

Protecting Children in the Digital Age: Should Social Media Access Be Restricted?

By Sarika Verma, Mediator, Supreme Court of India

The Delhi High Court's recent decision concerning social media access for children below 13 years has brought an increasingly urgent question into focus: **How do we balance a child's right to protection with the realities of growing up in a digital world?**



The Public Interest Litigation filed by Kirti Dua and paediatrician Dr. Sharad Gupta sought restrictions on social media access for children below 13 years, stronger safeguards for children between 13 and 16, age-verification mechanisms, parental consent and greater accountability of social media platforms.

The Delhi High Court, however, rightly recognised that imposing a general prohibition is fundamentally a **policy matter**. On 20 August 2026, a Division Bench of Justice V. Kameswar Rao and Justice Manmeet Pritam Singh Arora disposed of the petition, directing the Central Government to consider the petition and the suggestions made by the petitioners, while consulting relevant stakeholders. The Court did not prescribe a deadline for the Government to take a decision.

Beyond a Simple “Ban or No Ban” Debate

The issue deserves a more nuanced approach. Children today encounter technology at an exceptionally early age. Social media can provide opportunities for learning, communication and creativity, but it can also expose children to cyberbullying, inappropriate content, online exploitation, privacy violations and addictive patterns of use.

A blanket prohibition may therefore not be the only answer. What India needs is a **child-centric digital safety framework** combining age-appropriate access, effective age verification, parental involvement, privacy protection, content moderation and meaningful accountability for platforms.

The challenge is particularly significant for adolescents between 13 and 16. At this stage, completely excluding children from the digital environment may be difficult to implement and may also overlook the positive role technology can play. A system of graduated access and stronger safeguards may prove more practical.

The Role of Parents and Platforms

Legal regulation alone cannot protect children. Parents, schools, technology companies and the State must share responsibility.

Parents need greater awareness about digital risks and healthy screen habits. Schools can play an important role by introducing age-appropriate digital literacy and online-safety education. Social media platforms, meanwhile, must move beyond self-regulation and adopt transparent, effective mechanisms for age assurance, privacy protection and removal of harmful material.

The petition's emphasis on stronger implementation of existing laws is particularly significant. India already has legal frameworks dealing with information technology, personal data protection and child sexual offences. The real challenge is ensuring that these protections work effectively in the rapidly changing digital environment.

A Mediation Perspective

As a mediator, I believe that this debate also offers an important lesson in **shared responsibility and dialogue**.

The Court's decision to leave the matter to the policy-making process creates an opportunity for meaningful consultation among government authorities, parents, child-rights experts, mental-health professionals, educators and technology platforms.

Rather than viewing the issue as a conflict between children's freedom and governmental control, we should approach it as a collective responsibility to create a **safer digital childhood**.

The objective should not merely be to keep children away from technology. It should be to ensure that when children enter the digital world, they do so with **appropriate safeguards, dignity, privacy and protection from exploitation**.

Conclusion

The Delhi High Court's decision does not settle the question of whether social media should be banned for children below 13. Instead, it places the responsibility where it constitutionally belongs — with the policy-making authorities.

The Government now has an opportunity to develop a comprehensive and future-ready framework. The focus should be on **proportionate regulation rather than regulation for its own sake; protection rather than prohibition; and collaboration rather than confrontation**.

Ultimately, the measure of a digital society is not how early its children gain access to technology, but **how safely and responsibly that access is enabled**.

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Thank You &

WARM REGARDS FROM

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