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Expert Opinion on Proposals for a Blanket Ban on Social Media for Children

As experts working in the fields of psychology, pedagogy, prevention of risky behavior, intervention, media studies, education, and safety of children in online environments, we consider it important to respond to public discussions regarding the possible introduction of a blanket ban on social media for children under 15 or 16 years of age.

We share the concerns of parents, schools, and the public about the impact of the digital environment on children and adolescents. Social media can be associated with several risks, including cyberbullying, exposure to harmful content, pressure related to appearance, sexual harassment, blackmail, or excessive use. These risks exist and require a systemic response. However, we believe that **a blanket ban on social networks for children under 15 or 16 is neither appropriate nor effective**.

A ban on social media for children may, at first glance, create the impression that children will be better protected from the risks of the online environment. In reality, however, this may be more of **a false sense of security**. Enforcing such a ban is problematic because children can relatively easily circumvent technical restrictions, for example, by entering a false age, using the accounts of parents, siblings, or peers, or using technical solutions to bypass the ban (e.g., a VPN). Technical solutions intended to prevent such circumvention, such as automated AI-based facial age recognition, face considerable unreliability and the risk of incorrect decisions. Other solutions, such as age verification through an ID card or other identity document, in turn raise serious questions concerning privacy protection, the security of personal data, and the proportionality of such interference with the rights of both children and adult users.

The fundamental problem is that **a formal ban does not necessarily mean that children's access to the online environment is actually restricted**. If adults assume that children are not on social media because their access has been banned, they may

easily overlook the risks to which children remain exposed. In some cases, these risks may even increase, because children will use online services in secret, without open communication with adults and without the possibility of timely support.

A blanket ban could also lead children to move to less safe online platforms. If children leave large, at least partially regulated services, this does not necessarily mean they will spend less time online. They may start using smaller, more anonymous, and more poorly moderated platforms, where it will be more difficult to ensure protection against harmful content, predatory behavior, or online aggression.

Furthermore, current scientific knowledge does not provide sufficient evidence that **a blanket ban on social media would lead to an improvement in children's mental health.** Research shows that the effects of social media use are highly individual and depend on several factors, including a child's maturity, personality, family background, how they use digital technologies, and the quality of their offline relationships. Some children may be more vulnerable to negative influences and need targeted support and protection, while others may navigate the online environment without significant difficulties and even derive benefits, such as social support, space for self-expression, the development of interests, or contact with communities that are beneficial to them.

Instead of a ban, we consider the following steps to be key:

1. Increase the accountability of digital platforms. Platforms used by children and adolescents must bear greater responsibility for the safety of their environment. This includes safer default settings, stricter privacy protection, limits on data collection, more transparent recommendation systems, and effective suppression of content that is demonstrably harmful to children. Algorithms designed for children must not prioritize toxic, extreme, sexualized, or self-harming content.

2. Strengthen media and digital education. Children need to understand how social media works. Media and digital education should be a systematic part of schooling, not merely a marginal or one-off topic. In this regard, we call for a revision of the Framework Educational Programs, from which the cross-curricular topic of Media Education was removed.

3. Support parents, rather than merely burdening them with responsibility. Parents need practical, comprehensible information on how to talk to children about the online environment, set appropriate boundaries, recognize warning signs, and proceed in the event of cyberbullying, extortion, sexual harassment, or other threats. This information should be provided to parents repeatedly and systematically, rather than only through occasional campaigns. Such an approach could also include incorporating the topic of digital health into preventive check-ups at pediatricians.

4. Enforce existing age rules more consistently. Rules already exist today, restricting children's access to certain online services, including the age limit of 13 and the requirement of parental consent up to age 15 (see Act No. 110/2019 Coll., on the Personal Data Processing). The problem is their low enforceability. Rather than symbolically tightening bans, it is necessary to ensure that platforms actually comply with rules for minors, and that age verification is conducted safely, proportionately, and without unnecessary collection of sensitive data.

5. Strengthen universal primary prevention of risk behavior in this area. Effective prevention should be built on continuity and long-term engagement, age-appropriateness, interactive methods, and above all on a positive framework that does not merely reinforce a prohibitive or punitive approach, but develops positive behavioral patterns, children's resilience, the ability to manage emotions, as well as knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Prevention conceived in this way, however, requires stable and predictable funding. This should combine European and national resources and, where appropriate, mandatory contributions from digital platform operators.

Protecting children in the online environment requires a well-considered, long-term policy based on scientific evidence. A blanket ban may appear to be a simple and decisive solution, but it does not address the root causes of the problem: risky platform design, the algorithmic amplification of harmful content, insufficient support for schools and parents, and the limited enforceability of existing rules.

The aim should not be to push children out of the digital environment, but to ensure that the digital environment in which they grow up is safer, appropriate to their age, and subject to clear rules.

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