

Children and Social Media in India: Rules, Risks and Gaps in Protection

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Children and Social Media in India Latest News

- India is relying on a patchwork of laws and platform-led measures to protect children on social media. Risks include exposure to harmful content, online grooming, and cybercrime.
- The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 mandates parental consent before platforms can process children's data. The IT Act and POCSO Act provide additional criminal provisions.
- Platforms are also using age-gating, parental controls, and child-focused content ecosystems. The government is considering a graded approach to regulate children's access to social media.
- However, experts warn that enforcement gaps, technological loopholes, and easy age misrepresentation continue to undermine these safeguards.

Risks for Children in the Online Space

- **Exposure to Harmful Content** – Increased screen time exposes children to inappropriate and harmful content. This can negatively impact mental health, leading to anxiety, stress, and social isolation.
- **Threat of Online Grooming** – Children are vulnerable to online grooming, where predators exploit them through digital platforms. This poses serious risks to their safety and well-being.
- **Rising Cybercrime Against Children** – NCRB data shows a 32% increase in cybercrimes against children (2021–2022). Indicates growing threats as more children engage online.

Increasing Internet Usage Among Children

- A **NITI Aayog report** reveals the following average daily online usage among Indian children in 2023:
 - Up to 5 years: ~1.5 hours daily (educational content, games)
 - 6–10 years: ~2.5 hours (social media, gaming, videos)
 - 11–15 years: ~4 hours daily
 - 16–18 years: ~6 hours daily
- As screen time rises sharply with age, so does exposure to unregulated content and online risks.
- The data underscores the urgency of stronger child safety frameworks in India’s digital space.

India’s Regulatory Framework for Children on the Internet

- India has developed a multi-layered framework combining legislation, platform regulations, and educational initiatives to protect children online.
- However, critics note that enforcement remains inconsistent.

Data Protection

- Under the **Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023**, companies collecting data of users under 18 must obtain parental or guardian consent.
- Platforms are also prohibited from tracking or monitoring children’s behaviour and serving them targeted advertisements.
- A key concern, however, is that children can easily bypass these protections by misrepresenting their age.

Laws Against Online Exploitation

- Key laws addressing child safety online include:
 - **Information Technology Act, 2000** – Criminalises the creation of child sexual abuse material (CSAM).
 - **POCSO Act, 2012** — Defines and penalises online sexual exploitation and grooming.
 - **Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023** — Extends liability to digital offences including trafficking and harassment of children.
 - **Juvenile Justice Act, 2015** — Addresses online facilitation of child exploitation.
- However, there are persistent weaknesses in digital forensic capacity, law-enforcement training, and the uneven functioning of Special POCSO Courts, all of which limit the effective investigation and prosecution of offences.

Content Classification and Parental Controls

- Under the **IT (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021**, OTT platforms must classify their content into five age-based categories:
 - U, U/A 7+, U/A 13+, U/A 16+, A
- Mandatory measures include:
 - Parental locks (U/A 13+ and above)
 - Age verification (Adult content)

Screen Time and Digital Wellness in Education

- The Ministry of Education introduced the **PRAGYATA Guidelines** in July 2020, recommending age-appropriate screen time limits for students.
- The guidelines aim to safeguard both the safety and academic welfare of children in a digital learning environment.

Age-Gating Measures by Social Media Platforms

- Several major social media and tech platforms have introduced age-gating measures and child-safety tools, though their effectiveness remains a subject of debate.

Google's Parental Control System

- Minimum age to create a Google account in India is 13 years.
- For children below 13, parents can use Family Link to:
 - Monitor activity
 - Block inappropriate content
 - Approve app downloads and manage permissions
- At 13, children can manage their accounts independently, though parents are notified if supervision ends.

Instagram's Teen Safety Features

- Instagram offers 'Teen Accounts' with built-in protections.
- Users under 16 require parental approval to relax safety settings.
- Aims to provide a safer default environment for young users.

Child-Focused Platforms

- Platforms like YouTube Kids provide a controlled content environment.
- Parents can customise content based on the child's age.
- Instagram had planned a kids-only app, but development was paused in 2021.

Limitations and Criticism

- These measures are not fully effective.
- Studies suggest many safety tools can be easily bypassed or ineffective.
- Platforms dispute such findings but concerns about real-world effectiveness remain.

Source: IE

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