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OP-ED

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SOCIAL MEDIA BAN SHOULD SPARK A READING RENAISSANCE

TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, Facebook – from today, under 16's will no longer allowed accounts on major social media platforms.

Up till today, the conversation has heavily focussed on the merits of this ban and how it will be implemented. How will it work? Will children be able to bypass it? What happens if they do?

I want to start a different conversation.

There are many, many families out there who support the ban – because it is in the best interests of our children – but who know it will not be easy.

Teens and young children will be going through a period of adjustment. Families will be looking for something to fill the gap. What should we do to fill the void left by social media?

My answer is this: why not pick up a book instead?

As we head into the summer break, with Christmas around the corner and time off from school and work, why not look at this ban as an opportunity for a reset? With less time spent doom-scrolling, this may be our chance to rekindle the love of reading.

There are many great reasons to encourage our kids to read.

Reading is still the closest thing we have to an educational superpower. Children who read regularly for pleasure do better in vocabulary, comprehension, critical thinking and even maths. They concentrate for longer.

But too many kids are missing out.

One in three Australian children cannot read at a proficient level. Almost a third of our teenagers don't read recreationally. As a recent University of South Australia study found, among students aged 11–14, the share who never read books for fun jumped from 11% in 2019 to 53% in 2022.

That's right – more than half of our children were never reading for fun at all. That is shocking.

But to me, the best reason to encourage kids to read is simply that there are so many great stories out there.

We're not starting from scratch. Australia has some of the best children's and young adult writers in the world – and our kids already love them.

Take Aaron Blabey. His *Bad Guys* series about a gang of 'animals with bad reputations' trying to turn good has become a global phenomenon, selling tens of millions of copies and has now been turned into a major film franchise. Kids recognise it instantly, and they love it.

There is also Andy Griffiths and Terry Denton's *Treehouse* books, which have made entire primary school cohorts laugh their way through hundreds of pages.

Or Mem Fox, whose picture books have been bedtime staples for decades.

And young adult novels like John Marsden's *Tomorrow, When the War Began*, and Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*, both of which enthralled thousands.

These aren't dusty tomes at the top of the bookshelf. They are fast-paced, funny, engaging stories. Given the chance, children devour them.

I'm an optimist at heart: today's social media ban creates a once-in-a-generation chance - to put reading back at the centre of childhood.

The challenge is to join the dots between this new social media law and encouraging reading for every child.

For families, the shift doesn't have to be complicated or expensive. It's about making reading feel like a normal, everyday part of life again, not a school English assignment.

Reading is something every family can reach for. Our schools are full of books. Our council libraries are too, and they're open to everyone. Devices are great, but not essential – all you really need is a library card.

The point is this: if we are pushing kids off Tik Tok and Instagram without a plan, we are planning to fail.

So, as we ask families to step back from social media, let's point them towards an activity that is already on their doorstep. Let's encourage kids to walk through the local library doors.

The social media laws are aimed at addressing real problems: cyber-bullying, online exploitation, addictive algorithms and harmful content.

But that is not the end of the conversation. The risk is that we stop the conversation at only discussing what we're taking away.

Today is the beginning of an enormous change for our children and the digital environment they will in which they'll grow up. Let's not waste that disruption.

Let's use it to spark re-spark an interest in reading – one where every child, in every community, has the chance to swap the nightly doom scroll for a story.

Start it this Christmas holidays. Add in a book or two as a gift, spend that family time at the beach or in the park with a story in hand.

Let's make it a reading renaissance.