

Social media use and the under-18s

As per a landmark settlement, Meta will be making sweeping changes to its services. Is it enough to allay the fear of parents, asks **Mathures Paul**

Going by the track record of social media companies, we cannot trust that this is the end of it," Dr Bhooshan Shukla, child and adolescent psychiatrist from Pune, tells **The Telegraph**.

Though it remains to be seen how far the protections go beyond the US, Dr Shukla worries about one of the key protections Meta has listed: a default two-hour daily time limit that teens can only turn off with a parent's permission. The limit is "cumulative across Facebook and Instagram, and time spent scrolling on both apps counts towards the total, including if we detect that someone has multiple accounts", as Meta's official statement says.

"Two-hours already crosses the harm limit. If up to two full hours are allowed on social media alone, one can only imagine the total screen time of the adolescent. As it is, Indian kids are spending huge amounts of time looking at the screen. This comes at the expense of other

bosses do not permit these gadgets and apps for their own children."

Bill Gates didn't give his children smartphones before the age of 14 and access to social media before the age of 16. Steve Jobs once declared that his kids had never used an iPad and that as a parent he limited how much technology kids use at home.

But parental responsibility, Dr Ram says, cannot stop at setting rules. "We have to acknowledge that all of us, including parents and bigger corporations who are behind running social media platforms, have a responsibility towards the future generation. Ultimately, parents are largely responsible for teaching their children life skills and pointing out the dangers of excessive social media use or any form of behaviour that can endanger their well-being and safety."

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That responsibility also involves having difficult conversations. "What parents need to do is to have frank, honest and open



VERDICT: Mark Zuckerberg (centre) leaves a court in Los Angeles, US, after testifying in a tech addiction trial

activities like family time, face-to-face interactions, sports, self-study, hobbies and chores," says Dr Shukla.

A more intricate issue involves parental control over social media accounts. The settlement talks about empowering parents, which it does to a point. For example, teens will be able to choose a non-algorithmic feed — one that isn't personalised by Meta's recommendation systems — as their default. Parents can choose to adjust their teen's default experience to require this setting.

It's also true that parents are the ones who buy teenagers their phones and pay Wi-Fi bills. But does the settlement create a false sense of reassurance for parents? "It should do exactly the opposite because this is a signal that Meta has acknowledged that they have some responsibility in producing addictive behaviour through social media. The safeguards are an extremely important step. However, I remain sceptical about how far they would be enforceable, and what impact they will have over a longer period of time in reducing behavioural addiction," says senior consultant psychiatrist Dr Jal Ranjan Ram.

He said parents need to be well versed in the safeguards Meta has agreed to implement and "really use their agency in overseeing that these rules are implemented on a daily basis".

Dr Shukla says, "Parents should treat this fine as a warning on a cigarette pack. They must decide rules for their own home and make arrangements to enforce those rules. Most of the tech

TEEN LOCK

- Default two-hour daily time limit that can be turned off with parental permission
- Option to choose a non-algorithmic feed — one that isn't personalised by Meta's recommendation systems — as default
- Parents can adjust their teen's default experience to turn autoplay off. A deliberate action, such as a tap or swipe, required to keep scrolling
- Number of likes and reactions on posts — their own and that of others — not visible by default
- Facebook and Instagram blocked between midnight and 6am
- Notifications muted between 8am and 3pm
- Cosmetic surgery and extreme make-up filters disabled by default.

conversations — without getting angry and upset — regarding why society at large thinks that excessive social media is extremely unhealthy," he says.

More importantly, parents have to lead the change. "Children who see their parents reading, listening to music, pursuing a range of hobbies learn that these are also excellent modes of spending their free time, with which they can grow and learn. Whereas children who see their parents glued to the screen will not learn about the alternatives. We need to acknowledge the fact that parents can model their children's behaviour through modifying their own behaviour," Dr Ram says.