



THE SHOT PAPERS · 2026

LOCKED OUT.

The ban, the clips and the safer alternative. Australia has banned under-16s from social media and the UK follows in spring 2027. The harm the bans answer is real; so is the evidence that they leak. I wrote this paper because my own daughter asked me to unlock her Instagram so she could watch football videos. The choice is not ban or feed. There is a third option, and sport should build it.

FOR PARENTS · POLICYMAKERS · GOVERNING BODIES

SHOT Clubhouse Limited · Company no. 16350767 · 86-90 Paul Street, London EC2A 4NE

shotclubhouse.com

1 THE KITCHEN TABLE

"Dad, can you unlock my Instagram? I only want to watch the football videos."

My daughter asked me that at our own kitchen table on a school night, dinner barely cleared, homework half done. She was not asking for much. Her friends talk about the clips at school: the last-minute winners, the skills challenges, the players she idolises. That is where her generation's football lives, in fifteen-second pieces, passed around the playground the way stickers used to be.

I froze, because I am the worst possible person to answer her.

I build a platform for young people in sport for a living. I have sat with the safeguarding literature, the engagement mechanics, the design patterns that hold a child's attention long past the point she wanted to stop. I know exactly what is on the other side of that unlock, and it is not the football. The football is the bait. On the other side is an infinite feed tuned by some of the best engineers in the world to keep her scrolling, comparison dressed up as connection, strangers a message away, and a recommendation engine quietly deciding what she should believe a body, a life and a Saturday afternoon look like.

I also know exactly what she wants, because she told me, plainly and truthfully. She wants the football videos. She wants to watch her heroes do things she cannot do yet, then go and try them in the garden until it gets dark. That is not a symptom of anything. That is the healthiest impulse a sporting childhood has.

So which answer is the right one? If I say yes, I hand a child an engagement machine and hope the football outweighs the rest. If I say no, I lock her out of the place her sport now lives, and she stands at the edge of every playground conversation about clips she has never seen. Yes felt like negligence. No felt like exile. Neither felt like parenting.

Governments are now making that same kitchen-table choice on behalf of every family at once. Australia has already made it. The UK makes it in spring 2027. And sitting there, running a sport platform, staring at my own daughter's hopeful face, I realised I could not honestly cheer for either answer. This paper is my attempt to be honest about both, and about the third option nobody in sport is building fast enough.

2 BOTH SIDES, HONESTLY

The ban debate has two camps shouting past each other, and both are holding real evidence. Here is what each side can actually prove, with the soft numbers flagged as soft.

WHAT AUSTRALIA DID

On 10 December 2025, Australia switched on the world's first under-16 social media ban. Ten platforms are covered, including every one where sport clips live. There is no parental override. Enforcement sits with the platforms, on pain of penalties up to AUD \$49.5 million, through age checks such as facial age estimation or ID. Within days, the regulator reported around 4.7 million under-16 accounts removed.

10 Dec 2025

the world-first under-16 ban goes live across ten platforms

eSafety Commissioner, Australia

~4.7m

under-16 accounts removed within days of commencement

eSafety figure, Dec 2025

\$49.5m

maximum penalty (AUD) per platform breach

eSafety Commissioner

Spring 2027

the UK's own under-16 ban comes into force

UK Government, Jun 2026

THE CASE THAT IT CAN BE DONE

The strongest evidence on the ban side is technical. Australia's own government trial of age assurance, covering 48 vendors and more than 60 technologies, concluded in September 2025 that age checking "can be done... privately, efficiently and effectively", while noting that no single solution fits every context. The lazy objection, that teenagers will simply use a VPN, has not held up either: platforms cross-check multiple location signals, and Australian technology analysts concluded VPNs are not a reliable bypass. Millions of accounts really did come down.

THE CASE THAT IT LEAKS

Polling of 1,050 Australians aged 12 to 15 in March 2026 found that 61% of those who had accounts before the ban still had access, 70% of those said getting round the restrictions was easy, 51% said the ban had made no difference to how safe they feel, and 21% were spending more time on less regulated platforms. Two flags belong on those numbers. First, the polling was commissioned by an online safety charity that campaigns for stronger regulation of the platforms; it is advocacy-commissioned research and I cite it as such. Second, the detail cuts both ways: most children who kept access did so not through clever workarounds but because platforms simply failed to identify their accounts, and researchers have separately reported children fooling facial age scans. That reads less like proof that bans cannot work, and more like proof that enforcement is genuinely hard.

61%

of 12-15s with prior accounts still had access, three months in

Advocacy-commissioned polling, n=1,050, Mar 2026

70%

of those say circumventing the ban is easy

Same polling, flagged as advocacy-commissioned

21%

shifted more time to less regulated platforms

Same polling, flagged as advocacy-commissioned

0

independent wellbeing evaluations of the ban published so far

As of July 2026; multi-year study pending

THE GAP AND THE WAVE

THE WARNING THAT DESERVES QUOTING, NOT PARAPHRASING

UNICEF's position on age bans is blunt: they "come with their own risks, and they may even backfire", and for isolated children social media can be "a lifeline". The children most likely to depend on an online community, the lonely, the rural, the disabled, the ones who do not fit at school, are exactly the children a blanket ban cuts off with nothing offered in return. Pushing children towards less regulated corners of the internet is not a hypothetical either; it is the displacement pattern the Australian polling already suggests.

THE BIGGEST NUMBER IN THIS DEBATE IS ZERO

As of mid-2026 there is no independent evaluation of whether Australian children are actually better off. The regulator has commissioned a multi-year wellbeing study with a university research lab; its results do not exist yet. Anyone telling you the ban has definitively worked, or definitively failed, is ahead of the evidence, and that includes governments, platforms and campaigners alike.

Both camps are arguing ahead of the data. The removals are real. The leakage is real. The lifeline warning is real. The wellbeing answer does not exist yet.

THE WAVE IS COMING HERE

The UK announced its own ban in June 2026: under-16s off social media from spring 2027, with regulations before Parliament by the end of 2026, blocks on functions such as livestreaming and stranger contact extending into gaming platforms, and messaging apps excluded. The counter-voices arrived the same week: a digital rights group argues the UK ban "will cause more harm than it prevents", and a UK mental health charity argues a permanent ban is neither effective nor an incentive for platforms to build safer products. Both are advocacy positions and I flag them as such, just as I flagged the polling above.

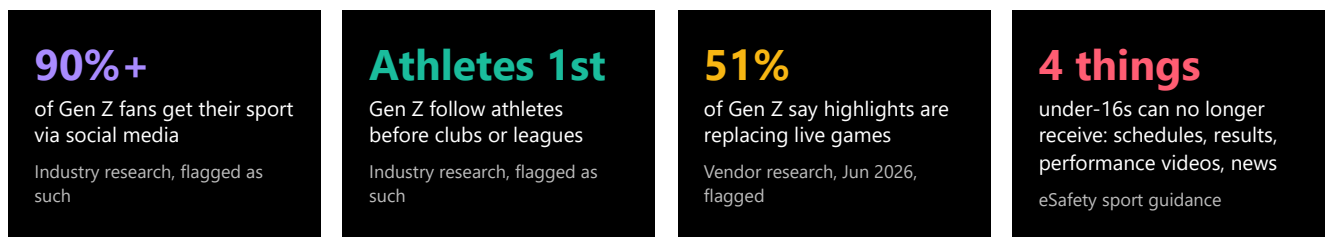
Nor does it stop with two countries. France's National Assembly passed under-15 legislation in January 2026, Denmark has agreed an under-15 ban with a parental override at 13 and 14, Norway has a bill due by the end of 2026, and the European Commission has trialled a privacy-preserving age verification app across five member states. This is the weather now, not a passing storm. The question is no longer whether under-16s will be locked out of the feed. It is what they will be locked out of alongside it, and what, if anything, gets built for them instead.

WHAT THE BAN DOES TO SPORT

Everything so far is the general debate. Here is the piece that belongs to us. When you ban under-16s from social media, you do not just ban the feed. You ban the way a generation follows sport.

Do not take that from me. Take it from the Australian regulator's own guidance to sport organisations. Clubs can keep posting content featuring under-16s, but under-16s can no longer receive it: schedules, results, performance videos, club news. The guidance tells sport organisations they "may need to explore alternative methods" of reaching their junior members. Read that again. The regulator is telling every club in the country that its youngest members can no longer receive the club's own communication about their own sport, and it offers no replacement beyond a suggestion to look for one.

Now put that next to how this generation actually consumes sport. Industry research, and I flag it as industry research, finds that over 90% of Gen Z fans use social media for sport, that clips, highlights and athlete posts are their favourite formats, and that they follow athletes first and clubs second. Separate vendor polling suggests around half of Gen Z now say highlights are replacing live games for them. Their sport is clip-first, athlete-led and social by default.



Put the two verified legs side by side. Leg one: the regulator confirms under-16s can no longer receive club schedules, results, performance videos or news on the banned platforms. Leg two: over 90% of Gen Z fans get their sport through social, clip-first and athlete-led. The conclusion, that a ban removes clip-first sport consumption for under-16s, is an inference from those two legs. Nobody has studied it directly yet, and I am stating it as an inference, not a finding. I am confident in it anyway, because I watched it play out at my own kitchen table.

One Australian governing body has already told its members where the weight falls: hardest on non-elite junior athletes, the kids for whom social media was the community around their sport rather than a shop window. The same guidance was honest enough to name an upside, less comparison pressure, and I will be honest enough to repeat it. Both halves ring true.

The clips are not trivial. A clip is how a girl in a small town discovers that someone who looks like her plays professionally. A results post is how a 14-year-old feels part of the first team he will never meet. A team feed is where the Sunday side lives between Sundays. The ban answers a real harm, and as collateral it severs the clips, the role models and the team community that keep children in sport.

3 WHY THE CURRENT ANSWERS FAIL

The feed is built to inflame. The ban is built to exclude. Both treat the child as the problem.

THE FEED

I will not pretend the bans came from nowhere. The clinical case for restricting children's access is argued seriously in the peer-reviewed literature, and it is contested there too; the most honest statement available is that the pattern of harms is real and the causal weights are still being fought over. What is not contested is the business model. A feed's job is to hold attention, and outrage, comparison and endless novelty hold it best. On a feed, a child is not the customer. A child is inventory: attention to be harvested and sold. The football videos my daughter wants are the bait; the machine behind them was never designed with her interests as its objective, because her interests are not what it is paid for.

THE BAN

The ban takes that real harm and answers it with the bluntest tool available: exclusion. It treats access as the harm, rather than design, so it removes the good with the bad in one motion, the grooming risk and the goal of the month, the doomscroll and the team's fixture list. It hands enforcement to the same platforms whose incentives created the problem, and children are already fooling the face scans. It displaces a fifth of them, on the flagged polling, into less regulated corners of the internet. It cuts isolated children off from what UNICEF plainly calls a lifeline. And, on the regulator's own guidance, it takes the sport down with it.

THE SHARED FLAW

Look at what the two answers have in common. The feed says the child's attention is a resource. The ban says the child's presence is a risk. Neither asks the obvious question: what if the spaces themselves were built differently? Child safety experts have been making this argument for years under names like safety by design and child rights by design; their phrase for it is worth stealing, regulate the product, not the child's access. The design-code argument has a literature, a set of published principles and a regulator's own framework behind it. What it has never had, inside sport, is a builder. Nobody in our industry has stood up and said: we will build the spaces where the sport still flows and the machine does not, and we will be judged on the architecture.

A feed treats the child as inventory. A ban treats the child as a hazard. Neither treats the child as a member of a community with a right to her own sport.

4 THE THIRD THING

The choice is not ban or feed. It is a third thing: spaces built safe by architecture, where the sport still flows.

I will state it as a method, so it stands up whether or not my company existed tomorrow. A digital space for under-16s in sport is safe by architecture when five things are true of its structure, not its settings page.

1

CONTACT IS STRUCTURAL, NOT CONFIGURABLE

No private messaging between strangers and children, because the capability does not exist, not because a toggle defaults to off. You cannot groom through a channel that is not there, and you cannot misconfigure a control that was never built.

2

AGE IS A TIER, NOT A CHECKBOX

Accounts are built differently at different ages, with the youngest managed by a guardian and autonomy arriving in steps. Australia's own government trial showed reliable age assurance is technically feasible, privately and effectively; the excuse that tiers cannot be enforced has expired.

3

EVERYONE IS WHO THEY SAY THEY ARE

Verified identity, so an anonymous adult cannot sit inside a children's space wearing a child's profile. Anonymity is a feature for adults on the open internet; inside a junior sport community it is a design defect.

4

GUARDIANS SEE IN, BY DESIGN

Parents and guardians have visibility of their child's space as part of the architecture, framed as communication rather than surveillance, so the adult responsible for the child is never the last to know.

5

THE SPORT STILL FLOWS

Schedules, results, clips, role models and team community reach the child, because the purpose of the space is the sport, not the harvest of attention. A safe space that loses the football has not solved the problem; it has just rebuilt the ban with better manners.

None of this is exotic. Every element exists somewhere, in regulation, in the safety-by-design literature, or in software your phone already runs. What has never existed is anyone assembling all five for sport, on purpose, as the default. The ban wave makes that assembly urgent: spring 2027 is now the deadline for every sport organisation in the UK, whether they have noticed or not.

5 THE BUILD

Here is the honest split at SHOT: what the desk evidence shows is live, what is still in build, and what the full audit still has to verify.

SHOT Clubhouse is a digital clubhouse for sport: club spaces, team spaces, development tools and community, built around the game rather than the feed. For this paper only the safeguarding architecture matters, so that is all I will describe.

- **Team-scoped communication is live.** The current model is announcement-first and keeps communication inside club and team structures rather than offering an open inbox between strangers. The full audit is checking how those boundaries are enforced in running code.
- **Guardian-managed under-13 accounts are live.** A parent creates the link, accepts team invitations and sees the same announcements as the child. That is the part the desk evidence currently supports.
- **The wider age model is in build.** The three-tier model for under-13s, 13 to 15s and 16+, including directional messaging rules and recorded parental authorisation, is specified and being implemented. This paper does not claim those changes are already live.
- **Verified identity and moderation remain part of the intended architecture.** They belong in the model, but intention is not audit evidence. Their status will be stated as the code-level audit verifies it.

Now the part most companies skip. What I will not claim: SHOT holds no external safeguarding certification, and no completed independent audit of our platform exists today. Claims like that are cheap to make and expensive to deserve, and this paper has spent six pages flagging other people's soft evidence; the same bar applies to us. The first safeguarding desk pass is complete. It found two items built, five designed but not fully implemented, and three not yet addressed. The full code-level audit is now in progress, and its verified findings, including the gaps, will be published as the work advances.

One more thing I want on the record. None of this makes SHOT a loophole, a workaround or a way to sneak children back to the feed, and I would refuse that framing if it were offered. The bans target a business model that treats attention as the product. The argument of this paper is that architecture, not access, is the variable that decides whether a child's digital space is safe, and that sport, of all industries, should be the one to prove it.

A parent should be able to say yes to the sport without saying yes to the machine. That is the whole design brief.



6 THE INVITATION

If you are a parent: the UK ban lands in spring 2027, and the kitchen-table question is coming to your table if it has not already. Before it does, ask where your child's sport actually reaches them, and ask the clubs and platforms in your child's life one question: is this space safe because of a settings page, or because of how it is built? You are entitled to an answer in plain English.

If you are a policymaker: a ban without an alternative is only half a policy. Pair the exclusion with a design code: recognise and set standards for spaces that are safe by architecture, so the market builds places children are allowed into, not just places they are barred from. And commission the independent wellbeing evaluation now, before spring 2027, so the UK does not repeat the Australian gap of legislating first and measuring later.

If you run a governing body or a club: the Australian regulator has already told sport organisations that under-16s can no longer receive schedules, results, performance videos or news on the banned platforms. Map how much of your junior communication runs through those channels today, because on current course that is your spring 2027. You have three seasons to build or adopt the alternative.

My daughter still asks about the football videos. The honest answer I owe her is not yes to the feed, and it is not no to the football. It is a third place, where the football lives and the machine does not. That is what we are building, and I would rather be held to this paper than to a slogan.

Take your SHOT. Own it. Make impact. · shotclubhouse.com

SOURCES

- eSafety Commissioner (Australia), social media age restrictions: scope, platforms, penalties and commencement, December 2025; guidance for sport organisations on the age restrictions, 2025-26
- eSafety Commissioner figure of ~4.7 million under-16 account removals, December 2025, via international press reporting
- Australian Government, Department of Infrastructure, Age Assurance Technology Trial final report, September 2025 (48 vendors, 60+ technologies)
- Molly Rose Foundation / YouthInsight, polling of 1,050 Australians aged 12-15, March 2026; advocacy-commissioned research, flagged as such in the text
- University of Sydney, explainer on the under-16 social media ban and age-check circumvention, December 2025
- ACS Information Age and subsequent reporting on VPNs and multi-signal location detection, 2025-26
- UNICEF statement on social media age bans, via UN News, December 2025
- UK Government announcement of the under-16 social media ban, June 2026; House of Commons Library briefing CBP-10468
- Electronic Frontier Foundation commentary on the UK ban, June 2026; advocacy position, flagged as such
- Mental Health Foundation (UK) position on the proposed under-16s ban; advocacy position, flagged as such
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health, peer-reviewed debate series on restricting adolescent social media access, 2025
- AusTriathlon, guidance for junior athletes on the under-16 social media laws, 2025
- Immersiv.io, Gen Z sports media research (industry research, flagged); Bango, Gen Z highlights polling, June 2026 (vendor research, flagged)
- Interface and Euronews reporting on France, Denmark, Norway and the EU age-verification app trial, 2026
- eSafety Commissioner and Stanford Social Media Lab, multi-year independent evaluation of the Australian ban, in progress; no results published as of July 2026

The kitchen-table story is my own family's and is told first person. Where evidence is advocacy-commissioned, vendor-sourced or industry research, it is flagged both in the text and above. The link between the ban and clip-first sport consumption is stated in the text as an inference, not a finding.