



The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of
Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness

by Jonathan Haidt

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Discussion Questions

1. Jon and Lenore suggest a few ways to give your kids more unstructured, unsupervised opportunities for free play, such as keeping Fridays open so neighborhood kids can get together. What small steps could you take toward adding more free play to your children's lives?
2. When you were your child(ren)'s age, what did your parents trust you to do on your own? How did that make you feel?
3. What are some things you do for your children that they could start doing for themselves?
4. What are some things you do for your family that your children could start doing for you?
5. Think about a time when you were a child and something went wrong when no adult was around. How did you solve the problem?
6. How can you give your kids more opportunities to be part of the real world rather than the virtual one?
7. Modern technology makes it very easy to track our children's whereabouts, grades, and even behavior electronically. This can become "the world's longest umbilical cord." Could you cut down on the ways in which you electronically track or watch your child in the real world? How?
8. What problems do smartphones, social media, and screens solve in your own life and what problems do they create?
9. Do you have any tech rules for yourself? Do they work?
10. What would you like to change, if anything, about your own relationship with smartphones and social media? What about video games and other screen-based activities?
11. How are you different online and offline?
12. In what ways can we better prepare our kids to wisely navigate the virtual world?
13. In what ways can we better prepare our kids to wisely navigate the real world?
14. Would you want to grow up the way today's kids are growing up? Why or why not? What are some benefits of growing up today? What would you want to preserve/carry forward

from your own upbringing?

15. What actions can you take, on your own and with like-minded parents, to lessen your kids' time spent in the virtual world and increase their opportunities for fun and responsibility in the physical world?
16. The book says that one problem with a phone-based childhood is that it replaces the hours children would otherwise spend playing in the real world: "Children are, in a sense, deprived of childhood." Do you agree about this for children in general or your own? What exactly are kids missing out on?
17. Think back on your own childhood. What are your most thrilling memories? Could your child have a similar experience today?
18. What did you get from "just playing" as a kid?
19. The book says that today we overprotect children and adolescents in the real world and underprotect them in the virtual world. Do you see this happening? Where?
20. What problems do smartphones, social media, and screens solve in your family, and what problems do they create?
21. Do you have any tech rules in your home? Do they work? Are there some that you have heard of, or would like to try?
22. What would you like to change, if anything, about your kids' relationship with smartphones and social media? What about video games and other screen-based activities?
23. How are your kids different online and offline?
24. "Free play" means playing without adults organizing or even supervising. What reservations do you have about allowing your own children more unsupervised time?

Author Biography

Jonathan Haidt (pronounced “height”) is a social psychologist at New York University’s Stern School of Business. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1992. Haidt’s research examines the intuitive foundations of morality, and how morality varies across cultural and political divisions. Haidt is the author of *The Happiness Hypothesis* (2006) and of the *New York Times* bestsellers *The Righteous Mind* (2012) and *The Coddling of the American Mind* (2018, with Greg Lukianoff). He has given four TED talks. In 2019 he was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Since 2018 he has been studying the contributions of social media to the decline of teen mental health and the rise of political dysfunction. His most recent book is the *New York Times* #1 bestseller *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*.

Reviews

Key takeaways from 'The Anxious Generation'

So much of parenting young kids is making it from one milestone to the next. We navigate through one challenging period until another pops up. For me, it's become a survival technique to take parenting as it comes. But with smartphones, I want to be proactive. That's why I'm adopting some of the actionable steps Haidt lays out in *The Anxious Generation*. These are foundational reforms to help reverse this rewiring of childhood include:

No smartphones before high school

No social media before 16

Phone-free schools

More unsupervised play and independence

While my kids are too young for phones just yet, nearly all of their friends have access to an iPad. Also some, like my oldest, have video game consoles. I know the day their peers start to get phones isn't far off. I want to be prepared, so here's what I'm doing now.

Setting limits with tablets, smartphones, and social media

Right now, my plan is that my kids won't get smartphones until they're 16. That way, they won't be tempted by having a smartphone but a no-social-media boundary. But I will consider other forms of tech, like a kid-friendly smartwatch or good old-fashioned flip phone, another one of Haidt's suggestions. Maybe I'll even consider a landline phone for our family. It's not the one-to-one communication I want to keep them from; it's access to social media and the unfettered internet.

Second, I'm hoping their school will eventually enact a no-phone rule. Right now 14 states have "active laws or executive orders that ban or restrict cell phone use in schools." And this 2025-2026 school year New York City public schools (the largest district in the U.S.) will implement "a ban on personal internet-enabled devices, including smartphones, smartwatches, and tablets, during the school day." Until my kids' school follows suit, I know if my kids really, truly need to reach me, they can call me from the school office.

How I'm talking to my kids about screens

I still remember the day I happened to walk by the TV while my youngest was watching something served to him by YouTube Kids' algorithm. It was so inappropriate, it made me gasp.

That night, I did a deep dive into our TV's parental controls, blocking YouTube and a few other channels.

Naturally, when they found out, they were devastated, since one of their favorite shows was now inaccessible. We had to have a really hard and honest conversation about how we have to be careful what we put into our bodies. It's not just what we eat and drink, but what we watch and read, too. I think I may have used a silly metaphor like, "If you watch too much YouTube, your brain will turn into mashed potatoes!" Funny, but it got my point across.

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My kids don't always agree with the boundaries I set. But they know we can always have open conversations about them. I plan to do the same with cell phones when the time comes.

Letting go in real life

One other big takeaway from *The Anxious Generation* is the idea that, as parents, we're too overprotective in the real world and not overprotective enough online. This hit home for me. My kids already get plenty of unsupervised play and independence, so I'm going to continue to build on that. But like many parents, I worry about the big scary dangers out in the world, like kidnapping, sex offenders, and the like. But what we really should be worried about, Haidt says, is what's on their computer or smartphones.

"We're too overprotective in the real world and not overprotective enough online."

Since my kids don't yet have phones, I'm focusing on what I can do to ease up in the real world to give them more freedom, independence, and autonomy. My hope is that they'll use these skills to make good decisions in the future, both online and off.

Checking my own phone and screentime use

While I loved *The Anxious Generation*, some parts were hard to read. Learning about how we, as parents, often pick convenience over our kids' mental health, i.e., letting our kids have their iPads while they need to get work done like I am right this second. It's made me want to be more intentional about how I use social media and screens.

Opening up the dialogue with other parents

But one of the things I loved about *The Anxious Generation* is that everyone is talking about it—even Oprah and Dr. Becky! It's truly opened up the dialogue about kids and screens. From the

moms at the splash pad to my childhood friends, even the waiter at an airport restaurant, everyone had an opinion on what screens were doing to our kids—and how to fix it.

Every parent's approach to their child's screen usage may differ, but I think sharing our various approaches: what's worked, what hasn't, and what challenges may be just around the corner can only help. As Haidt says, kids and screens are a "collective action problem," and it's up to all of us to solve it.

FAQs:

Q: What is the main message of *The Anxious Generation* by Jonathan Haidt?

A: Haidt argues that the rise in teen anxiety and depression is closely linked to the replacement of real-world childhood experiences with digital ones—especially through early access to smartphones and social media. In the book, he often compares today's "phone-based childhood" to a "play-based childhood." He makes a compelling case to prioritize play.

Q: Is *The Anxious Generation* helpful for parents?

A: Yes. As I mentioned, the book provides a helpful analysis of mental health trends and practical strategies for parents raising kids in today's tech-heavy world.

Q: What age is appropriate for kids to have a smartphone, according to the book?

A: Haidt recommends delaying smartphones and social media access until around age 14 and 16, respectively. He also recommends smartphone alternatives like a smartwatch or flip phone.

Final thoughts on 'The Anxious Generation' book

No parent is perfect, just like no approach is perfect. But armed with the knowledge of what screens and smartphones can do to our kids' health, we can make better choices about how and when to introduce them to our kids. And we can evaluate our own smartphone and social media usage. As for me, I'm with Haidt in getting our kids back to a play-based childhood, not a phone-based one, as soon as we can.

Read-Alikes

Bad Therapy: Why the Kids Aren't Growing Up by Abigail Shrier

In virtually every way that can be measured, Gen Z's mental health is worse than that of previous generations. Youth suicide rates are climbing, antidepressant prescriptions for children are common, and the proliferation of mental health diagnoses has not helped the staggering number of kids who are lonely, lost, sad, and fearful of growing up. What's gone wrong with America's youth? In *Bad Therapy*, ... Shrier argues that the problem isn't the kids--it's the mental health experts. Drawing on hundreds of interviews with child psychologists, parents, teachers, and young people, Shrier explores the ways the mental health industry has transformed the way we teach, treat, discipline, and even talk to our kids.

Growing Up in Public: Coming of Age in a Digital World by Devorah Heitner

The definitive book on helping kids navigate growing up in a world where nearly every moment of their lives can be shared and compared. With social media and constant connection, the boundaries of privacy are stretched thin. *Growing Up in Public* shows parents how to help tweens and teens navigate boundaries, identity, privacy, and reputation in their digital world. We can track our kids' every move with apps, see their grades within minutes of being posted, and fixate on their digital footprint, anxious that a misstep could cause them to be "canceled" or even jeopardize their admission to college. And all of this adds pressure on kids who are coming of age immersed in social media platforms that emphasize "personal brand," "likes," and "gotcha" moments. How can they figure out who they really are with zero privacy and constant judgment? Devorah Heitner shows us that by focusing on character, not the threat of getting caught or exposed, we can support our kids to be authentically themselves. Drawing on her extensive work with parents and schools as well as hundreds of interviews with kids, parents, educators, clinicians, and scholars, Heitner offers strategies for parenting our kids in an always-connected world. With relatable stories and research-backed advice, *Growing Up in Public* empowers parents to cut through the overwhelm to connect with their kids, recognize how to support them, and help them figure out who they are when everyone is watching.