

‘She was trying to hide it’: Online harms lead to some parents wanting social media ban

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SINGAPORE - When asset manager Look Ru Shin noticed her daughter, then aged 10, glued to her phone, something felt off.

“She was trying to hide it,” Madam Look, 46, recalled.

A closer look revealed that her daughter, Claire, had received inappropriate messages from a stranger on Minecraft. “I immediately deleted her account and the app,” she said.

The incident heightened Madam Look’s concerns about harms online that she had seen, such as toxic trends, warped beauty standards and sexualised content, and their detrimental impact on children.

Many parents stand with her in wishing to see more handholding when it comes to online usage for children, but are torn on what the most effective measures should be.

Regulators globally are at a crossroads with online platforms and harmful content that plagues social media, games and other apps.

Many nations, including Britain, European countries, [Indonesia and Singapore are mulling over age restrictions](#) – with some even considering outright bans on social media for teenagers.

Australia has led the charge, [passing a ban that will kick in later in 2025](#), to outlaw social media for teenagers under 16.

Singapore’s Minister of State for Digital Development and Information Rahayu Mahzam said in Parliament in January that Singapore shares the same objectives as Australia in legislating age limits for social media access to protect young users and [is in talks with the country over Australia’s approach](#).

The Republic’s approach – for now – targets app stores and app creators, who are required to follow standards under codes of practice to address harms on their platforms or face penalties like a fine of up to \$1 million or be blocked here.

App stores have until March 2026 to set up technology that can check users’ age – a key measure in keeping children away from mature apps.

As Singapore evaluates the merits of a social media ban, the views among parents interviewed by The Straits Times are split over whether this will be effective. Some are in favour of a sweeping ban while others want to see brakes applied to online usage but wish to ease their children into the online world.

Ms Tammie Wong, 46, supports the ban, which she likened to having a law against underage drinking to protect teenagers from its harmful effects.

She said: “The advent of social media was so quick that its effects on our youth are unprecedented and uncharted. Many effects are surfacing only now.”

Ms Wong added: "Without a concerted and clear signal, the extent to how much parents can control kids' usage is limited, especially when they reach teenhood."

Dr Natalie Games, a clinical psychologist at Alliance Counselling, said that a ban works like scaffolding for parents, as it would usher in more protective measures around social media and support them in their struggle to manage their children's use of social media.

More than half of her clients, especially teenagers, talk about social media in the context of struggles.

But a ban is just one step as digital literacy is still crucial to helping teenagers navigate the digital world, she said.

Online content has been blamed for encouraging harmful behaviour and mental health issues among young people.

Many are still reeling from the tragedy of British teenager Molly Russell, who took her own life in 2017 after being exposed to thousands of Instagram and Pinterest posts about depression, self-harm and suicide in the months leading up to her death.

Yet, young people today are still frequently exposed to suicide and self-harm content online. TikTok has been criticised for circulating viral challenges encouraging dangerous activities, such as ingesting chemicals or dangerously holding one's breath.

Another parent, Madam Salizawati Abdul Aziz, 41, said she feels a sense of unease as her six children, aged between three and 17, are increasingly exposed to online services.

"Most alarming for me was that it is so easy to access videos with sexual content, and ones that feature women in a sexualised manner, like in skimpy clothes and doing things to entice viewers," added Madam Saliza, a teacher.

"I was shocked that I could see these as I casually swiped through the Facebook shorts or IG stories. It got me thinking then how do I filter and prevent my young children from viewing such things," she said, welcoming the stricter expectations on online services.

She noticed differences between those who had online devices while growing up and those who did not.

The older children who grew up largely without social media till their late teens are typically more sociable and focused, said Madam Saliza.

Her younger children who have been exposed to more screen time at a young age are less focused and tend to get upset when they are told to put down their device.

"I would prefer them to immerse themselves in books and building Lego, like what the previous generations did."

Madam Saliza added: "In such a tech-savvy generation, we cannot stop children from being exposed and using social media and apps as it's already part of our daily lives. But we need to be aware of what our children are viewing and accessing."

For her 15-year-old daughter Syaliz, hours feel like seconds when she is using TikTok.

Syaliz said: "I just keep scrolling, and don't realise that I've gone four hours on it."

The Secondary 4 student said she encounters content related to mental health and body image on her Instagram feed on a daily basis, which led to her becoming more self-conscious about her own body.

"I'll scroll and see many fit and healthy-looking influencers post about how people call them fat. I started to think, 'if people consider them fat, then what am I?'"

Mr Bradley Joe, a father of three, said that while tech platforms must do better, a ban would be rushed as it would take away lessons that can be taught to children about social interaction.

The 42-year-old, who works in tech sales, said: "From the ages of 10 to 16, these are formative years, it's also a time when many of them build deeper relationships, learn about social interaction and acceptance from others is important."

Experts said that unlike a ban, the Code of Practice for Online Safety for App Distribution Services offers more targeted controls for children.

Dr Chew Han Ei, an adjunct senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, said the code focuses on app stores as gatekeepers of the digital ecosystem.

"It is practical and less rigid than a blanket ban," said Dr Chew. "By placing responsibility on app stores to manage access and content, the code offers a targeted solution that can be adapted for different age groups."

Like many parents, Madam Look walks a fine line between giving Claire, now 12, freedom to manage her own screen time and shielding her from potential harms.

Claire began using Instagram and YouTube when she was 11, limited to 30 minutes per day, said Madam Look, who configured settings to lock her daughter's phone in sleep mode at night.

Madam Look added: "I set limits because at that young age, she was not able to exercise self-control. The content can be quite addictive."

If a ban were to be imposed, it is easy to imagine children, who are already exposed to mobile phones, turning to unknown sources to socialise online, creating an even larger headache for parents, she said.

"I think that the blanket ban in Australia is a very blunt tool," Madam Look said, adding that teenagers should slowly learn to manage their use of social media, rather than to have it totally removed.

"I have seen my daughter learn useful skills from social media, and found healthy inspiration to be creative in schoolwork and her personal hobbies," she said. "We would lose all of that."