



Enforcing child-centred digital safety:

Charting Canada's legislative path with international best practices.

Executive Summary

Children's and youth's lives have been profoundly reshaped by digital platforms and services, transforming how young people learn, play, socialize, and perceive the world. The rapid integration of social media accounts, anthropomorphic technologies¹ (e.g., artificial intelligence [AI] chatbots), and data extracting software (e.g., location tracking) into everyday life has outpaced legislative safeguards, leaving children and youth exposed to greater levels of manipulation and risk than ever before.² While digital technologies can facilitate some opportunities for education and positive social interaction, an unregulated digital environment has led to significant harm to the mental and physical health and safety of children and youth.³

In 2020, Canadian children and youth ranked 31st out of 38 high-income countries in overall mental well-being, underscoring the need to strengthen supports for young people in Canada.⁴ Enacting online safety legislation is a necessary step, given consistent evidence linking exposure to digital harms, including

excessive use and harmful content,⁵⁻⁷ to increased risks of depression, anxiety, and other adverse health outcomes in children and youth.^{8,9} Global leaders, including Australia, the European Union, and the United Kingdom, have taken significant steps to protect children and youth online by enacting comprehensive online safety legislation with paediatric-specific protections. Canada's continued failure to pass comparable legislation and to align with international best practices and policies highlights an urgent need for coordinated policy and legislative action.

With an aim to protect children and youth from the harms associated with illegal or harmful online content, to safeguard young people from deceptively designed digital products and services that monetize their personal data and fuel addictive use,¹⁰ and to ensure technology companies are accountable for the online environments they create and—as of now—control, the federal government should:



1. Establish an independent online safety regulator with the authority, expertise, and resources to administer, monitor, and enforce compliance with online safety regulations. The mandate of the regulator should apply to all digital platforms, including social media, online gaming, online gambling, and generative AI, and should remain flexible enough to include emerging technologies.

2. Introduce a statutory duty of care on online platforms and services to act responsibly and safely in their operation and design, and to take reasonable measures to protect children and youth from harm.

3. Adopt a design-based approach that moves beyond content moderation and age-gating by requiring platforms to implement safety-by-design measures including, but not limited to, risk assessments, privacy by default, and user empowerment for children

and youth. Platforms must be required to assess and mitigate systemic risks, with meaningful penalties for non-compliance.

4. Develop and enforce a children's code to guide the enforcement of the independent regulator's child safety duties. The code must outline age- and stage-specific regulator duties and enforceable standards for services accessible to minors. It should be developed through broad consultation with civil society, including paediatricians, other child and youth care providers, caregivers, and children and youth themselves.

By acting on these recommendations, Canada can promote the health, educational, and developmental well-being of its youngest citizens, and increase alignment across international jurisdictions in this rapidly evolving digital regulatory environment.



Canada's digital environment is evolving faster than the safeguards designed to protect children and youth.



By not holding tech companies accountable for harms to children, Canada is in a shrinking minority.

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