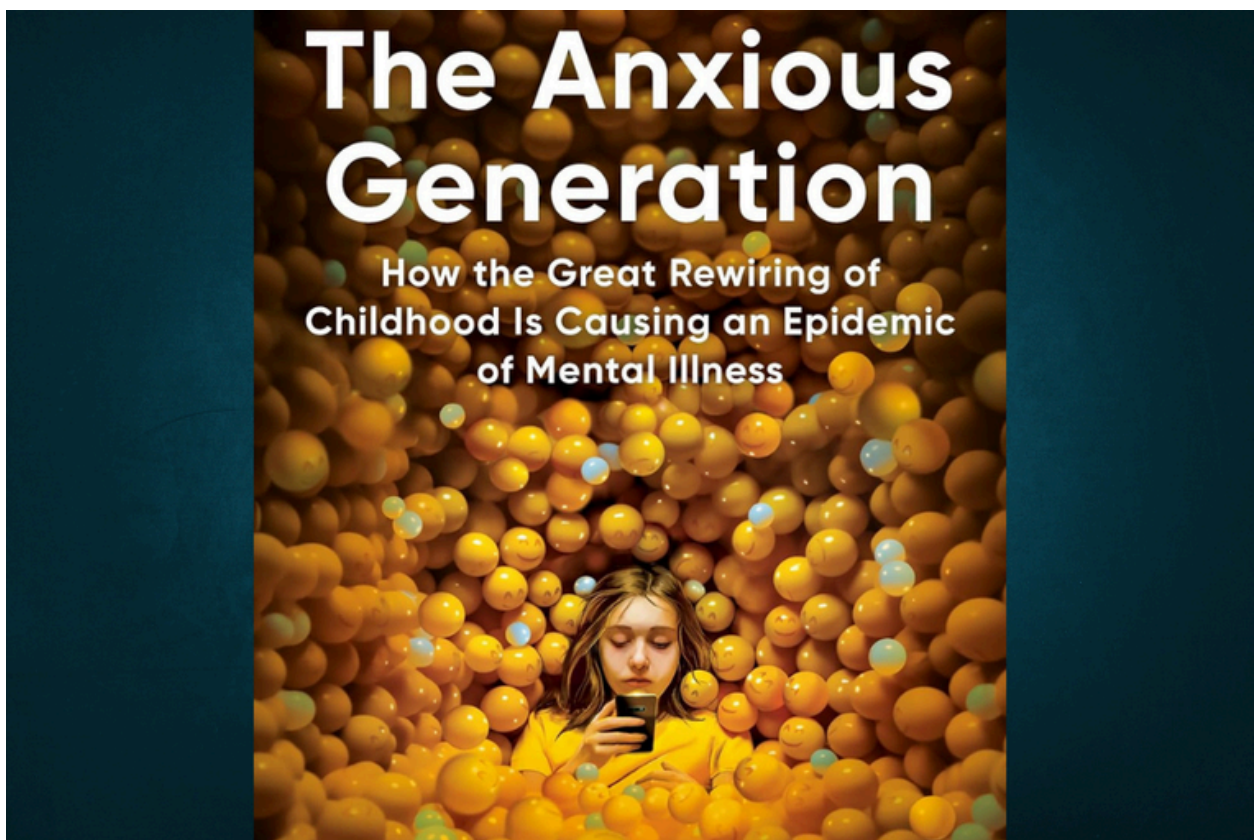


Unplugged Childhood: Haidt's Battle Cry Against Early Smartphone Use

'We are overprotecting our children in the real world while underprotecting them online...'



Book cover of Jonathan Haidt's new book available now. (photo: Penguin Press)

[Ashley McGuire](#) Books June 5, 2024

Every day at 3:16 p.m., I get a phone call from my son's school. On the other end is awkward and heavy breathing and an, "um ..." followed by a question about minutiae

from my 9-year-old along the lines of, “Can I get a McFlurry today?” Occasionally, the calls even come in the middle of the day with little worries like, “I have a weird dot on my finger,” or “Can you die from getting a splinter?”

My son’s school has it figured it out. They are cellphone free, and so — to get ahead of a culture where the average child receives their first phone at age 11 — they just plopped a landline in the lobby, and kids are welcome to use it at any time of day when they are not in class. Keeping in touch with my son during the school day, something with zero precedent in human history until a few years ago, anyways, is somehow still possible without giving him a smartphone.

I mention this because, as I was making my way through Jonathan Haidt’s new book, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, I was surprised to learn that some of the biggest pushback was coming not from underage phone junkies, but from their parents, who want to be able to stay in touch throughout the day. But at what cost?

An entire generation whose brains are quite literally being rewired as a result of a phone-based, rather than play-based childhood, is Haidt’s answer.

His book is such essential reading for parents that it should be almost given as a baby gift. I am only half joking, as the pressure of screens begins pressing at the earliest of ages. Recent research found that the average age a child is first given an iPad is 2. Children today are conditioned to be on smart devices from toddlerhood, and Haidt

paints a disturbing picture as to how it is reshaping childhood for the worse and causing a mental-health epidemic among children and teens.

The explosion of smart devices in the hands of America's youth came in tandem with the decline of what Haidt laments as the loss of a play-based childhood that entailed freedom and risk. My husband likes to joke that his parents didn't know his whereabouts between school let-out and dinner time. Today, the few parents that want to give their children the freedom to roam must worry constantly, not about their children's safety, but about someone calling child protective services on them.

Haidt documents, with extensive research from social scientists and psychologists, the way that free play, emphasis on *free*, is essential to healthy development for children. But the crackdown on free play and the proliferation of smartphones means that instead of being let loose into the yard, children today are let loose in what he calls "the Wild West of the virtual world, where threats to children abound."

He writes:

"To take one example of our shortsightedness, a powerful fear for many parents is that their child will fall into the hands of a sexual predator. But criminals nowadays spend most of their time in the virtual world because the internet makes it so much easier to communicate with children and to find and circulate sexual and violent videos involving children."

One of Haidt's central premises is that "*we are overprotecting our children in the real world while underprotecting them online*. If we really want to keep our children safe, we should delay their entry into the virtual world and send them out to play in the real world instead." This isn't alarmism, it is plain reality. I give you one child I know who isn't allowed to do anything that involves "running or jumping for safety reasons," per the mother, but is allowed to spend hours alone in a room roaming a tablet — and that began mid-elementary age.

Haidt relies heavily on neuroscience to explain why the average age of entry to the virtual world, 11, is the absolute *worst* age to give a child a phone. At the onset of puberty, 11-13 for girls and 13-14 for boys, a child's brain undergoes a period of elasticity during which rapid transformation takes place. Haidt likens this window, only ever experienced prior during the first few years of life and not to be experienced again, to wet cement.

During this period, he writes, "the brain is more vulnerable to the effects of sustained stressors, which can tilt the adolescent into mental disorders such as generalized anxiety disorder, depression, eating disorders, and substance abuse."

And it is during this exact window that children are most likely to be given a smartphone and unfettered access to social media, where they will spend, on average, six-to-eight hours a day, essentially all their leisure time and some of their school time, as well.

Not only does he argue that smartphones and social media are “experience blockers” that suppress authentic human engagement that humans deeply need, but they are designed to addict, something the underdeveloped frontal cortex of the adolescent brain is less able to cope with. “The frontal cortex,” he writes, which manages “self-control, focus, and the ability to resist off-ramps,” is “the last part of the brain to rewire during puberty.”

Meanwhile, kids are getting constant hits of dopamine from engaging with highly addictive social-media platforms and sending them into states of withdrawal when forced to take breaks. He cites one scholar from Stanford who describes “the universal symptoms of withdrawal from any addictive substance” as “anxiety, irritability, insomnia, and dysphoria.” Sound familiar?

And yet social media and other smartphone apps are designed to addict; their algorithms are constructed to exploit and prolong engagement. If you hover for a split second over a topic, no matter how nefarious, they will begin pummeling you with related content. The result, he argues, is that Big Tech companies, who have no care or concern for our children, are “sculpting some very deep pathways in our children’s brains.”

Perhaps most interesting and original is Haidt’s analysis of the disparate effects of this on girls versus boys. “Researchers have long found that boys and men are more focused on agency strivings while girls and women are more focused on communion

strivings.” He defines agency as “the desire to stand out and have an effect on the world” and communion as “the desire to connect and develop a sense of belonging.”

There are plenty who would denounce that as sexist, as if wanting to connect is somehow a lesser impulse than wanting to get ahead, but that is just our paternalistic mindset that holds male qualities as the ideal.

But show me the proliferation of female gaming addicts or the endless stream of tween male selfies. They don’t exist. (Video games give boys the virtual opportunity to achieve, and social media gives girls an unlimited ability to connect.) What does exist is a crisis of depression and anxiety that is especially acute among girls, as social media has unleashed a powerful way for girls to hurt each other in relationships as well as expose them to a torrent of messages and platforms that measure and erode their sense of worth and belonging. Haidt offers the trending TikTok diet called “corpse bride” as just one of countless ways social media preys especially ruthlessly on girls and their insecurities.

But Haidt doesn’t just rip back the curtain and run. He offers practical benchmarks and encourages parents and society to act collectively to protect children. He proposes delaying smartphone use until high school, social media until 16 at a minimum, and calls for legislation that actually enforces age verification for children for social media and other harmful websites, as well as phone-free schools where phones stay in locked pouches during the day, among many other attainable steps to liberating children from the “digital crack” in their hands.

For countless parents, they no doubt feel powerless as to where to begin, especially if their child already has a phone. But there is a simple first step for them all, and that's simply reading Haidt's urgently important book.

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