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Don't ban kids from technology, teach them how to use it

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Today's children are growing up in a world flooded with information, misinformation, and technology that's evolving faster than we can fully grasp. They're online earlier, interacting with social media and artificial intelligence before they reach their teens.

It's a daunting landscape that parents, teachers, and policymakers often respond to with bans and restrictions, hoping to shield young minds from harm. But these solutions are short-sighted.

Instead, our focus should shift to something far more fundamental: teaching kids how to think critically. Data from eSafety reveals that 80 per cent of Australian kids aged 8 to 12 are active on social media, ignoring age limits. At the same time, UNICEF Australia reports

nearly 70 per cent of students already engage with AI chatbots, yet almost half lack confidence in using AI effectively. Girls, notably, report lower confidence than boys. This shows clearly that simply blocking or restricting technology isn't enough. Our children need deeper skills.

Every day, young people confront a flood of information — some useful, much of it confusing, and far too often harmful. Without the tools to critically assess this content, they're vulnerable to manipulation and misinformation. Artificial intelligence isn't neutral. AI reflects human biases and can easily spread false narratives, from misogynistic messages targeting young men to deepfake videos threatening democratic processes.

Rather than sheltering kids from technology, we must equip them to navigate it wisely. Teaching critical thinking, digital ethics, and creative problem-solving empowers them emotionally, socially and intellectually.

As promising as AI and digital tools are, they risk widening existing inequalities, especially among students in rural or low-income communities. Digital literacy, including understanding AI, must become a national priority.

Many schools already embrace STEM education, design thinking, and project-based learning. These approaches align with Australia's curriculum goals, building the type of deep-thinking students need in digital environments.

But ensuring equitable access remains a significant challenge. The Securing Digital Equity in Australian Education report found that one in five children in disadvantaged schools lacks basic digital resources, compared to just 2 per cent in advantaged schools.

In low-income households, over half struggle to afford essential devices, leaving their children significantly behind in school. Remote and rural communities face additional hurdles like poor internet connectivity, limited teacher training, and scarce industry partnerships. Without targeted support, these students risk being left further behind. Civics education also deserves renewed emphasis. Understanding democracy, active citizenship, and social

justice is vital for building inclusive societies. Integrating civics education into schools helps students critically analyse power structures, express informed opinions, and confidently engage in civic life.

At Australian Schools Plus, we're deeply committed to developing agile, critical thinkers. Through strategic partnerships with schools, governments, businesses, and philanthropic organisations, we deliver programs that foster STEM skills, student agency, and innovation. In the past year, nearly one in four of our programs have been driven by demand for support in these areas.

We also prioritise digital equity, providing schools with essential technology, teacher training, and modern learning platforms. This ensures educators are well-equipped to integrate technology safely into their classrooms.

Let's be honest: restricting social media usage is not enough. To prepare our kids for a future shaped by AI, misinformation, and global uncertainty, we must teach them to think clearly, creatively, and critically.

It's time to move past quick fixes. Every child deserves the chance to become a resilient learner, a confident citizen, and an agile thinker.

Because the next generation won't just navigate the future, they'll shape it. And that begins with how we teach them to think.

Sherrill Nixon is the chief executive of Australian Schools Plus