

PARENT GUIDE

NAVIGATING THE NEW SOCIAL MEDIA BAN WITH GRACE AND TRUTH

Do you remember what it felt like to be a 14 year old? Trying to find your place in the world, navigating all kinds of changes to your school and your body. You want so desperately to grow up and be like the older kids you see over lunch. As you search for belonging, all you see are your peers on their phones, texting and gaming and laughing at the latest video online. It feels like getting those things will be the only way to fit in and make friends. With hindsight and adult experience we know that going without these things is not a dealbreaker for creating real connections, but to a teenager it sure can seem like it.



In our digital age many young people do have access to their own personal device and living in their pocket is a gateway to all the internet has to offer. It is undisputed that the internet, and social media in particular is responsible for some of the most hilarious, inspiring, evil and terrifying aspects of our modern world. The Australian government has decided to tackle some of the dangers by increasing the age that young people are allowed to have an account of their own on various platforms (including Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat and YouTube) to 16 years of age. For more information and specifics, visit the [Australian Government esafety website here](#).

While the onus is on the big tech companies to facilitate the restrictions the new rules will directly affect many young people and it creates an opportunity for parents to be on the front foot in how we respond and care for the youth in our homes. This article is an attempt to wisely aid Christian parents in preparing for this change, and encourage them to disciple their children to live like Jesus, the one who came with grace and truth.

So how can we respond to this cultural change with grace and truth? Well here are four suggestions for how you might connect with a teenager being impacted by this new law, and specifically four suggestions for engaging with them when it comes to phone use and social media.

1. START A CONVERSATION

One of the classic memory verses for parenting is Deuteronomy 6:49, which is all about regular conversations with your child. So if nothing else, use this moment of change to have a conversation with your teen regardless of their age. Listen to their opinions about the new laws, ask what their friends are saying and their feelings about the upcoming change. Rather than assuming it will come up in conversation, try to set aside a deliberate time to discuss this over a milkshake or look for opportune moments to discuss during a commute.

The truth of the matter is that the law will be enacted on 10 December, and our opinion can't change that. It will be a law as much as the wearing a seatbelt is, and Jesus calls us to obey the lawmakers in authority over us (Romans 13:1-5; 1 Peter 2:13-17).

The grace you can offer is honesty about your own screen time habits or the struggle you've experienced in facing change.

Tip: Check out Axis for downloadable parent guides to help you have tough conversations with your teen. [You can click here to see them.](#)

2. COMMIT TO IRL INTERACTIONS

Hopefully you don't need to be convinced of the value of gathering as Christians and how Hebrews encourages us not to neglect meeting together. This new law helps us to pursue that "all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrew 10:25) and to give greater importance to the in real life (IRL) interactions.

The truth is that for young people, online connections are genuine and meaningful. The conversations they have over social media is just as real to them as the ones we have with our friends over coffee, that's why it's important to have pastoral sensitivity at this time - these laws are potentially limiting good friendship conversations. Yet chatting over a messaging app can never replace the experience and value of face-to-face embodied conversations, and therefore we don't need to be isolated just because our apps are gone.

The grace you can give to them at this time is helping to facilitate IRL events and meetings (despite the cost to yourself). If they have been deeply embedded in the online space, then milling in a group might seem a bit foreign or uncomfortable. As part of the ongoing conversation, you might collaborate on some plans so that your child has different dates to look forward to, or start small.

Tip: Get along to Christmas church gatherings, summer camps or offer to drive them to the cinema or shops with their friends.



3. CARE FOR THEIR HEARTS IN THE CHANGE

More than just a new law or a loss of an app on their device, this change may come with all kinds of emotions. There may be grief at the loss of friendship communication, anxiety of missing out on the latest trends, jealousy at others who haven't been affected or a loneliness as school holidays begin.

Speak the truth in love by acknowledging these emotions around what is happening. Listen to their concerns without trying to problem solve. Of course, knowing that we are all different, you might find that your child is not overly effected by the law. Use the moment to ask them about any matters they ARE concerned about. One of the positives about social media is that it gives us more of a global outlook. This has led to many teens of this generation having concerns for global issues. The Mission Australia Youth Survey regularly shows bigger issues that young people are worried about. So as you seek to care for your child's heart, listen to the things that really do concern them - it's likely to be larger issues than social media restrictions.

Show them grace through patience and gentleness. Expect some of that emotional reaction to flow through their actions, especially in the first few days of restrictions. You may even need to temper your expectations on them because of it. Consider how you can help them act on the issues that matter to their heart. Of course, if they experience a particular down turn in their mental health due to this restriction (or for any other reason) you can always access support services like LifeLine, Headspace and Beyond Blue.

Tip: Take action together on a global issue to help change their perspective, like donating items to charity or buying Christmas gifts through organisations like Compassion or Tear.

4. LOOK FOR NEW OPPORTUNITIES

All these tips and ideas are about trying to make the most of every discipleship opportunity with your teen. Whether you need a reset on screen time boundaries, want to start a new hobby with your child or need to get back into family devotions, this moment could be the catalyst for that.

Truthfully, it's not yet clear how this law will go or how well tech companies will enforce it. Indeed there will be many young people who seek to circumvent the law, teens who try find loopholes or just use their parents' accounts. Adopting this attitude and letting them work it out themselves would be to miss the discipleship opportunity and misunderstand the intent behind this law change - young people should not be left alone but supported through things. Instead, take the chance to institute new traditions or moments of connection. By God's grace, this change comes in the holiday period when there are more public holidays and you get extra time with family. Don't let all the busyness of this time distract you from the opportunity presented.

Tip: Offer to watch funny YouTube video of the week together, That way they get some screen time but in a safe and shared space. You could even include some gospel themed videos.

I pray that these four tips create the catalyst for you to have good, deep and gospel conversations with your teen, based on truth and seasoned with grace. May we all enjoy freedom from staring at our screens as we celebrate Christ's coming this Christmas.