

Smartphones ban may cause more harm than good, says Molly Russell's father

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Government proposals to ban the sale of smartphones to under-16s and raise the minimum age for accessing social media risk causing more harm than good, the father of Molly Russell has warned. Ian Russell said it was “no surprise” there is a groundswell of pressure for tougher regulation of social media platforms but said plans for a fresh crackdown were flawed. Writing in the Guardian, Russell said poorly thought-out policies could have unintended consequences. “By rushing to introduce new measures that may sound attractive but that research has shown may be deeply flawed, my fear is that there is a real risk the government introduces a set of poorly thought-out measures that result in multiple unintended consequences. Put simply, much of what is being suggested may cause more harm than good,” he said. Russell has become a prominent voice in the debate over online safety after the death of his 14-year-old daughter, Molly, who killed herself in November 2017 after viewing large amounts of content related to suicide, depression, self-harm and anxiety on Instagram and Pinterest. In 2022, an inquest ruled Molly had “died from an act of self-harm while suffering from depression and the negative effects of online content”. The government is preparing to launch a consultation on children’s use of smartphones and social media next month. It is expected to include proposals to ban the sale of smartphones to under-16s, make it easier for parents to put parental controls on devices, and raise the minimum age for social media apps from 13 to as high as 16. Russell said “overly intrusive” parental controls could weaken trust between children and parents and make it less likely that young people would flag harmful content and interactions. He added that banning social media for under-16s would be punishing them and not social media companies. “This would punish children for the failures of technology companies to build their products responsibly,” he said, adding that “children have told us that being online is fundamental to their lives”. Russell described a mooted smartphone sale ban as “naive”, because such a move would at best delay encounters with harmful online content and would not remove the danger. The Russell family has set up the Molly Rose Foundation – chaired by Ian Russell – to campaign for improved online safety. Russell said, notwithstanding his concerns over the proposals, it was clear that further action needed to be taken despite the recent introduction of the Online Safety Act, which imposes a duty of care on social media companies to shield children from harmful content. “Children and young people continue to face a wave of inherently preventable online harms on often negligent-by-design social media platforms,” he said. Last year, Russell said the response of tech companies to his daughter’s inquest, where the coroner recommended improving child safety on social media sites, was “underwhelming and unsurprising”. Russell called for a “strengthened” Online Safety Act, which he wants to see bolstered with tougher regulations on self-harm content and enhanced scrutiny of platforms’ inner workings. He said this

could be achieved by the next government introducing “strong yet measured” follow-up legislation in the next parliament. A government spokesperson said: “Our commitment to making the UK the safest place to be a child online is unwavering, as evidenced by our landmark online safety act.”