorder.

In light of the rising concern about the impact of social media on mental health, particularly among young Australians, EDFA strongly advocates for increased regulation of social media in Australia.

This submission outlines the necessity for stricter age restrictions, effective age verification measures, practical support for parents and carers, and mandatory removal of harmful content by social media platforms. In addition, it clearly outlines the necessity for a broad community debate on the age at which social media access is appropriate in the context of other development milestones such as being licensed to drive a vehicle, consume alcohol, and vote.

The Impact of Social Media on Eating Disorders

Social media has become an inextricable part of teenagers' lives, influencing their behaviour and self-perception. There has been a rapid rise in the incidence of eating disorders among younger Australians for over a decade with the prevalence in eating disorders in Australian young people aged 10-19 rising by 86% since 2012.¹ Almost two-thirds (61.7%) of young people in Australia (aged 12-18) say social media makes them feel dissatisfied with their body – up by 12% since 2022.

In addition, 81% of EDFA carers firmly believe that social media has contributed to their loved one's eating disorder or impeded their recovery from an eating disorder, as outlined in EDFA's *Carer Feedback Survey* conducted in October 2023. Parents and carers believe that social media starts or exacerbates concerns about appearance, food and exercise for their loved ones. The prevalence of pro-anorexia and pro-self-harm online content exacerbates these issues, creating an environment that normalises and promotes unhealthy and dangerous behaviours.

In a recent study of 598 young Americans either with an eating disorder, a subclinical eating disorder, or without an eating disorder, fewer than 3% of participants reported that engaging with eating disorder social media networks supported them to recover, seek treatment or not engage in eating disorder behaviours.² Of significant concern are results showing that these young people reported negative feelings and lower self-esteem (61.3%), triggered eating disorder behaviours such as motivation to engage in harmful eating or dieting practices (26.3%), increased pressure to become thin (22.8%), and engage in body comparisons (22.1%).

EDFA recognises that eating disorders is just one of many profoundly negative impacts arising from social media. Others include but are not limited to anxiety, depression, self-harm, suicide, cyberbullying, addiction, social exclusion, loneliness, pornography, aggressive behaviour, misogyny, sextortion, concentration difficulties, declining academic performance, and sleep disturbance.

¹ Paying The Price Report 2024: the Economic and Social Impact of Eating Disorders in Australia, Deloitte Access Economics and The Butterfly Foundation

² Cavazos-Rehg, P., Fitzsimmons-Craft, E., Krauss, M., Anako, N., Xu, c., Kasson, E., Costello, S. & Wilfley, D. (2020) Examining the self-reported advantages and disadvantages of socially networking about body image and eating disorders. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*.

Age Restrictions and Verification Measures

To mitigate the harmful effects of social media on young people, EDFA proposes the implementation of an enforced age restriction that raises the minimum age for social media use to 16+. Effective age verification measures are essential to enforce these restrictions, preventing underage users from accessing potentially harmful content.

Government intervention is essential. For too long, the onus has been placed on parents to monitor their loved ones' social media use and to protect them from the myriad of dangers that exist in the online world. EDFA's May 2024 Carer Survey found the majority of parents were floundering under the weight of this responsibility with a very real sense of hopelessness evident in their comments. Parents face the impossible choice of allowing their child to have social media and opening the door to online harms or preventing their child from having social media access and risking them being excluded from social connections with their peers.

The comments included:

"The age of 14-15 is when the pressure is on to have a phone. But if we could throw all phones in the bin and erase social media tomorrow, I would be in favour of it," one parent said in the survey.

"Ideally, I would like it (the social media access age) to be 18, but there is so much peer pressure at younger ages to engage with social media," a carer said.

Many parents expressed regret at having given in to pressure to allow social media at a young age:

"My children had access at a young age. I wish it never happened," said one.

"It's very unhelpful. I wish we had been more strict."

EDFA believes that a mandatory minimum age for social media access eliminates the dilemma faced by parents and will provide them with the power to protect their children from social media harms.

Support for Parents and Carers

Parents and carers play a critical role in guiding responsible social media use. However, as discussed, many feel overwhelmed and powerless against the influence of social media giants. They express frustration, describing the situation as one that is impossible to manage because "the horse has bolted".

In addition, many parents are unaware of dangers posed by social media use. They have not received adequate social media literacy education about the damaging content contained in social media. Many hold the mistaken view that because its use among young people is so prevalent, it must be safe.

To address this, EDFA recommends the development of co-produced practical support and resources to empower parents and carers. In addition to the recommended minimum age, EDFA recommends that consideration is given to including effective social media literacy educational programs as well as simple tools for monitoring social media activity and strategies for fostering healthy online habits. Under a co-production model, young people and carers will be equal partners in planning, creating, and evaluating the resources that are produced. Including young

people in the process is likely to significantly increase their engagement with the materials to the benefit of all.

Regulation of Harmful Content

Social media platforms must be held accountable for the content they host. Mandatory requirements should be established for the prompt removal of pro-anorexia, pro-self harm, and other negative and damaging content. Significant financial penalties are recommended for social media platforms that fail to meet this requirement. This will create a safer online environment, reducing exposure to content that could negatively impact mental health and trigger eating disorder behaviour.

In addition, EDFA believes social media platforms need to be more transparent about their algorithms and the actions they are taking to remove harmful content. It is noted that the US state of New York passed legislation in early June 2024 to prohibit social media platforms from using “addictive” algorithms when deciding what children under the age of 18 view in their social media feeds. Under the legislation, social media companies will be required to display content to younger users in chronological order. The platforms are also banned from sending children alerts between midnight and 6am. Of course, this requirement also relies on the use of robust age verification tools, such as “video selfie” technology that is already in use to effectively prove age in several countries.

The Need for Government Regulation

The pervasive influence and power of social media companies necessitates government intervention. Voluntary measures by these platforms have proven insufficient in protecting vulnerable users. By implementing strict regulations, the government can ensure that social media companies prioritise the well-being of Australia’s young people.

EDFA believes the regulatory framework must include:

1. Raising the age limit for social media access to 16+ years;
2. Effective and robust age verification;
3. Practical support and social media literacy resources for parents and carers; and
4. Stringent content moderation and algorithm transparency requirements.

Conclusion

The call for increased regulation of social media in Australia is driven by the urgent need to protect young people from the detrimental effects of online content on their mental health, including eating disorders. EDFA stands with carers and families, who have voiced their concerns, and urges the government to take decisive action. By implementing these measures, we can create a safer digital environment that supports the prevention of eating disorders and recovery of those young people affected by eating disorders.

EDFA is committed to advocating for these changes and supporting families in navigating the challenges posed by social media.