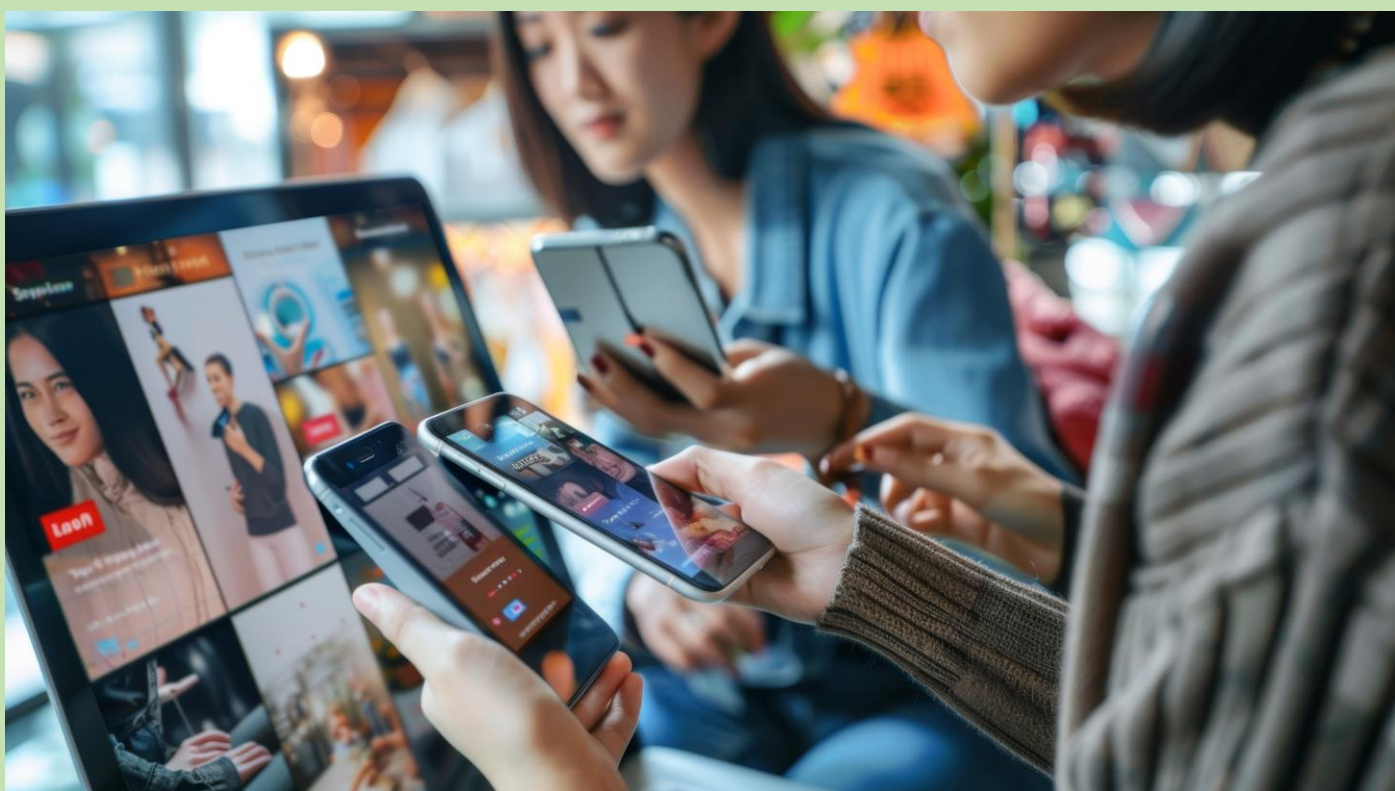


Event Report

Japan-Australia Online Round Table Discussion

“The Impact of Social Media on the Mental Health of Children and Young People and How Social Media Should Be Used in Society “



Background and Overview

Globally, one in seven adolescents aged 10–19 years is estimated to live with a mental disorder, accounting for approximately 15% of the disease burden for this age group. In Japan, the number of suicides among elementary and junior high school students reached a record high in 2024, and there is an urgent need to strengthen current initiatives and develop new initiatives to promote the mental health of children and young people. In Australia, it is estimated that around 20% of 11–17-year-old and 15% of 18–24-year-old are experiencing significant psychological distress, and the deterioration of mental health among young people has become a serious social problem.

In this context, there is a growing global concern about the impact of social media usage on the physical and mental health of children and young people. Several studies have suggested that the use of social media may be associated with problems such as sleep deprivation, mental distress, suicidal thoughts and dissatisfaction with body image. On the other hand, social media may also play a role in developing mental health by promoting social connections and peer support. Thus, social media has both risks and benefits, and thorough discussions are required regarding optimal and healthy usage for young people whose mental capacity is still developing.

Several countries have taken various approaches to addressing these challenges. For example, in November 2024, Australia passed the world's first legislation that bans social media use for those under the age of 16. This regulatory approach has sparked debate among various stakeholders, raising concerns about the lack of sufficient scientific evidence, and questions about its effectiveness and ethical concerns.

Meanwhile, in Japan, the "Basic Plan on Measures for Providing Safe and Secure Internet Use for Young People" has been formulated since 2009 and has been reviewed every three years since then. The latest version (sixth version) of the plan promotes voluntary initiatives by service providers to tackle problems arising from social media, such as sexual exploitation and cyberbullying. The Children and Families Agency is also developing a consultation system using social media and other media, and is adopting a response based on the premise of coexistence with social media.

Seeing that the national responses to young people's use of social media differ; the aim should not only be to mitigate harmful effects but also to create safe, healthy and appropriate environments in which young people can benefit from the advantages social media can offer. Going forward, it is essential to explore what a healthy and desirable use of social media looks like for youth, through multi-stakeholder and multidisciplinary dialogue grounded in real-world scientific evidence.

This roundtable aims to facilitate cross-disciplinary dialogue among a wide range of stakeholders—including healthcare experts, educators, and youth representatives—on how to responsibly integrate this technology into society, drawing on policy and research trends in Australia and Japan.

[Event Overview]

- **Date & Time:** Friday, May 23, 2025; 16:45-18:15 JST | 17:45-19:15 AEST
- **Format:** Online (Zoom Webinar)
- **Language:** Japanese and English (with simultaneous interpretation)
- **Participation Fee:** Free
- **Host:** Health and Global Policy Institute

[Program] (Titles omitted, no particular order, Australian Time)

- 17:45-17:50** Explanatory Introduction
Shu Suzuki (Senior Associate, Health and Global Policy Institute)
- 17:50-18:05** Presentation 1 “Social Media Regulation in Australia”
Jasmine Fardouly (Senior Lecturer, School of Psychology, The University of Sydney)
- 18:05-18:20** Presentation 2 “Current Situation of Social Media Use among Children and Young People in Japan”
Kazuo Takeuchi (Professor, School of Human Science and Environment,
University of Hyogo)
- 18:20-19:05** Round Table Discussion

Participants:

Junya Dohi (Chair, Specified Nonprofit Corporation, Wakamono no Machi)
Daisuke Fujikawa (Professor, Faculty of Education, Chiba University)
Kazuo Takeuchi (Professor, School of Human Science and Environment,
University of Hyogo)
Jasmine Fardouly (Senior Lecturer, School of Psychology, The University of Sydney)
Susan M Sawyer (Professor, Chair in Adolescent Health/Department of Pediatrics,
Melbourne Medical School, The University of Melbourne)
Kwansei Gakuin Senior Highschool ICT Committee Members
(Youth representatives from Japan)
Ava Koshab (A Youth Representative from Australia)
Yoko Katakura (Head of Healthcare & Public Health YouTube, Japan, Google
Japan G.K)

Moderator:

Shu Suzuki (Senior Associate, Health and Global Policy Institute)

- 19:05-19:15** Q&A

< Presentation 1 >



Jasmine Fardouly

(Senior Lecturer, School of Psychology, The University of Sydney)

Dr Jasmine Fardouly is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Psychology, the University of Sydney, where she leads a research program investigating positive and negative social media content for users' body image. She holds a prestigious Sydney Horizon Fellowship on improving social media for users' body image via interventions among individuals, social groups, social media influencers and policy initiatives.

< Presentation 2 >



Kazuo Takeuchi

(Professor, School of Human Science and Environment, University of Hyogo)

Professor Kazuo Takeuchi is a Professor at the School of Human Science and Environment, University of Hyogo. He worked for 20 years from 1987 as a junior high school teacher and student guidance coordinator at municipal schools in Neyagawa City. In April 2007, he joined the Neyagawa City Board of Education as a teacher consultant. In April 2012, he was appointed Associate Professor at the School of Human Science and Environment, University of Hyogo, and has held his current position since April 2023. He earned his Doctorate in Education from Ashiya University in 2022. He has served as a committee member for the Children and Families Agency's Study Group on the Internet Social Environment for Young People, as well as various committees under the Children and Families Agency, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), and the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications.

< Round Table Discussion Participants >



Junya Dohi

(Chair, Specified Nonprofit Corporation, Wakamono no Machi)

Junya Dohi was born in 1995 in Yaizu City, Shizuoka Prefecture. He holds a Master's degree in Social Sciences from Waseda University. He is the representative of the NPO Wakamono no Machi, the General Incorporated Association Torinasu, and C&Y Partners Co., Ltd. While he was a student, he founded "Wakamono no Machi" in Shizuoka City and has been engaged in promoting social participation and the inclusion of voices of children and youth. He holds various public roles, including his role as a member of the Basic Policy Subcommittee and the Children's Spaces Subcommittee, and as Chair of the Expert Committee on Child and Youth Participation and Voice at the Children and Families Agency.



Daisuke Fujikawa

(Professor, Faculty of Education, Chiba University)

Dr Fujikawa is professor at the Faculty of Education, Chiba University. He specializes in educational methodology and lesson practice development. He was born in Tokyo in 1965. He withdrew from the doctoral program at the Graduate School of Education, The University of Tokyo, after earning the required credits. After serving as an Associate Professor at Kinjo Gakuin University and other institutions, he now holds his current position since 2010. Since 2018, he has also served as principal of the Junior High School affiliated with the Faculty of Education at Chiba University. His research focuses principally on media literacy education, career education, the development of teaching materials and lesson plans, including mathematics, as well as bullying prevention and classroom management.

**Kazuo Takeuchi**

(Professor, School of Human Science and Environment, University of Hyogo)

Professor Kazuo Takeuchi is a Professor at the School of Human Science and Environment, University of Hyogo. He worked for 20 years from 1987 as a junior high school teacher and student guidance coordinator at municipal schools in Neyagawa City. In April 2007, he joined the Neyagawa City Board of Education as a teacher consultant. In April 2012, he was appointed Associate Professor at the School of Human Science and Environment, University of Hyogo, and has held his current position since April 2023. He earned his Doctorate in Education from Ashiya University in 2022. He has served as a committee member for the Children and Families Agency's Study Group on the Internet Social Environment for Young people, as well as various committees under the Children and Families Agency, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), and the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications.

**Susan M Sawyer**

(Professor, Chair in Adolescent Health/Department of Pediatrics, Melbourne Medical School, The University of Melbourne)

Susan Sawyer holds the Chair of Adolescent Health at The University of Melbourne and is Director of the Centre for Adolescent Health at the Royal Children's Hospital, a WHO Collaborating Centre for adolescent health. She leads adolescent health research at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute. A former President of the International Association for Adolescent Health (2017–2021), she co-led two series on adolescent health for The Lancet, the 2016 Lancet Commission on Adolescent Health and Wellbeing and the newly published 2nd Lancet Commission on Adolescent Health and Wellbeing. Her work spans policy, research, and education, including the development of a global MOOC and postgraduate training program in adolescent health. She has widely published in the field of adolescent health and serves on editorial boards, including Lancet Child & Adolescent Health.

**Jasmine Fardouly**

(Senior Lecturer, School of Psychology, The University of Sydney)

Dr Jasmine Fardouly is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Psychology, the University of Sydney, where she leads a research program investigating positive and negative social media content for users' body image. She holds a prestigious Sydney Horizon Fellowship on improving social media for users' body image via interventions among individuals, social groups, social media influencers and policy initiatives.

**Kwansei Gakuin Senior Highschool ICT Committee Members**

(Youth Representatives from Japan)

The goal of this committee is to create an environment where students learn from teachers about how to use Information and Communication Technology (ICT) devices and develop net literacy, as well as taking initiative to identify issues, share them, and act with self-discipline to tackle these issues and progress toward improvement. Acting as a bridge between students and teachers, this committee works to ensure that everyone involved in the school community can use digital tools wisely and in a better environment.



Khoshab, Ava

(A Youth Representative from Australia)

Ava Khoshab is a youth representative from Australia interested in the topic of youth mental health and the impact of social media.



Yoko Katakura

(Head of Healthcare & Public Health YouTube, Japan, Google Japan G.K)

< Round Table Discussion Moderator >



Shu Suzuki

(Senior Associate, Health and Global Policy Institute)

Mr. Shu Suzuki earned his nursing license from the National College of Nursing. After graduation, he enrolled in the master's program at the University of Tokyo Department of Community Health Nursing and was licensed as a public health nurse. After completing the program, he began working as a public health nurse in Shizuoka Prefecture. There, his duties at the public health center were mainly in the field of mental health and welfare, and included developing a psychiatric emergency response system and engaging in duties related to higher brain dysfunctions and similar issues. His other duties as a public health center member included serving at an evacuation center after the 2021 Atami landslide and participating in the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic response.

Presentation 1

“Social Media Regulation in Australia”

Jasmine Fardouly

(Senior Lecturer, School of Psychology, The University of Sydney)

■ Background to the Introduction of Social Media Age Restrictions

Growing International and Public Concern

In recent years, concerns have been growing globally among researchers, parents, educators, and clinicians about the impact of social media on young people's mental health and well-being. In Australia, the 2024 report by the eSafety Commissioner revealed that approximately 95% of parents were concerned about online safety. In response, the government established a bipartisan Joint Parliamentary Select Committee in May 2024 to examine the effects of social media on the public. The committee was appointed to conduct a six-month investigation and provide recommendations to the government.

Civil Society Advocacy

At the same time, News Corp, a major media company operating TV, radio, and newspapers, launched the “Let Them Be Kids” campaign. A grassroots movement called the “36 Months” campaign also emerged, both calling for the minimum age for social media use to be raised to 16. These efforts were widely promoted through a six-month media campaign, resulting in a petition with 127,000 signatures submitted to the government. A public survey conducted in November 2023 showed that 77% of respondents supported age restrictions.

Political Consensus Building

There was growing bipartisan support among politicians for introducing age restrictions on social media. The premiers of two states proposed raising the age limit at the state level, and the leader of the opposition signaled support for implementing the measure under a future administration. However, the support was not unanimous. In an open letter, more than 140 scholars from both Australia and abroad argued that age restrictions were too simplistic and called for more thorough and comprehensive regulation. Human rights organizations also criticized the legislation, warning that it could infringe on youths' fundamental rights such as access to information. Additionally, the lack of young people's voices in the policymaking process was pointed out as a concern.

In November 2023, the Joint Parliamentary Select Committee released a report with 12 recommendations, but age restrictions were not included. Nonetheless, backed by strong public support, the Prime Minister decided to proceed with the policy and submitted a bill on November 21. The bill was quickly passed with little opportunity for public consultation. The debate, however, extended beyond age restrictions to broader discussions on reducing screen time among youth and promoting outdoor activities such as engagement with nature and sports.

■ Social Media Age Ban

— Regulatory Overview, Implementing Authorities, Technical Measures, and Expected Impact —

Overview and Scope of the Regulation

The age restriction was introduced through an amendment to the Online Safety Act 2021. Its primary objective is to prohibit Australians under the age of 16 from owning or using social media accounts. Under the Act, "social media platforms subject to age restrictions" (hereafter referred to as "platforms") are defined as services that allow users to post and share content with one another. However, messaging apps, online games, platforms primarily for educational or medical services, and YouTube are excluded. The regulation also applies to users under 16 who already have accounts, requiring their access to be restricted until they reach the age of 16.

Implementing Authorities and Technical Measures for Enforcement

Under this regulation, the responsibility for enforcement lies with social media platforms, not with parents or young users under the age of 16. Platforms are required to take "reasonable steps" to comply, and failure to do so may result in fines of up to AUD 50 million. However, the use of government-issued IDs for age verification is prohibited. If a platform requests an ID, it must offer alternative methods, and any data used for age verification must be deleted after the process is complete.

To support this framework, the government launched a pilot program in 2023 to evaluate age verification technologies, with a focus on privacy and ethical considerations. A report on the outcomes of the trial is expected in mid-2025 and will serve as a guideline to define what constitutes "reasonable steps" for platforms. The regulation is scheduled to come into effect by the end of 2025, with a review of the system planned within two years of its implementation.

Expected Impact

While the effectiveness of this regulation remains uncertain, it is expected to provide parents with a legitimate basis to restrict their children's use of social media and may contribute to shaping broader social norms. The regulation is also anticipated to curtail exposure to cyberbullying, sexual exploitation, and harmful content.

However, there is concern that the regulation may also limit access to positive content and supportive communities, particularly for socially marginalized youth, potentially leading to adverse effects. Additionally, there is a risk that young people who use social media in violation of the regulation and have negative experiences may hesitate to seek help from adults due to fear of being blamed.

Concerns also exist about the potential use of VPNs and other tools to bypass the regulation, thus raising questions about its overall effectiveness. Furthermore, the regulation does not address content within the platforms themselves, meaning harmful content, such as that available on TikTok that can still be accessed without an account.

■ Other Policy Recommendations from Joint Selection Committee

The Joint Parliamentary Select Committee made the following recommendations, aligning with systems in the EU and the UK, as well as evidence-based proposals concerning social media and mental health.

1. Strengthen laws to ensure digital platforms fall under Australian jurisdiction.
2. Introduce a duty of care for platforms to protect the wellbeing of Australian users through risk assessments and mitigation.
3. Mandate access to platform data for independent researchers and public interest organizations, with auditing by regulators.
4. Require platforms to let users alter, reset, or turn off personalization features (e.g., recommender systems).
5. Prioritize reforms from the Privacy Act Review, including greater protections for the personal information of Australians and children.
6. Ensure any regulations impacting young people are formulated with their input.
7. Support ongoing research to build an evidence base for policy on social media's health impacts.
8. Fund digital competency and online safety education, coordinated by a proposed Digital Affairs Ministry.
9. Require the government to report to Parliament on the outcomes of its age verification trial.
10. Mandate that safety is built into platform technologies from the start (proactive protection).
11. Social media platforms must be mandated to have clear, fair, and transparent complaint processes, including rights to appeal.
12. Ensure the Office of the eSafety Commissioner is adequately funded to meet expanding responsibilities.

• Other recommendations

1. Review of recommendations for social media and mental health:

Chhabra et al. (2025) Journal of Medical Internet Research.

Available at: <https://preprints.jmir.org/preprint/72061/accepted>

2. Recommendations for improving social media for body image and eating disorders:

Fardouly et al. (September 20, 2024).

Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4973962

Presentation 2

“Current Situation of Social Media Use among Children and Young People in Japan “

Kazuo Takeuchi

(Professor, School of Human Science and Environment, University of Hyogo)

■ Current Situation of Internet and Social Media Use Among Children and Youth in Japan

In recent years, children in Japan have been starting to use the internet at increasingly younger ages. According to a government survey, around 11% of infants under the age of one year have already been exposed to the internet in some form, and more than half of two-year-olds have used it. This includes not only social media, but also cases where parents show children content on platforms like YouTube. These figures highlight how early children in Japan begin interacting with digital devices.

Alongside this trend, social media use is also becoming more common among younger age groups. For instance, over 30% of lower elementary school students are already using social media, and this jumps to 96% among junior high school students. LINE, an instant messaging communication platform, is especially popular in Japan, with more than 90% of junior high students using it regularly. Additionally, nearly half of junior high students use video- and image-focused platforms like TikTok and Instagram. These findings show that social media is no longer limited to older age groups—it has become an integral part of children's daily lives from the early years of schooling.

■ Policy and Social Background

In Japan, children's internet use has been actively promoted as part of educational support. Since 2019, under the Global and Innovation Gateway for All (GIGA) School Program, the government has provided each student from the first grade of elementary school with a personal digital device and developed a system to use these devices in classroom instruction. In this context, the internet is positioned not as something to be restricted, but as a tool to be actively used, with policies aimed at ensuring that all children have equal access to digital technology.

Alongside these policy efforts, broader social changes have also played a significant role in the widespread use of the internet among children. Since the 1990s, the number of dual-income households in Japan has increased rapidly, resulting in more time spent at home without adult supervision. As a result, smartphones and the internet have replaced the parental role and come to serve as important sources of connection and information for children. In other words, we have entered an era where parenting is assumed to involve the presence of digital devices.

At the same time, the rapid spread of internet use and digital devices at school and at home has led to a growing number of issues and risks surrounding children, challenges that now demand greater attention and response.

■ Challenges Arising from the Widespread Use of the Internet Among Children and Youth

As internet use among children and youth continues to grow, one of the most serious concerns in recent years has been the increase in violent behavior at the elementary school level. A survey by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) shows a sharp rise in violent incidents at elementary schools, with one main factor being conflicts stemming from online games and chat platforms. For example, verbal disputes during voice chats in online games have reportedly spilled over into school life, thus escalating tensions among students. However, there is currently a lack of sufficient educational materials and resources to address these issues. Efforts are now underway to counter this issue by developing new teaching materials in collaboration with organizations such as NHK.

Another growing concern is the rise in online harassment and cyberbullying through social media and online games. Between 2006 and 2020, the proportion of students reporting experiences of defamation or abuse increased approximately 1.5 times among high school students, 3.2 times among junior high students, and an alarming 16 times among elementary school students. Particularly troubling is the fact that such incidents are no longer limited to older students, but are increasingly affecting younger children.

In addition, there has been a rise in cases of children becoming involved in online crimes and scams. Reports have emerged of young people being drawn into illegal part-time job and illegal online gambling, with social media serving as a gateway for malicious perpetrators to contact and exploit them, potentially leading to their involvement in criminal activities.

There have also been cases where inappropriate behavior posted on social media have escalated into major social issues. For example, in 2023, a video posted by a junior or senior high school student licking a soy sauce bottle at a conveyor belt sushi restaurant went viral, ultimately resulting in a large claim for damages. Such incidents show that actions can lead to significant societal consequences beyond the individual's intentions, highlighting the growing risk of children becoming not only "perpetrators" but also targets of social punishment.

■ National Response to Challenges Related to Internet Use Among Children and Youth

In Japan, while the need for measures addressing social media use among children and youth is widely recognized, concrete policy directions are still under consideration. At present, opinions remain divided on whether priority should be given to restricting or banning usage, or to encouraging responsible use by promoting digital engagement while teaching children how to use the internet appropriately. A clear national stance has yet to be established.

One current point of debate is the development of an age verification system. National-level policy discussions are underway to design a framework that ensures children are properly protected and cannot bypass existing safeguards. This includes ongoing consideration of a system that uses Japan's Individual Number Card¹ for age verification.

¹ An Individual Number Card is a plastic card which contains an IC chip, and the bearer's name, address, date of birth, sex, My Number (the Individual Number), and ID photograph, etc., are displayed on it.

This card can be used as an identification card for identity verification as well as to receive a wide range of services including municipality services and electronic applications using the electronic certificate such as e-Tax.

Panel Discussion Overview

Introduction

In a rapidly expanding digital environment, respect for the rights and dignity of children and young people should be at the forefront of all policies. In both the United Nations (UN) and national legal systems, children are increasingly recognized not only as individuals in need of protection but also as individuals with diverse rights.

On November 20, 1989, the UN adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which approximately 196 countries have since ratified. The CRC clearly defines children as rights-holders and outlines four fundamental principles that apply across all of their rights. One of these principles is the “Respect for the views of the child.” This principle affirms that children have the right to freely express their views on all matters affecting them, and that those views should be given due weight in accordance with the child’s age and maturity.

This principle is also reflected in Japan’s fundamental law on child policy, the Basic Act on Children's Policy. Article 11 of the Act obliges the national and local governments to listen broadly to the views of children and those involved in child-rearing when formulating, implementing, and evaluating child-related policies, and to reflect those views in policymaking. As a concrete initiative to put this principle into practice, the government has developed online platforms such as "Kodomo Wakamono★Iken Plus (Program to Promote Reflection of Opinions and Views of Children and Young People)"² to provide children with opportunities to freely express their views on issues like smartphone and internet use.

In Australia, while the federal government sets the laws and guidelines for child protection, the actual implementation of policies is the responsibility of state and territory governments³. One of the key principles underpinning these systems is the meaningful participation of children and young people in decision-making processes. Relevant legislation outlines requirements such as providing children with adequate and suitable information, ensuring opportunities for participation, and recognizing the limitations that should be considered in the process.

As shown above, the expression of opinions by children and young people is a fundamental right. When designing systems and policies that affect them, it is essential to ensure that their voices are genuinely heard and appropriately reflected in the decision-making process. In addition, it is important to strike a proper balance between the right to protection and other rights such as freedom of expression, privacy, access to information, and the right to play.

This roundtable discussion was grounded in the recognition of children’s agency and their right to be heard, and explored various perspectives on how regulations related to social media and the internet should be structured.

² <https://www.cfa.go.jp/policies/iken-plus/>

³ <https://aifs.gov.au/resources/resource-sheets/australian-child-protection-legislation>

1. Comparing Japan and Australia's Approaches and Looking Ahead

—Efforts to Create a Safe Internet Environment for Japanese Youth and Examples of Practical Initiatives—

■ Japan's Efforts to Build a Safe Internet Environment for Youth and Expectations for Voluntary Regulation by Platforms —Striking a Balance Between Respect for Children's Rights and the Prevention of Harm—

Even before smartphones became widespread, Japan had been working to create a safe online environment for people under the age of 18. One major step was the enactment of the Act on Establishment of Enhanced Environment for Youth's Safe and Secure Internet Use in 2009. This law ensured that the government promoted the use of filtering services for mobile phones used by minors.

In order to respect young people's rights to freedom of expression and communication, the law encouraged private sector-led efforts in implementing filtering, while the government refrained from intervening in decisions regarding filtering criteria or content. Instead, the government took on a supportive role, helping facilitate these private initiatives.

Furthermore, regarding social media, a private organization—the Content Evaluation and Monitoring Association (EMA)—established and implemented a system under which only platforms deemed safe were exempt from filtering. This approach has achieved a certain degree of success in balancing the protection of children's rights with the prevention of criminal harm. However, with the rapid spread of smartphones, young people increasingly began using global internet platforms. As a result, the number of services not certified by EMA increased, thus rendering the existing system ineffective. EMA was consequently dissolved in 2018. While efforts to promote filtering continue, their effectiveness remains limited in the face of the rapidly growing influence of global platforms.

In recent years, there has been a shift toward platforms taking greater responsibility for youth protection—for example, Instagram, one of the major social media platforms, has introduced teen accounts with restricted features. This reflects a growing trend of platforms proactively engaging in safeguarding young users.

Such efforts align with Japan's earlier approach of “respecting children's rights while promoting private-sector-led initiatives to protect children and youth from online harm.” Japan's experience in developing such systems through trial and error offers valuable insights for ongoing global discussions on platform accountability.

■ Examples of Media Platforms Supporting Digital Well-Being Among Youth and Future Outlook

YouTube, as a media platform, positions the digital well-being of children and young people as a top priority and is actively implementing multifaceted initiatives to support their mental health and overall well-being in digital spaces. In close collaboration with experts in child development and media use, YouTube has developed a four-pronged approach:

1. Enhancing content safety,
2. Improving digital well-being tools,
3. Strengthening mental health support systems, and
4. Expanding co-management features for parents.

Specific measures include limiting recommendations for content that may negatively affect self-esteem, introducing reminder functions to encourage breaks and bedtime, and displaying reliable support resources when users search for topics like suicide or eating disorders. These features are designed to encourage the healthy development of young users both mentally and physically.

In addition, YouTube has introduced mechanisms that enable parents to monitor and support their children's usage, promoting dialogue within the household and allowing for shared, responsible guidance in media use.

■ Mental Health Support Initiatives in Australia and the Positioning of Social Media Age Restrictions

Over the past 20 years, Australia has developed a comprehensive support system for the mental health of children and young people. These efforts include promoting mental, social, and emotional literacy through school-based education, as well as reducing stigma toward mental illness through community initiatives. To ensure that children and young people have access to necessary information and support, a range of online resources have also been established, including counseling and educational services, information platforms, and opportunities for youth participation.

The proposed age restrictions on social media are positioned as part of this broader mental health support framework. They are intended to complement existing educational and healthcare services, not to limit access to them.

■ Support and Opposition Regarding the Passage of the Social Media Age Restriction Bill

The passage of the social media age restriction bill has sparked both support and criticism, particularly from the perspectives of children's rights and the potential impacts of regulation.

Supporters argue that the debate incited from the bill has brought parental concerns to the forefront of the discussion, thereby creating a space for an open societal dialogue, that is no longer restricted to family or individual community settings. Some also point out that, in line with the principle of the Convention on the Rights of the Child that children's views should be respected and their best interests given primary consideration according to their age and maturity, limiting access for younger users can be seen as part of a broader effort to protect and uphold children's rights.

On the other hand, some express caution regarding whether age restrictions can be effectively enforced. In particular, the effectiveness of age verification measures in limiting children's access to harmful content has been questioned. Several years ago, Australia's eSafety Commissioner conducted a study on the effectiveness of age verification technologies intended to prevent minors under the age of 18 from accessing online pornography. The study concluded that such initiatives were not effective as a means of restricting access to harmful content.

Thus, while there may be legitimate grounds for introducing age restrictions, concerns remain about the lack of adequate evidence supporting their effectiveness.

■ Voices of Children and Young People on Social Media Age Restrictions

Children and young people have expressed concerns about social media regulations from three main perspectives: (1) limited effectiveness, (2) impact on skill development, and (3) loss of the positive functions of social media.

First, regarding effectiveness, many point out that social media is deeply embedded in the daily lives of children and youth today, and that such regulations can be easily circumvented. Even if legal age restrictions are implemented, there are various ways to bypass them, such as using VPNs. This therefore raises doubts about how effective these measures would be in practice.

Second, in terms of skill development, some argue that restricting social media use may hinder the development of important skills that young people naturally acquire through use, such as information filtering skills and critical thinking in the digital environment. Additionally, based on experiences where social media has sparked interest in politics and social issues, it is emphasized that the digital environment plays an important role as a gateway for learning and encouraging civic engagement among youth.

Finally, regarding the potential loss of benefits, concerns have been raised that blanket restrictions may also undermine the positive functions of social media, such as access to information, opportunities for self-expression, and connecting with peers who share similar interests.

From this perspective, many young people argue that rather than prioritizing regulatory bans, greater emphasis should be placed on strengthening comprehensive digital citizenship⁴ education. In particular, during adolescence, a period when social needs are especially strong, access restrictions are seen as less effective than cultivating “self-regulation” and “critical thinking” through appropriate educational environments. Such an approach is considered to be more sustainable and effective in the long term.

—Balancing the Risks and Benefits of Social Media and Internet Use, and Pathways Toward Its Realization—

■ Three Key Perspectives for Advancing a Digital Environment That Serves the Best Interests of Children and Young People

One of the core principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is that “in all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.” Regulations and policies related to social media use should be designed with the best interests of children and young people at the center, while also fully respecting their rights, such as the right to access information, the right to play, and freedom of expression. To develop appropriate systems and a safe digital environment that aligns with these principles, the following three perspectives are essential.

1. Building and Using Evidence

While numerous cross-sectional studies exist on the impact of social media use on the mental health of children and young people, there is still a lack of longitudinal research that clearly establishes causal relationships. Moving forward, it is essential to identify priority research areas and promote strategic, high-quality studies in order to build a robust evidence base that can inform policy decisions and legislative measures.

2. Inclusive Dialogue and Decision-Making Centered on Children and Young People’s Perspective

As stated in the introduction, respect for the views of the child is one of the four core principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Moreover, it is today’s generation of children and young people who are directly experiencing both the benefits and risks of social media. Therefore, it is crucial to place their voices at the center when formulating and implementing policies and regulations relating to social media use.

3. Establishing a Robust Evaluation Framework and Securing Adequate Funding

When introducing regulations or policies, it is essential to thoroughly assess the feasibility of technological measures and their broader social impacts, such as their effectiveness, unintended consequences, and economic implications, before implementation. For example, Australia is the first country to consider introducing a legal framework to restrict social media use on individuals under the age of 16, and technical evaluations, such as those related to age verification, are currently underway. While oversight mechanisms such as the eSafety Commissioner have been established, a lack of funding to support comparative evaluations of various implementation methods has been identified as a significant challenge. As this example illustrates, it is crucial to ensure adequate budget allocation and establish a sustainable evaluation system that allows for flexible, multi-approach assessments throughout the policy development and implementation process.

⁴ Digital citizenship refers to the skills and knowledge a person needs to effectively use digital technologies in a positive way. <https://www.nsw.gov.au/education-and-training/digital-citizenship/about>

As a result, three key perspectives are vital for designing systems and creating environments that serve the best interests of children and young people: high-quality evidence to inform decision-making; the active participation of children, young people, and a diverse range of stakeholders in policy discussions; and sustained evaluation and funding. By integrating these perspectives, it will be possible to develop regulations and policies on social media use by children and young people that balance risks and benefits, while fully respecting and promoting children's rights.

■ The Importance of a Flexible Policy Design That Reflects the Diversity of Children and Young People

When considering policies related to children and young people's social media and internet usage, it is essential to fully take into account differences in age, gender, and the needs of socially vulnerable groups.

For example, measures that may be appropriate for 16-, 18-, or 21-year-olds may not be equally suitable for children aged 6, 8, or 10. Policy design must be aware of and sensitive to developmental stages across different ages. Rather than uniform regulations, a flexible and gradual approach is necessary to ensure appropriate and effective responses.

It is also imperative to consider gender differences in how social media and digital devices affect young people's mental health and well-being. Multiple studies have shown that the impacts of these technologies can vary significantly by gender⁵⁶. For example, a longitudinal cohort study in the United Kingdom reported that the group most negatively affected by social media was girls aged 10 to 12.⁷ Ongoing research in Australia has identified a similar trend, indicating that girls in this age group are at particularly high risk for mental health challenges. In contrast, in the context of online gaming, a study of Japanese youth found that negative experiences, such as impacts on academic performance, social interaction, and lifestyle habits, were more commonly reported among boys.⁸

It is also essential to consider the impact of policies on socially marginalized groups, such as LGBTQI+ youth and young people living in remote or rural areas. For these individuals, social media often serves as a vital source of information and a means of support. The ability to access connections and resources that may be difficult to obtain offline is critically important for ensuring their mental well-being. Policy discussions regarding social media use must take this into account. In this context, policies related to social media use among children and young people must be designed with flexibility to respond to the diverse backgrounds and needs of the populations they aim to serve.

⁵ Twenge, J. M., & Martin, G. N. (2020). Gender differences in associations between digital media use and psychological well-being: Evidence from three large datasets. *Journal of adolescence*, 79, 91–102. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2019.12.018>

⁶ Svensson, R., Johnson, B. & Olsson, A. Does gender matter? The association between different digital media activities and adolescent well-being. *BMC Public Health* 22, 273 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-12670-7>

⁷ Orben, A., Przybylski, A.K., Blakemore, S.J. et al. Windows of developmental sensitivity to social media. *Nat Commun* 13, 1649 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-022-29296-3>

⁸ Hashimoto, Y., Ohno, S., & Amano, M. (2020). What Causes Internet Gaming Addiction?: The Current Situation and How to Escape from Dependency. Research survey reports in information studies. Interfaculty initiative in information studies, the University of Tokyo, 36(4), 155–196. <https://cir.nii.ac.jp/crid/1390290699580184960>

2. Addressing the Psychological Impact of Social Media in Healthcare and Educational Settings through Multisectoral Collaboration

■ The Need to Provide Educational Opportunities to Promote the Expression of Opinions by Children and Young People — A Japanese Case Study—

International treaties, national legal systems, and various policy measures have gradually contributed to creating an environment that promotes the expression of opinions by children and young people. However, for such participation to be truly meaningful, it is necessary to advance beyond formal inclusion. Education that empowers children and youth to engage in discussions, develop their own opinions, and express them effectively is indispensable.

One concrete example of such an initiative in Japan is debate education. The National Association of Debate in Education⁹ in Japan has been working to introduce debate techniques and approaches into school education by developing teaching materials, creating instructional methods, and organizing debate workshops. Through debate education, which encourages students to consider issues from both supporting and opposing viewpoints, children are expected to gain the ability to understand social issues from multiple perspectives and to construct and properly articulate their own positions.

Summary

—Balancing the Risks and Benefits of Social Media and Internet Use:

Possibilities and Pathways Toward Realization—

In designing policies related to children and young people's use of social media and the Internet, it is essential to align with the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly the notion of placing the best interests of the child at the forefront. A key challenge lies in balancing the need to protect children from harmful content and the risks of addiction, while also ensuring they can benefit from access to information, opportunities for self-expression, and social participation.

To achieve this balance, three components are indispensable:

1. **Real-world evidence-based policymaking grounded in robust scientific research;**
2. **Collaborative decision-making that places the voices of children and young people at its center, while engaging a diverse range of stakeholders;**
3. **Sustainable policy implementation, supported by continuous evaluation frameworks and adequate funding.**

In addition, policy design must be flexible enough to respond to the diverse needs of strengthening digital literacy education and early intervention systems through multisectoral collaboration, including schools, healthcare providers, families, and the private sector, is also crucial. It is expected that by enhancing the understanding of addictive tendencies and psychological impacts in healthcare, education, and home settings, and by establishing systems to identify and support children in need at an early stage, we can build a sustainable and effective approach to protecting and empowering children and young people in the digital age.

⁹ <https://nade.jp/about/>

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Mental Health Project Members

Shu Suzuki (Senior Associate, Health and Global Policy Institute)

Daichi Watanabe (Senior Associate, Health and Global Policy Institute)

Hikaru Sato (Associate, Health and Global Policy Institute)

Orie Yamashita (Associate, Health and Global Policy Institute)

Favour Omileke (Program Specialist, Health and Global Policy Institute)

Ryoji Noritake (Chair, Health and Global Policy Institute)

Health and Global Policy Institute (HGPI)

Grand Cube 3F, Otemachi Financial City, Global Business Hub Tokyo

1-9-2, Otemachi, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 100-0004 JAPAN

TEL: +81-3-4243-7156 FAX: +81-3-4243-7378 E-mail: info@hgpi



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