President Ursula von der Leyen
President of the European Commission

Wednesday 9 September 2026

Subject: Children cannot wait: safe by default must also mean protection now

National parent movements across Europe unite in calling on the EU to take a precautionary approach with regards to social media and other digital services and set a minimum age of at least 16 until platforms demonstrate that their services are safe and age-appropriate.

Dear President von der Leyen,

The report of the Special Panel on Child Safety Online marks an important step forward. Whatever differences may remain about the precise measures to be taken, its central principle is clear: social media and other digital services (such as online games, AI companions or devices among others), when used by minors, should be safe and age-appropriate by default.

This principle ought to have a clear regulatory consequence: the burden of proof lies with platforms to objectively demonstrate that their services are safe and age-appropriate, rather than leaving children, parents and regulators to prove harm after it occurs. Until the platforms can provide this proof, they should not be allowed to engage with or profit from minors. This precautionary approach is well established in other areas: protection comes before exposure, not after harm.

In their current form we know that social media platforms and other digital services our children encounter today are not safe by default. The report itself identifies features such as infinite scroll, autoplay, recommendation algorithms and persistent notifications as addictive, harmful and age-inappropriate. These are among the defining features of today's social media environment and other digital services. They underpin how platforms are earning their money on the backs of our children.

The urgent question is therefore not only what Europe wants these platforms to become. It is also: ***What is Europe doing while the current platforms are not safe and age-appropriate by default and millions of children retain access to them?***

While Europe is deciding the course of action to take, children continue to enter these platforms at young ages. On an average day, more than 10.000 children in the EU are estimated to begin using social media before turning 16. Thousands of them even before they are 12 years old[1]. That means 10.000 European children entering today, another 10.000 tomorrow and more than 300.000 in the coming month, while current platforms have still not demonstrated that they are safe and age-appropriate.

[1] These figures are based on annualised cohort estimates. Eurostat records approximately 4,87 million 15-year-olds in the EU, while the European Commission's Joint Research Centre reports that 96% of 15-year-olds use social media daily. Applied across the cohort, this corresponds to approximately 12.800 children per day who began using social media before turning 16; the estimate presented uses the conservative figure of "more than 10.000". The estimate for younger children is based on research across six European countries which found that 34% of 9–11-year-olds report having a social-media profile. Applied to an EU age cohort, this would correspond to approximately 4.200 children per day starting using social media before the age of 12.
Sources: Eurostat, Population on 1 January; European Commission, Joint Research Centre, Social media usage and adolescents' mental health in the EU (JRC141047, 2025); EU Kids Online, European children's use, views and worries on age bans for social media (2026).

Will their parents only be told that legislators are working on ways of making these environments safer? And that technology companies will be held accountable *at some point in time*? Or are they also going to hear: "While we work to hold Big Tech accountable and make platforms safe and age-appropriate, we recommend to *delay your child's first social media account and access to currently unsafe digital services to at least 16*"? Your voice carries a long way and such a strong signal can literally save children from harm.

President von der Leyen, you stated when receiving the Panel report that Europe now needs action at European level. We agree. Yet we are deeply concerned about the direction that action may take. The Panel's recommendation to set the threshold for EU-wide independent access at 13 is difficult to reconcile with its own analysis that the ages of 13 to 15 are also the period of peak vulnerability to mental-health problems. It is difficult to reconcile with what most Member States want[2]. It is difficult to reconcile with what most EU citizens want, as most polling shows[3].

Moreover, 13 is already the threshold adopted by most major platforms. Platforms would likely welcome seeing their own industry convention turned into European public policy. Whether intended or not, this would signal to families, Member States and countries beyond the EU that Europe currently regards access from 13 as appropriate, despite the current platforms not having demonstrated to be safe and age-appropriate. Especially for Member States already pursuing higher age limits, such a European reference point weakens rather than reinforces their efforts. A common European solution should provide a strong floor for protection, not become the lowest common denominator or discourage stronger precautionary action at national levels.

Another strong concern is the Panel's recommendation that parental authorisation may provide a pathway to access even below 13. As long as platforms have not demonstrated that their environments are safe and age-appropriate, parental consent cannot substitute for that assurance. Consent may authorise access, but it cannot make an unsafe environment safe.

A parental-consent exception would also create a perverse commercial incentive for platforms. Every consent gives a platform access to another young user and the long-term engagement and commercial value that child represents. Platforms would therefore benefit from maximising the number of parents who consent. The resulting pressure would fall hardest on families with the least time, information and support, potentially leaving the most vulnerable children with the least protection. European policy should reduce such inequalities, not reinforce them.

These concerns make a clear and uniform European safeguard all the more necessary. Such a safeguard would complement, not replace, the regulation of platforms.

We recognise that DSA enforcement is underway, and we support the development of the Digital Fairness Act and the revision of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive. We also agree that any age-assurance measures must be secure, privacy-preserving and respectful of fundamental rights. But translating these principles into legislation and safe, effective

---

[2] EU Child Safety Online p.105-106
[3] Most Europeans want minors off social media – POLITICO, April 2026

enforcement is legally and technically complex and will take considerable time. In the meantime, children continue to enter commercial social-media environments whose safety and age-appropriateness have not been demonstrated, while evidence of the risks and harms they pose continues to accumulate.

Europe must therefore act on two fronts: continue to require and enforce safe and age-appropriate design, while ***also*** providing families with immediate protection and clear guidance. We ask you to send an immediate and unambiguous message: establish a harmonised precautionary minimum age of at least 16 until digital platforms demonstrate that their services are safe and age-appropriate.

This would neither relieve technology companies of their responsibilities nor delay the necessary redesign of their services. It would protect children during that transition.

As you said, children cannot wait. Nor should Europe wait to protect them.

On behalf of hundreds of thousands of European parents, united in the undersigned movements:

1	Austria	Smartphone freie Kindheit - Österreich	hallo@smartphone-freie-kindheit.at
2	Belgium	KidsUnplugged Belgium	info@kidsunplugged.be
3	Finland	Smartphone Free Childhood Finland	fatimagaliana@gmail.com
4	France	Le Pacte inter-parents “Grandir mieux sans Smartphone”. Attentive Generation	pactesmartphone@gmail.com caroline@attentivegeneration.org
5	Germany	Smarter Start	hallo@smarterstartab14.de
6	Greece	Smartphone Free Childhood Greece	SFCHellas@gmail.com
7	Ireland	SmartphoneFreeChildhoodIreland	Smartphonefreechildhoodireland@gmail.com
8	Italy	Patti Digitali	info@pattidigitali.it
9		SFC Italia - Crescere On/Off	info@sfcitalia.org
10	Malta	Smartphone Free Childhood Gozo	smartphonefreechildhoodmalta@gmail.com
11		Virtually Unplugged Kids	virtuallyunpluggedkids@gmail.com
12	Nederland	Smartphonevrij Opgroeien	info@smartphonevrijopgroeien.nl
13	Poland	Dzieciństwo Bez Smartfona	kontakt@dziecinstwobezsmartfona.pl
14	Portugal	Smartphone Free Childhood Portugal	smartphonefreechildhoodpt@gmail.com
15	Romania	Smartphone Free Childhood Romania	office@sfcromania.ro
16	Slovakia	Počkajme so smartfónom (Slovakia)	martin@pockajmesosmartfonom.sk
17	Slovenia	Smartphone Free Childhood Slovenia	info@pocakajmo.si
18	Spain	Adolescencia Libre de Móviles	adolescencia.sin.moviles@gmail.com
19	Sweden	Nationell Ki-DS Bättre Digital Barndom	snacka@ki-ds.org
20	Switzerland	Smartphone-freie Kindheit Schweiz	info@smartphonefreiekindheit.ch
21	UK	Smartphone Free Childhood	hello@smartphonefreechildhood.org