

SOCIAL MEDIA RESTRICTIONS FOR UNDER-16S

BRIEFING

INTRODUCTION

1. As part of our work supporting members across the UK, **NASUWT – The Teachers' Union** is committed to ensuring that Members of Parliament remain informed of developing challenges in schools and colleges.
2. There is a growing and substantive body of evidence indicating that unregulated access to social media platforms is causing demonstrable harm to children and young people. This includes, but is not limited to, adverse impacts on mental health and wellbeing, diminished capacity for real-world social engagement, and increased exposure to malicious content and misinformation.
3. NASUWT members have identified social media use as a primary contributory factor in the deterioration of pupil behaviour in schools, including increased incidences of hostility between pupils, a decline in empathy and interpersonal respect, and the normalisation of abusive and harmful conduct.
4. Evidence from members further indicates that children's sustained use of social media is associated with a reduction in attention span, concentration and capacity for sustained learning, due in part to overexposure to highly stimulating and short-form digital content.
5. A recent snapshot poll of 300 NASUWT members demonstrated that 88.7% support a statutory ban on social media access for children under the age of 16, with 6% opposed and 5.3% undecided.
6. In the NASUWT Behaviour in Schools 2025 survey, a consistent theme emerging from respondent commentary was the removal of access to social media for under-16s as a necessary intervention to support improved behaviour, safeguarding and wellbeing in schools.
7. This briefing sets out the NASUWT position on social media restrictions for under-16s, and explores the evidence, reasons and rationale for adopting this position.
8. NASUWT – The Teachers' Union – represents teachers and headteachers across the United Kingdom.

NASUWT POSITION

9. NASUWT believes that greater restrictions on social media access for under-16s are required to address the growing health crisis among children and young people. We also affirm there is a need to limit access to these services to reduce the barriers to learning that our evidence shows is a result of access to social media at a young age.
10. We hold the view that the risks of access to these platforms are greater than the benefits that they might offer to some children and young people.

11. We are therefore calling for the UK Government to introduce primary legislation prohibiting access to social media platforms by children and young people under the age of 16.
12. We will actively advocate for this legislation through formal representations, policy submissions and public communications. Such advocacy shall include the demand for legally enforceable and robust age verification and compliance mechanisms, placing clear statutory duties on platform providers to prevent access by under-16s and to mitigate circumvention.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND PUPIL BEHAVIOUR

13. NASUWT members are increasingly telling us that they believe social media is the main reason that behaviour in schools is deteriorating. In our 2025 Behaviour in Schools survey, 59% cited this as the main driver for difficulties in the classroom.
14. When the use of social media is explored in different education phases, two-thirds of respondents in secondary settings report it as a factor affecting pupil behaviour. Within the primary sector, 47% cite it as causing poor behaviour. This is despite children at primary school being under the age of consent for social media sites.
15. We've also heard how social media is affecting pupil behaviour. Common themes reported to us through the same survey include tiredness and irritability, mood swings and an inability to follow rules. Teachers report that pupils are unable to communicate effectively with each other and adults.
16. Members also drew a link between use, and excessive use, of social media and loss of interest in school and learning.
17. One member shared their view that "the disrespectful and sometime cruel manner in which pupils see people treating each other is becoming their normal and what they see as acceptable. They don't see the consequences of their actions and how damaging they are to others."

TEACHER VOICE

18. Teachers and leaders were asked if they felt social media is a driving factor on pupil behaviour. Some of the comments from secondary school members included:
 - *"Pupils are keen to take part in trends. They lack empathy for others and are displaying symptoms of addiction."*
 - *"Pupils feeling extreme social pressures, pupils with extremely low self-esteem and constant reliance on positive feedback via social media."*
 - *"The disrespectful and sometimes cruel manner in which they see people treating each other is becoming their normal and what they see as acceptable. They don't see the consequences of their actions and how damaging they are to others."*
 - *"Students going down rabbit holes and ending up on sites that offer detrimental advice, spread hate and misinformation."*
 - *"Less reading and critical thinking going on, kids in general are not mentally equipped yet to fully deal with social media (arguably adults aren't, either). Individualism, belligerence and selfishness is promoted by social media, too."*

19. Commentary from primary school teachers demonstrates the effects on pupils aged 11 and under:

- *“Children are very self-centred and egocentric. They seem to feel they are the star of their own ‘show’ and have a very low sense of responsibility for their own actions while being entitled to all sorts of rights.”*
- *“Pupils get instant gratification from social media and online games which cannot be matched by activities in school. This leads to a lack of motivation and resistance to work which is considered ‘boring’.”*
- *“Children (Year 5: aged 9-10) are exposed to content they cannot fully understand and see as funny to mimic without understanding the consequences. Many incidents of bad language once investigated stem from children having unrestricted and unsupervised access to the internet.”*
- *“I think it has reduced children’s ability to focus and has been detrimental to attention span. Children are used to being constantly entertained by a device which is impacting on ability to interact and communicate.”*

ACCESS TO TOXIC CONTENT

20. The findings of the Behaviour in Schools survey also show that the influence of far right and populist movements is negatively impacting pupils through social media, messaging apps and online gaming platforms.

21. In the qualitative data, 53 teachers referenced far right agitator Andrew Tate as directly impacting male pupils’ behaviour, leading to an increase in misogynistic abuse of female staff and pupils in schools,

22. Female teachers are more likely to receive verbal abuse regularly than their male counterparts, with 27.3% of female teachers reporting verbal abuse several times a week and 14.3% reporting it daily, versus 20.4% and 9.8% of male teachers.

23. Teachers describing themselves as from Black, Caribbean or African backgrounds are more likely to experience regular physical abuse from pupils, with 29.6% reporting physical abuse several times a week, compared to 15.9% of teachers who describe themselves as White.

24. Some detailed examples include:

- *“Very dangerous messaging around ideas of masculinity, which has led to a worrying rise in misogyny, and also led to girls accepting misogynistic behaviours.”*
- *“Toxic masculinity and misogynistic, sometimes abusive, behaviour and comments towards females because of people such as Andrew Tate, and other ‘alphas’.”*
- *“Children are watching violent and sexual behaviour on the internet. This behaviour is being seen replayed in schools. The number of pupils displaying sexualised behaviour has increased hugely. I teach six- and seven-year-olds.”*
- *“Concerns around what pupils are accessing online – violence, porn, misogyny, racist attitudes. Very worrying views heard.”*



ABOUT NASUWT

NASUWT is The Teachers' Union and is the voice of the teaching profession.

Our aim is to improve and protect the status, morale and working conditions of the teaching profession so that teachers and headteachers can provide the best education and support to children and young people.

We are committed to ensuring that teachers and headteachers are recognised and rewarded as highly skilled professionals, with working conditions that enable them to focus on their core role of leading teaching and learning. NASUWT is proud to be led by teachers for teachers.

Our democratic structures ensure that we are the voice of the profession and our decisions are rooted in the concerns of our members.

Our members are teachers and headteachers working in schools, early years settings and post-16 colleges.

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