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No blanket social media ban for children and teenagers – Ethics Council recommends risk-based safety concept instead

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Today, the German Ethics Council presents its Ad Hoc Opinion on “Protection, Participation and Empowerment of Children and Adolescents in the Digital World”. In it, the Council sets out 13 recommendations aimed at reconciling these three aspects in digital safety concepts for minors. The matter was referred to the Council in October 2025 by Julia Klöckner, President of the Bundestag.

Should a statutory minimum age be introduced for social media? This is a question currently engaging politicians and the public in many countries, including Germany. “The German Ethics Council’s answer is no,” says Helmut Frister, legal scholar and Chair of the German Ethics Council. “Children and adolescents today grow up surrounded by a wide range of digital services that play a vital role in meeting their communication and information demands. Here, we need to strike a balance between the necessary protection of young people and their interests in digital participation and empowerment. In the view of the German Ethics Council, the introduction of a statutory minimum age for social media is not expedient for achieving this balance.”

Focus on social media is missing the point

However, digital environments urgently need to be made more youth-friendly. “Addiction-promoting algorithms, manipulation, violence, cyberbullying, pornography, extremism: digital risks are omnipresent. However, they originate from content and features that are not limited to social media,” explains Judith Simon, philosopher and spokesperson for the Opinion issued by the Ethics Council. “Generative AI applications, such as chatbots and image generators, are increasingly being used by children and teenagers – with risks that are by no means less significant.” A statutory minimum age for social media ignores these dangers and could also lead to youngsters shifting their informational, communicative and emotional needs to chatbots, which are even less adequately regulated.

Risk-based protection framework – holding providers to account

The Ethics Council therefore recommends a risk-based protection framework that encompasses not only social media but also other digital services, specifically analyses the respective risks associated with these services, and establishes protective measures tailored to the level of risk. “The regulation of online platforms under the European Union’s Digital Services Act, which has been in force since February 2024, already provides a good basis for such a safety concept,” says Helmut Frister. “However, the requirements to reduce risks to children and adolescents online must be implemented much more effectively, and providers must be held more strictly accountable.” The European Commission has, in fact, begun to step up its efforts to ensure compliance with the

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Digital Services Act's requirements for the protection of minors. Nevertheless, this path must be pursued consistently, against all opposition, and must be supported by Germany," adds Judith Simon. Furthermore, she states that it is urgently necessary to extend the protection of minors to AI applications such as chatbots or image generators and to modernise the Interstate Treaty on the Protection of Minors in the Media.

Regulating the use of age verification technologies

Even with the risk-based safety concept in place, as recommended by the Ethics Council, minimum age limits are required for certain digital services, such as pornography. These must be controlled through age verification technologies. "However, the use of such technologies has side effects for all users, the extent of which depends strongly on the technology used," emphasises Judith Simon. For this reason, the decision on choosing these technologies must not be left to the providers. In particular, the Ethics Council opposes age estimation through the tracking of digital activities on the basis of privacy protection and advocates primarily device-based methods.

Respecting and supporting parental freedom of education

Where access to digital content is not restricted by mandatory age limits, it is primarily the parents' responsibility to balance their child's interests in protection, participation and empowerment in the digital world on a case-by-case basis. "In this regard, just as with other parenting issues, they have a margin of discretion that the state must respect," says Helmut Frister. To provide support for parents, the Ethics Council recommends better technical tools that enable them to tailor and limit their children's digital activities precisely. "Parents also need reliable and independent information about online risks, clear age recommendations for digital content from voluntary self-regulation bodies, and the opportunity to seek advice and assistance from digital mentors," adds Judith Simon.

Involving children and young people

To take their children's wishes and interests adequately into account, parents should involve them in decisions about their digital activities. "This promotes digital self-determination, raises awareness of the risks, and builds trust, enabling parents to gain an insight into their children's digital lives," says Judith Simon. Young people should also be involved in political decision-making on the matter.

Further recommendations

In its recommendations, the Ethics Council also addresses the reduction of market dominance, protection against manipulation, the promotion of media literacy and analogue spaces, restrictions on the private use of smartphones in schools, and more effective accompanying research.

The Opinion will be available from 11 June 2026 at 11:15 on the German Ethics Council's website at www.ethikrat.org/publikationen/stellungnahmen/kinder-und-jugendliche-in-der-digitalen-welt.