

Meta to put under-18 Instagram users into new ‘teen accounts’

Change giving parents greater control comes as governments consider social media age limits

By Josh Taylor & Dan Milmo – Tue 17 Sept 2024 – *The Guardian*

Meta is putting Instagram users under the age of 18 into new “teen accounts” to allow parents greater control over their activities, including the ability to block children from viewing the app at night.

The change will apply to new teen users but will also be extended to existing accounts held by teenagers over the next few months.

Changes under the teen account setting include giving parents the ability to set daily time limits for using the app, block teens from using Instagram at certain times, see the accounts their child is exchanging messages with and being shown the content categories they are viewing.

Teenagers signing up to Instagram are already placed by default into the strictest privacy settings, which include barring adults from messaging teens who don’t follow them and muting notifications at night.

However, under the new “teen account” feature users under the age of 16 will need parental permission to change those settings, while 16- and 17-year-olds defaulted into the new features will be able to change them independently. Once an under-16 tries to change their settings, the parental supervision features will allow adults to set new time limits, block access at night and view who their child is exchanging messages with.

The new account setting will apply to users in the US, UK, Australia and Canada.

Nick Clegg, Meta’s president of global affairs, said the aim of the change was to “shift the balance in favour of parents” when it came to using parental controls. Last week Clegg admitted that parents did not use the child safety controls offered by Mark Zuckerberg’s company, which also owns Facebook and WhatsApp.

“This is a very significant moment,” Clegg said on Tuesday. “The common refrain we keep hearing from parents is that ‘we want to exercise our responsibilities and obligations as parents’, but across the multiple apps that young people now use, parents were being left somewhat confused and disempowered from playing their role as parents.

“This (change) really tries to very meaningfully shift the balance in favour of parents by basically putting teens into the strictest default settings over what content they see, who they can be connected with, what time they can spend ... and crucially, if you’re under 16, they’ll have to ask mum and dad if they can change those settings.”

Ian Russell, a prominent internet safety campaigner, said he hoped the announcement was a “turning point” for Meta but cautioned that previous safety changes had not produced meaningful results.

The father of Molly Russell, a British teenager who killed herself in November 2017 after viewing large amounts of content related to suicide, depression, self-harm and anxiety on Instagram and Pinterest, said Instagram had announced a crackdown on self-harm content in 2019 when Molly’s story went public. A report found such material was still discoverable on the platform four years later.

“The big announcement in the wake of Molly’s story breaking in 2019 did not achieve the result that it sounded like it should have done,” said Russell, chair of the Molly Rose Foundation, a charity campaigning for improved online safety. “Meta comes up with wonderfully crafted PR-spun statements that sound really promising but time after time they don’t deliver. I hope this is a turning point when they consider safety to be equally important to the profits they are making.”

46 The teen accounts change came after the Australian government last week
announced plans to introduce legislation to parliament by the end of the year to raise the age
children can access social media up to an as-yet-undefined age between 14 and 16.

48 Meta’s director of global safety, Antigone Davis, said that the decision to introduce teen
accounts was driven by parents and not by any government legislation or proposals.

50 “Parents everywhere are thinking about these issues,” Davis said. “The technology at
this point is pretty much ubiquitous, and parents are thinking about it. From the perspective of
youth safety, it really does make the most sense to be thinking about these kinds of things
globally and addressing parents’ concerns globally.”

54 Davis did not rule out bringing the changes to Facebook in the future but said the
company would examine what measures could make sense for different apps.

56 If the Australian proposal goes ahead, the country could be one of the first to bring a
ban into effect.

58 The UK technology secretary, Peter Kyle, last week said he was keeping a close eye on
how the Australian model may work and had an open mind about whether the UK might follow
in the future.

62 Existing account settings for teens that will be switched to the new teen accounts include
under-18s needing to accept new followers, being placed into the most sensitive content
restrictions and filtering out offensive words and phrases in posts and messages.