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Off the Feed: On Children and the Online-Safety Debate

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Off the Feed: On Children and the Online-Safety Debate

 **The Indian Express** 9 June 2026 **GS2** **GS3**

Source: ujjari.com — Free UPSC & State PCS Current Affairs



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Banning under-16s from social media protects children but requires age verification that can erode everyone's privacy. How should India weigh protection against rights and practicality?"

Source: [Original editorial](#)  [The Indian Express](#)

 **Every fact web-verified against primary sources** **HOW**

WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

Canada is moving to follow **Australia** toward banning **social media for under-16s**, putting child online safety on the global policy agenda. For India, navigating its own **Digital Personal Data Protection Act**, this is a live GS2 (governance, child rights, comparative policy) and GS3 (technology) debate. The hard part is the trade-off: protecting children is a genuine duty, but the tools to do it touch **free expression and the privacy of everyone**.

THE CRUX IN 60 WORDS

Australia banned under-16 social media; **Canada** is following. The case, protecting children's mental health and safety, is real. But bans need **age verification** that can erode everyone's **privacy**, raise **free-expression** concerns, and may just push children to unregulated spaces. India's **DPDP Act, 2023** (parental consent, no ad-targeting of minors) points to a more **layered, proportionate** approach than a blunt ban.

THE ISSUE, DECODED

CONCEPT	WHAT IT MEANS	WHY IT MATTERS
Under-16 ban	Barring young children from social media	Australia first; Canada next
Age verification	Proving a user's age online	Can require intrusive identity checks
Safety by design	Building platforms to protect children	A less blunt alternative to bans
DPDP Act, 2023	India's data-protection law	Requires parental consent for minors

THE ANALYSIS: THREE DIFFICULTIES WITH A BLUNT BAN

- 1 Free expression.** Sweeping bans restrict access to information and community, including for vulnerable youth who rely on online support.
- 2 Privacy and enforceability.** A ban needs robust age verification, which can compel intrusive identity or biometric checks that erode all users' privacy.
- 3 Displacement.** Bans may push children to unregulated or hidden platforms, not protect them.
- 4 The genuine concern remains.** None of this denies the real harms to children, which demand a serious response.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

Australia legislated the first under-16 social media ban (effective December 2025); **Canada** is preparing an online harms bill; the **EU's Digital Services Act** regulates platforms. **India's framework:** the **Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023** (verifiable parental consent for under-18s; no targeted ads or tracking of children); the **IT Rules, 2021**; the proposed **Digital India Act**. **Concepts:** age assurance / verification; **safety by design**; the precautionary principle. **Tension:** child protection versus **free expression (Article 19)** and **privacy (Article 21, Puttaswamy 2017)**.

THE DEBATE

Argument for a ban: The evidence of harm to children is strong enough that precaution justifies an under-16 ban, as Australia has shown, even at some cost to convenience and rights.

Argument against a blunt ban: Bans require privacy-eroding verification, raise free-expression concerns, and may displace rather than reduce risk.

The balanced verdict: Protection is a duty, but a single prohibition is a blunt tool. The better path is **layered and proportionate**: strong data protection, safety-by-design duties on platforms, privacy-preserving age assurance, and digital literacy, with bans considered carefully rather than reflexively.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (TRANSFERABLE SKILL)

Many policy questions pit two legitimate goods against each other, here child safety versus privacy and free expression. The weak answer champions one; the strong answer acknowledges both, identifies the least-restrictive effective means, and proposes proportionate regulation. This “balance competing rights through proportionality” lens applies to free speech, surveillance and data-protection debates.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS

Concern over harm to children -> under-16 ban (Australia, then Canada) requires age verification -> privacy erosion for all + free-expression cost + possible displacement. The proportionate alternative: data protection (DPDP) + safety-by-design + privacy-preserving age assurance + digital literacy.

THE WAY FORWARD

- ❶ **Strengthen data protection** for minors (parental consent, no ad-targeting), as the DPDP Act provides.
- ❷ **Impose safety-by-design duties** on platforms for younger users.
- ❸ Use **privacy-preserving age assurance** rather than intrusive identity checks.
- ❹ **Invest in digital literacy** for children and parents, and consider bans proportionately.

THE TAKEAWAY BOX

“Protecting children online requires balancing safety, free expression and privacy.” Examine via global age-restriction moves and India’s framework. (250 words)

“A ban that protects children only by surveilling everyone, or by pushing them to darker corners of the internet, has mistaken a gesture for a safeguard.”

Australia first under-16 ban (Dec 2025) · EU Digital Services Act · DPDP Act 2023 (parental consent; child = under 18) · IT Rules 2021 · Puttaswamy (privacy, 2017) · safety by design.

Should India ban under-16s from social media, knowing the privacy cost of enforcing it?

Connects to GS2 PYQs on data protection, child rights and comparative governance, and GS3 on IT; probable forward question is the safety-versus-rights framing above.

the DPDP Act and digital-governance debates; static GS2 on fundamental rights and GS3 on technology regulation.

Sources: Indian Express, MeitY, Ministry of Women and Child Development

Source: Off the Feed: On Children and the Online-Safety Debate — Ujijari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

● KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

As Canada follows Australia toward an under-16 social media ban, India must weigh the genuine case for protecting children online against the costs to free expression, the practical difficulty of enforcement, and the privacy risks of the age-verification technology such bans require.

✓ SUPPORTING

- There is a real and growing concern about social media’s effects on children’s mental health, safety and exposure to harmful content.
- Effective age restrictions require robust age verification, which can compel intrusive identity checks that erode the privacy of all users, not just children.

- Outright bans raise questions of free expression, enforceability, and whether they push children to unregulated spaces rather than protecting them.

COUNTER

Some argue the evidence of harm to children is strong enough that precaution justifies a ban, as Australia has legislated, even at some cost to convenience and rights.

WAY FORWARD

Combine strong data-protection rules (parental consent, no targeted advertising to minors) with safety-by-design obligations on platforms, privacy-preserving age assurance, digital literacy, and proportionate regulation rather than only blunt bans.

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MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK

QUESTION

"Protecting children online requires balancing safety, free expression and privacy." Examine in the context of global social media age-restriction moves and India's framework. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

Around the world, governments are moving to keep young children off social media. Canada is following Australia toward an under-16 ban, and the debate it raises, safety versus rights, is one India is also navigating.

BODY

The case for action is real. There is mounting concern about social media's effects on children's mental health, exposure to harmful and addictive content, and online exploitation.

Australia became the first country to legislate an under-16 social media ban, and Canada is preparing similar restrictions through an online harms bill. But three difficulties complicate the blunt-ban approach.

First, free expression: sweeping age bans restrict access to information and community, especially for

vulnerable youth who find support online. Second, enforceability: a ban is only as good as the age verification behind it, and reliable verification can require intrusive identity or biometric checks that erode the privacy of all users, creating new data-security risks.

Third, displacement: bans may push children toward unregulated platforms rather than protecting them. India's own framework offers a more layered model: the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 requires verifiable parental consent for processing the data of those under 18 and bars targeted advertising to children, complemented by the IT Rules, 2021 and ongoing work on a Digital India Act. The better path is proportionate: safety-by-design obligations on platforms, privacy-preserving age assurance, strong data protection, and digital literacy, rather than relying on a single blunt prohibition.

CONCLUSION

Protecting children online is a genuine duty, but a ban that sacrifices everyone's privacy or merely displaces the risk is no protection. India should aim for layered, proportionate safeguards.

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