

addictive content that entered through kids' eyes and ears, and by displacing physical play and in-person socializing, these companies have rewired childhood and changed human development on an almost unimaginable scale. The most intense period of this rewiring was 2010 to 2015, although the story I will tell begins with the rise of fearful and overprotective parenting in the 1980s and continues through the COVID pandemic to the present day.

What legal limits have we imposed on these tech companies so far? In the United States, which ended up setting the norms for most other countries, the main prohibition is the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), enacted in 1998. It requires children under 13 to get parental consent before they can sign a contract with a company (the terms of service) to give away their data and some of their rights when they open an account. That set the effective age of "internet adulthood" at 13, for reasons that had little to do with children's safety or mental health.<sup>5</sup> But the wording of the law doesn't require companies to verify ages; as long as a child checks a box to assert that she's old enough (or puts in the right fake birthday), she can go almost anywhere on the internet without her parents' knowledge or consent. In fact, 40% of American children under 13 have created Instagram accounts,<sup>6</sup> yet there has been no update of federal laws since 1998. (The U.K., on the other hand, has taken some initial steps, as have a few U.S. states.<sup>7</sup>)

A few of these companies are behaving like the tobacco and vaping industries, which designed their products to be highly addictive and then skirted laws limiting marketing to minors. We can also compare them to the oil companies that fought against the banning of leaded gasoline. In the mid-20th century, evidence began to mount that the hundreds of thousands of tons of lead put into the atmosphere *each year*, just by drivers in the United States, were interfering with the brain development of tens of millions of children, impairing their cognitive development and increasing rates of antisocial behavior. Even still, the oil companies continued to produce, market, and sell it.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, there is an enormous difference between the big social

media companies today and, say, the big tobacco companies of the 20th century: Social media companies are making products that are useful for adults, helping them to find information, jobs, friends, love, sex; making shopping and political organizing more efficient; and making life easier in a thousand ways. Most of us would be happy to live in a world with no tobacco, but social media is far more valuable, helpful, even beloved by many adults. Some adults have problems with addiction to social media and other online activities, but as with tobacco, alcohol, or gambling we generally leave it up to them to make their own decisions.

The same is not true for minors. While the reward-seeking part of the brain matures earlier, the frontal cortex—essential for self-control, delay of gratification, and resistance to temptation—is not fully developed until the mid-20s, and preteens are at a particularly vulnerable point in development. As they begin puberty, they are often socially insecure, easily swayed by peer pressure, and easily lured by anything that seems to offer social validation. We don't let preteens buy tobacco or alcohol, or enter casinos. The costs of using social media, in particular, are high for adolescents, compared with adults, while the benefits are minimal. Let children grow up on Earth first, before sending them to Mars.

**THIS BOOK TELLS THE STORY OF WHAT HAPPENED TO THE GENERATION** born after 1995,<sup>9</sup> popularly known as Gen Z, the generation that follows the millennials (born 1981 to 1995). Some marketers tell us that Gen Z ends with the birth year 2010 or so, and they offer the name Gen Alpha for the children born after that, but I don't think that Gen Z—the anonymous generation—will have an end date until we change the conditions of childhood that are making young people so anxious.<sup>10</sup>

Thanks to the social psychologist Jean Twenge's groundbreaking work, we know that what causes generations to differ goes beyond the events children experience (such as wars and depressions) and includes changes in the technologies they used as children (radio, then television,

personal computers, the internet, the iPhone).<sup>11</sup> The oldest members of Gen Z began puberty around 2009, when several tech trends converged: the rapid spread of high-speed broadband in the 2000s, the arrival of the iPhone in 2007, and the new age of hyper-viralized social media. The last of these was kicked off in 2009 by the arrival of the “like” and “retweet” (or “share”) buttons, which transformed the social dynamics of the online world. Before 2009, social media was most useful as a way to keep up with your friends, and with fewer instant and reverberating feedback functions it generated much less of the toxicity we see today.<sup>12</sup>

A fourth trend began just a few years later, and it hit girls much harder than boys: the increased prevalence of posting images of oneself, after smartphones added front-facing cameras (2010) and Facebook acquired Instagram (2012), boosting its popularity. This greatly expanded the number of adolescents posting carefully curated photos and videos of their lives for their peers and strangers, not just to see, but to judge.

Gen Z became the first generation in history to go through puberty with a portal in their pockets that called them away from the people nearby and into an alternative universe that was exciting, addictive, unstable, and—as I will show—unsuitable for children and adolescents. Succeeding socially in that universe required them to devote a large part of their consciousness—perpetually—to managing what became their online brand. This was now necessary to gain acceptance from peers, which is the oxygen of adolescence, and to avoid online shaming, which is the nightmare of adolescence. Gen Z teens got sucked into spending many hours of each day scrolling through the shiny happy posts of friends, acquaintances, and distant influencers. They watched increasing quantities of user-generated videos and streamed entertainment, offered to them by autoplay and algorithms that were designed to keep them online as long as possible. They spent far less time playing with, talking to, touching, or even making eye contact with their friends and families, thereby reducing their participation in embodied social behaviors that are essential for successful human development.

The members of Gen Z are, therefore, the test subjects for a radical new way of growing up, far from the real-world interactions of small

communities in which humans evolved. Call it the Great Rewiring Childhood. It's as if they became the first generation to grow up on]

THE GREAT REWIRING IS NOT JUST ABOUT CHANGES IN THE TECHNOLOGIES THAT SHAPE CHILDREN'S DAYS AND MINDS. THERE'S A SECOND PLOTLINE THE WELL-INTEENTIONED AND DISASTROUS SHIFT TOWARD OVERPROTECTING CHILDREN AND RESTRICTING THEIR AUTONOMY IN THE REAL WORLD. CHILDREN NEED A GREAT DEAL OF FREE PLAY TO THRIVE. IT'S AN IMPERATIVE THAT'S EVIDENT ACROSS MAMMAL SPECIES. THE SMALL-SCALE CHALLENGES AND SETBACKS THAT HAPPEN DURING PLAY ARE LIKE AN INOCULATION THAT PREPARES CHILDREN TO FACE IN LARGER CHALLENGES LATER. BUT FOR A VARIETY OF HISTORICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL REASONS, FREE PLAY BEGAN TO DECLINE IN THE 1980S, AND THE DECLINE ACCREDITED IN THE 1990S. ADULTS IN THE UNITED STATES, THE U.K., AND CANADA, INCREASINGLY BEGAN TO ASSUME THAT IF THEY EVER LET A CHILD WALK OUT UNSUPERVISED, THE CHILD WOULD ATTRACT KIDNAPPERS AND SEX OFFENDERS. UNSUPERVISED OUTDOOR PLAY DECLINED AT THE SAME TIME THAT THE PERSONAL COMPUTER BECAME MORE COMMON AND MORE INVITING AS A PLACE FOR SPENDING FREE TIME.\*

I propose that we view the late 1980s as the beginning of the transition from a “play-based childhood” to a “phone-based childhood,” a transition that was not complete until the mid-2010s, when most adolescents had their own smartphone. I use “phone-based” broadly to include all of the internet-connected personal electronics that came to fill young people’s time, including laptop computers, tablets, internet-connected video game consoles, and, most important, smartphones with millions of apps.

\* There is good evidence that the trends in overprotection, technology use, and mental health I describe happened in largely similar ways and at the same time in a number of countries of the Anglosphere: the United States, the U.K., Canada, Australia, New Zealand (see Rausch & Haidt, 2023, March). I believe they are happening in most or all of the developed Western nations, although with variations based on degree of individualism, social integration, and other cultural variables. I am collecting studies from other parts of the world and will be writing about trend those countries on the *After Babel* Substack.

When I speak of a play-based or phone-based "childhood," I'm using that term broadly too. I mean it to include both children and adolescents (rather than having to write out "phone-based childhood and adolescence"). Developmental psychologists often mark the transition between childhood and adolescence as being the onset of puberty, but because puberty arrives at different times for different kids, and because it has been shifting younger in recent decades, it is no longer correct to equate adolescence to the teen years.<sup>13</sup> This is how age will be categorized in the rest of this book:

- Children: 0 through 12.
- Adolescents: 10 through 20.
- Teens: 13 through 19.
- Minors: Everyone who is under 18. I'll also use the word "kids" sometimes, because it sounds less formal and technical than "minors."

The overlap between children and adolescents is intentional: Kids who are 10 to 12 are between childhood and adolescence, and are often called tweens for that reason. (This period is also known as early adolescence.) They are as playful as younger children, yet they are beginning to develop the social and psychological complexities of adolescents.

As the transition from play-based to phone-based childhood proceeded, many children and adolescents were perfectly happy to stay indoors and play online, but in the process they lost exposure to the kinds of challenging physical and social experiences that all young mammals need to develop basic competencies, overcome innate childhood fears, and prepare to rely less on their parents. Virtual interactions with peers do not fully compensate for these experiential losses. Moreover, those whose playtime and social lives moved online found themselves increasingly wandering through adult spaces, consuming adult content, and interacting with adults in ways that are often harmful to minors. So even while parents worked to eliminate risk and freedom in the real world, they generally, and often unknowingly, granted full independence in the virtual world, in part because most found it difficult to understand

what was going on there, let alone know what to restrict or how to strict it.

A FEW NOTES ABOUT TERMINOLOGY. WHEN I TALK ABOUT THE "virtual world," I am referring to relationships and social interactions characterized by four features that have been typical for millions of years:

1. They are *embodied*, meaning that we use our bodies to communicate, we are conscious of the bodies of others, and we respond to bodies of others both consciously and unconsciously.
2. They are *synchronous*, which means they are happening at the same time, with subtle cues about timing and turn taking.
3. They involve primarily *one-to-one or one-to-several communication* with only one interaction happening at a given moment.
4. They take place within communities that have a *high bar for entry and exit*, so people are strongly motivated to invest in relationships and repair rifts when they happen.

In contrast, when I talk about the "virtual world," I am referring relationships and interactions characterized by four features that have been typical for just a few decades:

1. They are *disembodied*, meaning that no body is needed, just language. Partners could be (and already are) artificial intelligence (AIs).
2. They are heavily *asynchronous*, happening via text-based posts and comments. (A video call is different; it is synchronous.)
3. They involve a substantial number of *one-to-many communication* broadcasting to a potentially vast audience. Multiple interactions can be happening in parallel.



ments ever created for young adults. Yet campus culture changed around 2015, not just in the United States but also at British<sup>9</sup> and Canadian<sup>10</sup> universities. How could such a big change happen so quickly and internationally?

In the rest of this chapter, I'll show how the play-based childhood is nature's way of wiring up brains that tend toward discover mode, and how the phone-based childhood shifted a generation of children toward defend mode.

## KIDS ARE ANTIFRAGILE

In the late 1980s, a grand experiment was launched in the Arizona desert. Biosphere 2 was (and still is) the largest attempt to build a closed artificial ecosystem, as a prelude to (someday) building self-sustaining ecosystems in outer space. Biosphere 2 was designed to support eight people, who would attempt to live within it for several years. All of the oxygen they breathed, the water they drank, and the food they ate was to be generated within the facility.

That goal was never reached. The complexity of biological interactions among species and social interactions among humans proved to be too much, but a great deal was learned from the multiple failures. For instance, many of the trees they planted to create a rain-forest ecosystem grew rapidly but then fell over before reaching maturity. The designers had not realized that young trees need wind to grow properly. When the wind blows, it bends the tree, which tugs at the roots on the windward side and compresses the wood on the other side. In response, the root system expands to provide a firmer anchor where it is needed, and the compressed wood cells change their structure to become stronger and firmer. This altered cell structure is called reaction wood, or sometimes stress wood. Trees that are exposed to strong winds early in life become trees that can withstand even stronger winds when full grown. Conversely, trees that are raised in a protected greenhouse sometimes fall over from their own weight before they reach maturity.

Stress wood is a perfect metaphor for children, who also need to ex-

perience frequent stressors in order to become strong adults. The Biosphere trees illustrate the concept of "antifragility," a term coined by NYU colleague Nassim Taleb in his 2012 book, *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder*. Taleb noted that some things, like wineglasses, are fragile. We protect fragile things from shocks and threats because we know they cannot withstand even a gentle challenge, such as being knocked over on a dinner table. Other things are resilient, such as a plastic cup, which can withstand being knocked off the table. But resilient objects don't get better from getting dropped; they merely don't get worse.

Taleb coined the word "antifragile" to describe things that actually need to get knocked over now and then in order to become strong. I use the word "things," but there are very few inanimate objects that are antifragile. Rather, antifragility is a common property of complex systems that were designed (by evolution, and sometimes by people) to function in a world that is unpredictable.<sup>11</sup> The ultimate antifragile system is the immune system, which requires early exposure to dirt, parasites, and bacteria in order to set itself up in childhood. Parents who try to raise their children in a bubble of perfect hygiene are harming their children by blocking the development of their antifragile immune systems.

It's the same dynamic for what has been called the psychological immune system<sup>12</sup>—the ability of a child to handle, process, and get past frustrations, minor accidents, teasing, exclusion, perceived injustice and normal conflicts without falling prey to hours or days of inner turmoil. There is no way to live with other humans without conflicts and deprivations. As the Stoics and Buddhists taught long ago, happiness cannot be reached by eliminating all "triggers" from life; rather, happiness comes from learning to deprive external events of the power to trigger negative emotions in you. In fact, the best parenting book<sup>13</sup> that my wife and I read when our children were toddlers urged us to look for opportunities to frustrate our children every day by laying out and enforcing the contingencies of life: *If you want to watch Teletubbies, you must first put away your toys. If you persist in doing that, you'll get a time-out. Yet your sister got something you didn't, and that happens sometimes.*

Well-intentioned parents who try to raise their children in a bubble of satisfaction, protected from frustration, consequences, and negative emotions, may be harming their children. They may be blocking the development of competence, self-control, frustration tolerance, and emotional self-management. Several studies find that such “coddling” or “helicopter parenting” is correlated with later anxiety disorders, low self-efficacy (which is the inner confidence that one can do what is needed to reach one’s goals), and difficulty adjusting to college.<sup>14</sup>

Children are intrinsically antifragile, which is why overprotected children are more likely to become adolescents who are stuck in defend mode. In defend mode, they’re likely to learn less, have fewer close friends, be more anxious, and experience more pain from ordinary conversations and conflicts.

## ANTIFRAGILE KIDS NEED RISKY PLAY TO STAY IN DISCOVER MODE

Antifragility is the key to solving many puzzles about human development, such as this one: Why do children add risk to their play? Why is it that once a skill is mastered, such as skateboarding down a gentle slope, a child will move on to a steeper slope, then a staircase, then perhaps the staircase railing? Why would children choose activities that pretty much guarantee that they’ll get hurt, multiple times? Play researchers have long known the answer. As the Norwegian researchers Ellen Sandseter and Leif Kennair wrote in 2010, thrilling experiences have anti-phobic effects.<sup>15</sup>

Sandseter and Kennair begin with a puzzling fact long known in clinical psychology: Phobias are concentrated around a few animals and situations that kill almost nobody, such as snakes (even tiny ones), tightly enclosed places, the dark, public speaking, and heights. Conversely, very few people develop phobias to things that kill many modern people, including cars, opioids, knives, guns, and junk food. Furthermore, phobias in adults can rarely be traced to a bad experience in childhood.<sup>16</sup> In fact,

kids who fall out of trees often turn into the adults who are least afraid of climbing trees.

We can resolve the puzzle by taking an evolutionary view. Common phobias evolved over millions of years of hunter-gatherer life, with some (such as snakes) being shared by other primates. We have an “evolved preparedness” to pay attention to some things, such as snakes, and to acquire a fear very easily from a single bad experience or from seeing others in our group show fear toward snakes. Conversely, as a child gains exposure, experience, and mastery, fear usually recedes.

As children become more competent, they become increasingly more *intrigued* by some of the things that had frightened them. They may approach them, look to adults and older kids for guidance, learn to distinguish the dangerous situations from the less dangerous ones, and eventually master their fears. As they do so, their fear turns into thrill and triumph. You can see the transition on a young child’s face as he reaches out to touch a worm under a rock you just lifted up for him on a nature walk. You can see the mix of fear and fascination turning into a shriek of delight and disgust as he pulls his finger away, laughing. He did it! Now he’ll be less afraid the next time he encounters a worm.

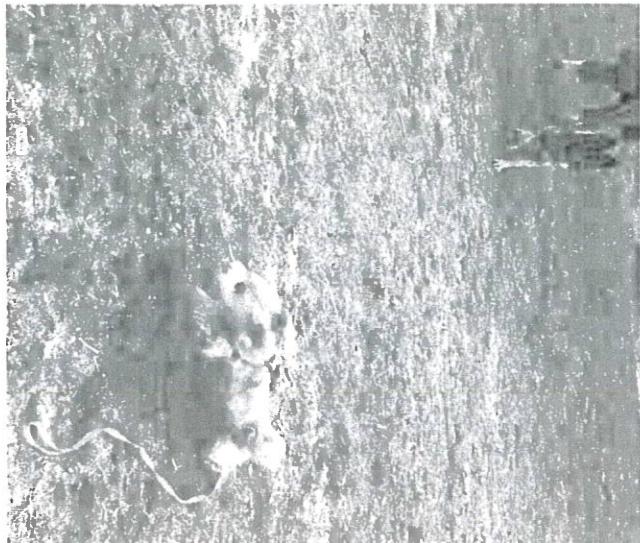
While I was writing this chapter, in the fall of 2022, my family got a puppy. Wilma is a small dog, and she weighed only seven pounds when we first started taking her for walks on the crowded sidewalks of New York City. At first she was visibly afraid of everything, including the parade of larger dogs, and she had trouble relaxing enough to “do her business.”

Over time, she habituated somewhat, and I began to let her run off leash, early mornings, in parks with other dogs. There too she was afraid at first, but the way she handled it made it seem as though she had read Sandseter and Kennair. She would approach much larger dogs, slowly, and then bolt away like lightning when they’d take a step toward her. Sometimes she’d run toward me for safety, but then her anti-phobic programming would kick in. Without slowing down, she’d execute a high-speed turn around my legs and sprint back toward the larger dog for

with risks, and learn that when things go wrong, even if they get hurt, they can usually handle it without calling in an adult.

Sandseter and Kennair define risky play as “thrilling and exciting forms of play that involve a risk of physical injury.” (In a 2023 paper, expanding on their original work, they add that risky play also requires elements of uncertainty.<sup>17</sup>) They note that such play usually takes place outdoors, during free-play time rather than during activities organized by adults. Children choose to do activities that often lead to relatively harmless injuries, particularly bruises and cuts.

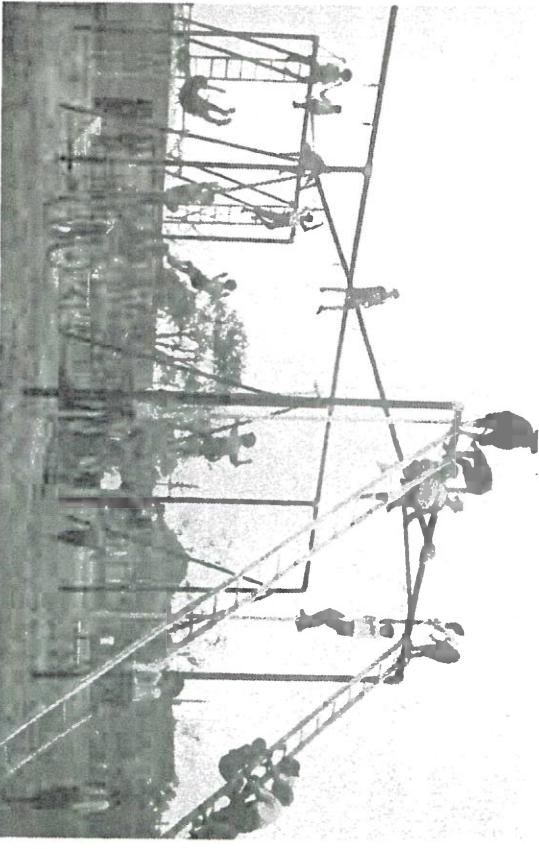
**Figure 3.3.** Wilma, age 7 months, executing a hairpin turn as her sprint toward a German shepherd sharply angled into a sprint away, which was followed by play position and more sprinting toward the larger dog. You can see the video of this interaction in the online supplement.



Sandseter and Kennair analyzed the kinds of risks that children seek out when adults give them some freedom, and they found six: heights (such as climbing trees or playground structures), high speed (such as swinging, or going down fast slides), dangerous tools (such as hammers and drills), dangerous elements (such as experimenting with fire), rough-and-tumble play (such as wrestling), and disappearing (hiding, wandering away, potentially getting lost or separated). These are the major types of thrills that children need. They’ll get them for themselves unless adults stop them—which we did in the 1990s. Note that video games offer *none* of these risks, even though games such as *Fortnite* show avatars doing *all*

another round of thrills. She was experimenting to find the balance of joy and fear that she was ready for at that moment. By repeatedly cycling through discover and defend mode, she learned how to size up the intentions of other dogs and she developed her own abilities to engage in rough and joyful play, even as she occasionally got knocked over in a scramble of paws and tails.

Kids and puppies are thrill seekers. They are hungry for thrills, and they must get them if they are to overcome their childhood fears and wire up their brains so that discover mode becomes the default. Children need to swing and then jump off the swing. They need to explore forests and junkyards in search of novelty and adventure. They need to shriek with their friends while watching a horror movie or riding a roller coaster. In the process they develop a broad set of competences, including the ability to judge risk for themselves, take appropriate action when faced



**Figure 3.4.** An overly dangerous playground in Dallas, Texas, year unknown.<sup>18</sup>

of them.<sup>19</sup> We are embodied creatures; children should learn how to manage their bodies in the physical world before they start spending large amounts of time in the virtual world.

You can see children seeking out risks and thrills, together, in many playground photos taken before the 1980s.<sup>20</sup> Some of them, such as figure 3.4, show playgrounds that are clearly *too* dangerous. If children fell from such a great height, they could suffer severe injury, perhaps even a broken neck.

In contrast, figure 3.5 shows a playground spinner (or merry-go-round), which is, in my opinion, the greatest piece of playground equipment ever invented. It requires cooperation to get going: the more kids who join in, the faster it goes and the more screaming there is, both of which amplify the thrills. You get physical sensations from the centrifugal force that you don't get anywhere else, which makes it educational as well as experientially unique. You get consciousness alteration if you lie in the center (dizziness). To top it all off, it offers endless opportunities for additional risk-taking such as standing up, hanging off the sides, or throwing a ball with the other kids while it's spinning.

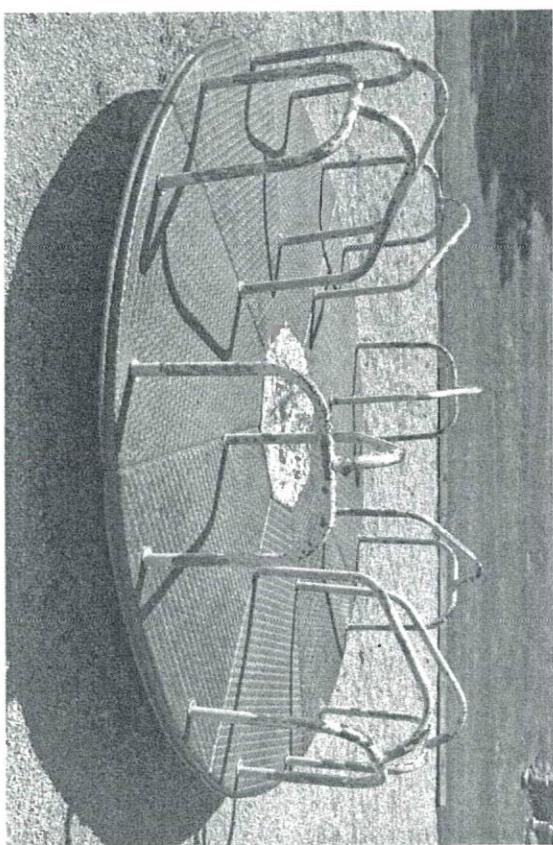


Figure 3.5. A playground spinner (or merry-go-round), a staple of 1970s playgrounds.<sup>21</sup>

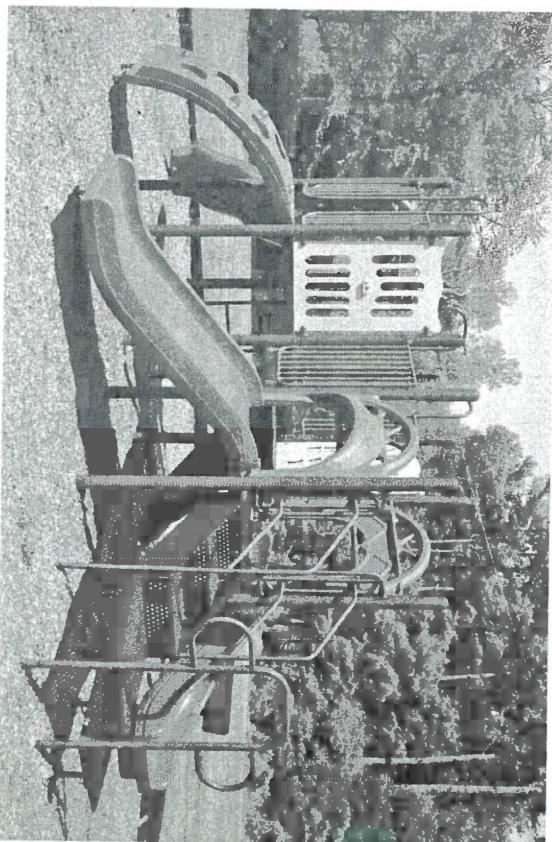


Figure 3.6. An overly safe playground, offering little opportunity for antifragile kids to learn how to not get hurt.<sup>22</sup>

On the playground spinner you can get hurt if you're not careful, but not badly hurt, which means you get direct feedback from your own skillful and unskillful moves. You learn how to handle your body and how to keep yourself and others safe. Researchers who study children and play have concluded that the risk of minor injuries should be a feature not a bug, in playground design. In the U.K., they are acting on this insight, adding construction materials, hammers, and other tools (which are used with adult supervision).<sup>23</sup> As one enlightened summer camp administrator told me, "We want to see bruises, not scars."

Unfortunately, playground spinners are rare nowadays, because they carry *some* risk, and therefore in a litigious country like the United States they carry some risk of a lawsuit against whoever is responsible for the playground. You can see the decimation of risky play since the 1990s in most American playgrounds. Figure 3.6 shows the most common kind of structure in the playgrounds my children used in New York City in the early 2010s. It's hard to hurt yourself on these things, which means children don't learn much about how to *not* get hurt.

These ultrasafe structures were entertaining when my kids were

she says, should be to "keep them as safe as necessary, not as safe as possible."<sup>27</sup>

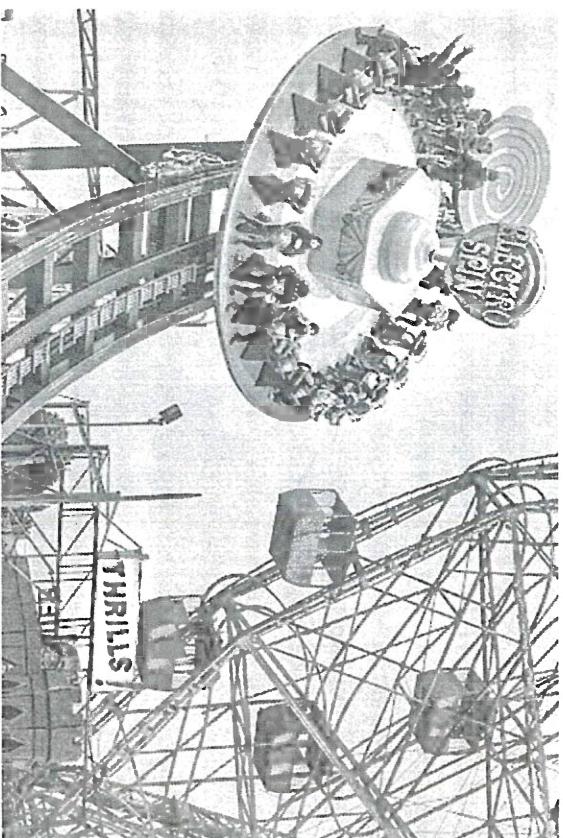


Figure 3.7. Coney Island, New York City, offers a wide range of dosages of thrills.<sup>24</sup>

three or four, but by age 6 they wanted bigger thrills, which they found at Coney Island. Amusement parks around the world are designed to give children two of Sandseter and Kennair's six kinds of thrills: heights and high speeds. The rides offer differing doses of fear and thrill (with close to zero risk of injury), and a major topic of conversation in the car whenever I took my kids and their friends to Coney Island was, who is going to try which scary ride today?

Perhaps your first reaction to those old playground photos is "good riddance!" What parent wants to take *any* risks with their child? But the harms of eliminating all risky outdoor play are substantial. While writing this chapter, I met with Mariana Brussoni, a play researcher at the University of British Columbia. Brussoni guided me to research showing that the risk of injury per hour of physical play is *lower* than the risk per hour of playing adult-guided sports, while conferring many more developmental benefits (because the children must make all choices, set and enforce rules, and resolve all disputes).<sup>25</sup> Brussoni is on a campaign to encourage risky outdoor play because in the long run it produces the healthiest children.<sup>26</sup> Our goal in designing the places children play,

The play researchers Brussoni, Sandseter and Kennair, and Peter Grall help us see that antifragile children *need* play that involves some risk to develop competence and overcome their childhood anxieties. Like my dog, Wilma, only the kids themselves can calibrate the level of risk they are ready for at each moment as they tune up their experiencing expectant brains. Like young trees exposed to wind, children who are routinely exposed to small risks grow up to become adults who can handle much larger risks without panicking. Conversely, children who are raised in a protected greenhouse sometimes become incapacitated by anxiety before they reach maturity.

I am often asked why I urge parents to be more vigilant and restrictive about their children's online activities, when I've been talking for years about how parents need to stop over-supervising their children and start giving them independence. Can't children just as well become antifragile online? Don't they experience setbacks, stressors, and challenges there?

I see few indications that a phone-based childhood develops antifragility. Human childhood evolved in the real world, and children's minds are "expecting" the challenges of the real world, which is embodied, synchronous, and one-to-one or one-to-several, within communities that endure. For physical development they need physical play and physical risk-taking. Virtual battles in a video game confer little or no physical benefit. For social development they need to learn the art of friendship, which is embodied; friends do things together, and as children they touch, hug, and wrestle. Mistakes are low cost, and can be rectified in real time. Moreover, there are clear embodied signals of this rectification such as an apology with an appropriate facial expression. A smile, a pat on the back, or a handshake shows everyone that it's okay; both parties are ready to move on and continue playing, both are developing their skill of relationship repair. In contrast, as young people move their social relationships online, those relationships become disembodied, asynchronous, and sometimes disposable. Even small mistakes can bring heavy

costs in a viral world where content can live forever and everyone can see it. Mistakes can be met with intense criticism by multiple individuals with whom one has no underlying bond. Apologies are often mocked, and any signal of re-acceptance can be mixed or vague. Instead of gaining an experience of social mastery, a child is often left with a sense of social incompetence, loss of status, and anxiety about future social interactions.

This is why there is no contradiction when I say that parents should supervise less in the real world but more in the virtual—primarily by delaying immersion. Childhood evolved on Earth, and children's anti-faith is geared toward the characteristics of Earth. Small mistakes promote growth and learning. But if you raise children on Mars, there's a mismatch between children's needs and what the environment offers. If a child falls down on Mars and cracks the face shield of their spacesuit, it's instant death. Mars is unforgiving, and life there would require living in defend mode. Of course, the online world is not nearly as dangerous as Mars, but it shares the property that small mistakes can bring enormous costs. Children did not evolve to handle the virality, anonymity, instability, and potential for large-scale public shaming of the virtual world. Even adults have trouble with it.

We are misallocating our protective efforts. We should be giving children more of the practice they need in the real world and delaying their entry into the online world, where the benefits are fewer and the guardrails nearly nonexistent.

## THE BEGINNING OF THE END OF PLAY-BASED CHILDHOOD

At what age were you given freedom? How old were you when your parents let you walk alone to a friend's home, at least a quarter mile away, or allowed you and your friends to be out on your own, going to parks or shops, with no supervision? I have asked this question to dozens of audiences, and I always find the same generational differences.

First, I ask everyone who was born before 1981 to raise their hands.

These are the members of Gen X (born 1965–1980), the baby boomers (born 1946–1964), and the last members of the so-called Silent Generation (born 1928–1945). I ask these older audience members to recall their actions of liberation privately and then to shout it out when I point to their seat in the room. Nearly everyone shouts out “6,” “7,” or “8” and it is sometimes hard for me to continue the demonstration because they are laughing and fondly recounting to each other the grand adventures they used to have with the other kids in their neighborhood. Next I ask everyone who was born in 1996 or later (Gen Z) to raise their hands. When I ask them to shout out their liberation age, the difference is stark: The majority fall between 10 and 12, with just a few 8s, 9s, 13s, and 14s. (Members of the millennial generation fall in between and show a wide range of liberation ages.)

These findings are confirmed by more rigorous research. In the United States,<sup>28</sup> Canada,<sup>29</sup> and Britain,<sup>30</sup> children used to have a great deal of freedom to walk to school, roam around their neighborhoods, invent games, get into conflicts, and resolve those conflicts, beginning around first or second grade. But in the 1990s, parenting changed in all three countries. It became more intensive, protective, and fearful.

Corresponding to the crackdown, studies of how Americans spent their time show a sudden change in the 1990s. Women had been entering the workforce in large numbers since the 1970s, giving them far less time at home. Yet despite growing time pressures, mothers as well as fathers began reporting that they spent a lot *more* time with their children, beginning rather suddenly in the mid-1990s. Figure 3.8 shows the changing number of hours per week that mothers reported spending with their children from 1965 through 2008. The number is steady or slightly declining for mothers with and without college degrees, all the way until 1995, and then it jumps up, especially for college-educated mothers. The graph for fathers is quite similar, just with lower numbers (around four hours per week until 1995, then jumping up to around eight hours per week by 2000).

A separate study, looking at how children spend their time (as reported by parents), found that American children were also facing a time

## WHAT GOVERNMENTS CAN DO TO INCENTIVIZE MORE (AND BETTER) REAL-WORLD EXPERIENCE

During the summer of 2014, when the South Carolina single mom Debra Harrell worked her shifts at McDonald's, she brought along her daughter, who was on vacation from school. Regina, age 9, spent the time playing on a laptop. But when the laptop was stolen from their home, Regina begged her mom to let her play at the neighborhood's popular sprinkler park instead. She'd be surrounded by friends and many of their parents. It felt safe. It felt like summer. Debra said yes.

But on Regina's third day of fun in the sun, a woman at the park asked her where her mom was. When she said, "Working," the woman called 911. The police charged Debra with child abandonment—which carries up to a 10-year sentence—and threw her in jail. Regina was taken away from her mom for 17 days.<sup>28</sup>

This case and many others like it frighten parents into over-supervising their children. Governments are literally criminalizing the play-based childhoods that were the norm before the 1990s.

### 1. Stop Punishing Parents for Giving Children Real-World Freedom

Debra's experience and other stories of parents investigated for things like letting children play outside<sup>29</sup> or get themselves home from the park<sup>30</sup> led Let Grow to start a movement for "Reasonable Childhood Independence" laws. Currently, neglect laws in most states are vague, saying things like "Parent must provide proper supervision." Yes, of course they should, but people have wildly different ideas of what that entails. Just because some passerby wouldn't let *her* nine-year-old play outside doesn't mean the state should be able to investigate anyone who does.

A study in *Social Policy Report* found that the way current U.S. laws are written and interpreted has little relationship to the ages at which children develop abilities.<sup>31</sup> In societies around the world, children were traditionally thought to become much more capable and responsible around the ages of 6 or 7, when they were routinely given responsibilities

such as caring for younger children and animals. Yet in some U.S. states, such as Connecticut, the law said a child should never be left alone in public before the age of 12, meaning that 11-year-olds needed babysitters. Indeed, a Connecticut mom was arrested for letting her 11-year-old wait in the car while she ran into the store.<sup>32</sup> This, despite the fact that the Red Cross begins training babysitters at the age of 11, which is the age at which my sisters and I began to babysit for neighbors. Let Grow lobbied successfully for Connecticut to change its criminal endangerment law in 2023. But other states' neglect laws remain ambiguous, allowing the authorities wide discretion to intervene.

The *Social Policy Report* essay notes, "Parents who fail to provide their children opportunities for physical and cognitive stimulation through independent activities are potentially 'neglecting' their children in those dimensions." So a lack of adult supervision should not be the touchstone for a neglect finding. In fact, maybe the state is engaging in neglect when it mandates overprotection.

Reasonable Childhood Independence laws clarify the meaning of neglect: Neglect is when a parent blatantly, willfully, or recklessly disregards a danger to a child so apparent that no reasonable person would allow the child to engage in that activity. In other words, it is not neglect when you simply take your eyes off your children. This clarification protects parents who give their kids more independence for its own sake, as well as those who do so out of economic necessity, like Debra Harrell.

In 2018, Utah became the first U.S. state to pass such a law. Since then, Texas, Oklahoma, Colorado, Illinois, Virginia, Connecticut, and Montana have too. These bills have usually had bipartisan sponsors, and they often passed unanimously. They appeal to people across the political spectrum because no one wants the government meddling in family life if there is not a compelling reason.

The government's job is to protect children from actual abuse, not from the everyday activities of childhood. States must revise their supervisory neglect laws. They must cease and desist all enforcement action against parents whose only offense is that they chose to give their children reasonable independence, appropriate for their age. Ask your state

legislators (or equivalent in other countries) to introduce a Reasonable Childhood Independence law.<sup>33</sup>

## 2. Encourage More Play in Schools

In the next chapter, I'll make the case that schools in the United States are starving children of playtime in order to make ever more room for academic training and test preparation, which backfires because play-deprived kids become anxious and unfocused. Ultimately, they learn less. Governors' offices and state education departments should take seriously the research on the benefits of free play in general and recess in particular.<sup>34</sup> Then they should mandate that schools give a lot more of it, including play opportunities before and after school, especially in elementary and middle school.<sup>35</sup>

## 3. Design and Zone Public Space with Children in Mind

If we want children to meet each other face-to-face and interact with the real world—not just screens—the world and its inhabitants have to be accessible to them. A world designed for automobiles is often not one that children find accessible. Cities and towns can do more to be sure that they have good sidewalks, crosswalks, and traffic lights. They can install traffic calming measures, and they can change their zoning to allow more mixed-use development. When commercial, recreational, and residential establishments are more mashed up together, there is more activity on the street and more places that children can get to on foot or by bike. But when the only way for a kid to get to a shop, park, or friend's house is by "parent taxi," more kids will end up at home on a screen. One study found that kids who can get to a playground by bike or foot are six times more likely to visit it than kids who need someone to drive them.<sup>36</sup> So scatter playgrounds throughout a neighborhood, and consider having a few of them be adventure playgrounds (see next chapter).

One innovative and inexpensive way that European cities are helping kids (and parents) to be more sociable is by blocking off the street in

front of a school for an hour before and after school.<sup>37</sup> On these temporarily car-free School Streets, parents mingle and kids play, even as congestion, pollution, and road danger go down. Cities can make this happen by easing the street closure permitting process. In our era of declining community and rising loneliness, cities and towns should make it easy for local residents to block off streets for block parties and other social reasons too, including Play Streets (streets closed to traffic, part time, so kids can play with each other, like old times).<sup>38</sup>

When considering transit, zoning laws, permits, and new construction, remember that kids are human beings. They want to be where the action is. Easily accessible mixed-use spaces where everyone, young and old, can hang out, see, be seen, do some playing, shopping, eating, flirting, and, when tired, bench sitting make everyone more engaged with the world beyond the screen.

## 4. More Vocational Education, Apprenticeships, and Youth Development Programs

The educational system in the United States has become ever more focused on academic training that leads to a college education. There has been a corresponding decline in course offerings and student participation in what is known as career and technical education, or CTE. These are courses with a lot of hands-on experience in areas such as shop, auto mechanics, agriculture, and business. Richard Reeves says the research is strongest on the benefits of sending boys to specialized high schools devoted to CTE. Boys in such schools saw big gains in their graduation rates and later earnings, compared with similar boys who attended traditional high schools, while girls did not show these particular benefits.<sup>39</sup> These findings are further evidence that standard schools are failing to engage many boys, leading to enormous wasted potential.

Apprenticeships have also been shown to be effective for helping young people make the transition from high school to paid employment. In a labor market in which people move around frequently, companies have little incentive to take on untrained young people, invest in them,