Position Paper: Youth and Social Media

Submission to the Standing Committee for Digital Affairs of the Dutch House of Representatives

Roundtable Discussion – 28 May 2025

Introduction:

Social media now plays a central role in the lives of children and young people. While it enables connection, it also exposes them to serious harm, affecting their mental health, emotional development, and personal safety. The current approach is failing, and we are facing a crisis.

Despite years of research, policy discussions, regulatory proposals, and warnings from high-level industry whistleblowers, children continue to be harmed daily on these platforms.

The rapid evolution of social media platforms consistently outpaces regulatory efforts, leaving children vulnerable to risks that are both foreseeable and preventable. Meanwhile, these companies remain reactive, taking down harmful content that should never have made it onto their platforms in the first place.

The regulatory frameworks are too slow, too fragmented, and too easily bypassed. As a result, minors are being exposed to sexual content, violence, and algorithm-driven harm without any real-time protection.

We cannot allow the safety of children to remain an afterthought in a system designed for engagement and profit.

It is time to move from reaction to prevention, which requires broadening the scope of responsibility and creating enforceable, future-proof legislation that prioritises the well-being of children in the digital environment.

The Damage Is Real, Ongoing, and Getting Worse:

Children are subjected to addictive design features, peer-driven pressures, and algorithmic amplification of harmful adult content. Platforms, incentivised by engagement and ad revenue, often place the burden of protection on the user.

Research and the lived experience of young people reveal that social media is having an impact on every area of their lives. The spectrum of harm children are experiencing includes;

- Shortened attention spans.
- Experiencing elevated anxiety and depression.
- Interference with their sleep.
- Developing body dysmorphia, which contributes to disordered eating and, in extreme cases, suicidal ideation.
- Being exposed to graphic sexual content, which normalises harmful sexual behaviours and results in an upsurge of child-on-child sexual abuse.
- Becoming desensitised to sexual acts, making it easier for predators to coerce them into sharing illegal sexual content of themselves.
- Consuming and sharing violent pornographic content with their peers. Including genuine or AI-generated sexual images of each other.
- Becoming victims of sexual extortion by criminals, in some cases resulting in the child or young person taking their own life.
- Exposure to misogynistic toxic influencers that distort young men's attitudes towards women, resulting in an increase in violence against women and girls.
- Platforms like OnlyFans being viewed by increasing numbers of young people as a legitimate career path.

The Current Approach Is Not Working:

The current approaches to online safety are fundamentally flawed. They depend almost entirely on detecting harm after it's already occurred—flagging content, removing posts, or responding to user reports. This reactive model is too little, too late. By the time action is taken, the damage has been done.

The truth is: we have the technology to prevent many of these harms before they reach children. Choosing not to use it isn't just irresponsible, it's ethically indefensible.

We need a complete shift in how we think about digital safety. That means moving away from crisis response and toward prevention at the system level. Specifically, we must insist on:

- **Accountability by design:** Social media platforms must be required to build in protections that actively prevent foreseeable harms. This includes using AI and safety tools not just to detect harmful content, but to stop it from being posted on their platforms in the first place.

A More Impactful Solution - The Path Forward:

As new social media platforms and digital services emerge at a rapid pace, relying on individual platforms to implement safety features is no longer viable. While they must be held accountable, all parts of the digital ecosystem must apply safety features.

The future of a more holistic online protection framework for children includes on-device solutions, tools that operate directly on a child's phone or tablet, regardless of which app they're using.

To be effective and future-proof, these solutions must:

- Run on the device operating system, in real-time, ensuring sensitive data never leaves the child's device.
- Function independently of platform cooperation or APIs, allowing protection across any app, including those that are encrypted or newly launched.
- Be interoperable, providing consistent safeguards across the digital ecosystem.

One example of this approach is HarmBlock, a tool developed by SafeToNet.

HarmBlock operates at the operating system (OS) level of a device, enabling it to prevent the viewing, creation and sharing of harmful sexual content, including through video and livestreaming via the device's camera. Because it is embedded directly into the device OS, it is platform-agnostic, functioning seamlessly across all apps, regardless of encryption. It requires no configuration or setup, cannot be circumvented, and preserves user privacy by operating entirely on-device.

While social media platforms cannot be allowed to shift the burden of safety onto device manufacturers, they must be made to collaborate and act in partnership with the various parts of the digital ecosystem.

With proactive prevention systems and on-device protections, we can give children real-time seamless safety across all parts of the digital ecosystem today and tomorrow.

Strengthening Enforcement:

Regulation should shift toward proactive harm prevention compliance, not post-harm remediation.

- Social media platforms and digital services must be obligated to invest in protecting children from harmful content.
- Safety must be embedded into the social media platform's design to prevent foreseeable harms from occurring
- Device manufacturers must be brought into the scope of children's online safety legislation.
- Sanctions should be enforceable and proportionate to risk and negligence.

Final Remarks - Children Need Safety by Default, Not by Exception:

We wouldn't let a child ride in a car without a seatbelt. Why do we hand them a smartphone with no embedded safety controls?

Children deserve digital spaces that protect their dignity, safety, and mental health. Platforms alone cannot and will not deliver that. But by embedding tools like HarmBlock directly into devices, we can finally build a safety net that works everywhere, all the time.

It's time to act. Not with more warnings. Not with more delays. But with law, technology, and leadership that matches the scale of the problem.