

# The Great Rewiring of Childhood

## Academy of Ideas

“The Great Rewiring of Childhood, in which the phone-based childhood replaced the play-based childhood, is the major cause of the international epidemic of adolescent mental illness.”

*Jonathan Haidt, The Anxious Generation*

The release of the iPhone in 2007 profoundly transformed how we interact and experience the world and so marked the dawn of a new era in human history. Today most people are constantly within arm’s reach of their phone and a significant portion of their waking hours are devoted to using these devices. Social media apps are among the most heavily used with some people spending hours a day on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok. Some believe this smartphone-social media ecosystem has improved our quality of life as it provides nearly limitless entertainment, makes it easier to communicate and connect with other people, creates business opportunities, and facilitates the sharing and consuming of information, pictures, and videos. Yet this ecosystem also has a dark side; it is addictive, and it calls forth the superficial, hostile, and narcissistic side of humanity. But perhaps worst of all, it is destroying the mental health of young people. In this video, drawing from the American sociologist Johnathan Haidt’s 2024 book, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, we explore why social media causes anxiety and depression in children and teens and why smartphone and tablet use has radically changed the nature of childhood for the worst.

“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.”

*Jonathan Haidt, The Anxious Generation*

Around 2010, rates of mental illness in Generation Z, or those born between the mid-1990s and early-2010s, suddenly and drastically increased in the Western world. Rates of depression in teenagers increased 150%. Rates of self-harm by young adolescent girls tripled between 2010 and 2020, and doubled for girls between the ages 15 to 19. In 2020, 1 in every 4 American teen girls had suffered a major depressive episode in the previous year. While a 2023 study of American university students discovered that 37% reported feeling anxious “always” or “most of the time”, and 31% felt anxious “about half the time”. This mental health epidemic has been largely confined to Gen Z as since 2010 the mental health of older generations has remained relatively unchanged.

“What on earth happened to teens in the early 2010s? Something big is happening, something changed in the lives of young people in the early 2010s that made their mental health plunge.”

*Jonathan Haidt, The Anxious Generation*

Given that the timing of Gen Z’s mental health decline coincides with the rise of the smartphone-social media ecosystem, an obvious hypothesis is that smartphones and social media are causing a mental health epidemic in young people. After all, Gen Z are the heaviest

users of smartphones and social media. A 2015 report by Pew Research found that 1 out of every 4 teens said they were online “almost constantly”, while in 2022 that number rose to 46%. In 2017, Jonathan Haidt was toying with the hypothesis that these technologies cause depression and anxiety, but at the time all the available evidence was correlational. There were studies which linked smartphone and social media use with mental health problems, but it was unclear whether these technologies caused depression and anxiety, or whether depressed and anxious individuals spent more time on their phones and social media. However, today it is clear, in the words of Haidt, that “*social media use does not just correlate with mental illness; it causes it.*” Or as Haidt continues:

“Now, as I write in 2023...there’s a lot more research...showing that social media harms adolescents...the rapid movement of adolescent social life onto social media platforms was a cause, not just a correlate, of the increase in depression, anxiety... and other mental health problems that began in the early 2010s.”

*Jonathan Haidt, The Anxious Generation*

Why are smartphones and social media causing mental health problems in younger people? To answer this question, we must identify what young people are missing out on because of their compulsive technology use; that being, a play-based childhood.

Throughout human history, children in all parts of the world and in all cultures have spent much of their free time playing with peers. This play-based childhood is not unique to humans; all young mammals instinctively gravitate to playing as it is essential for their development. Or as Haidt writes:

“Children need a great deal of free play to thrive. It’s an imperative that’s evident across all mammal species...Hundreds of studies on young rats, monkeys, and humans show that young mammals want to play, need to play, and come out socially, cognitively, and emotionally impaired when they are deprived of play.”

*Jonathan Haidt, The Anxious Generation*

The healthiest type of play is unsupervised, outdoor play with peers which involves sporadic risk taking, which the Norwegian professors Ellen Sandseter and Leif Kennair define as “*thrilling and exciting forms of play that involve a risk of physical injury.*” In engaging in risky play, children confront and overcome their fears and anxieties, learn to endure minor injuries, and challenge their perceived limits. For example, climbing a tree may stimulate anxiety, but by climbing it anyway children develop physical skills, resilience, problem-solving abilities, and a sense of accomplishment that helps them face future risks and obstacles with greater confidence. “*The small-scale challenges and setbacks that happen during play are like an inoculation that prepares children to face much larger challenges later.*”, observes Haidt. One of the reasons children naturally gravitate to risky play is because it has “anti-phobic effects.” In playfully engaging in activities that stimulate fear and anxiety, and occasionally getting hurt in the process, over time children become less anxious and fearful.

Unsupervised outdoor play with peers also helps children cultivate social skills, such as how to detect and respond to social cues, deal with teasing, bullying, and exclusion, and in the case of boys, how to channel their natural aggressive impulses towards socially constructive ends.

*“Play requires suppression of the drive to dominate and enables the formation of long-lasting cooperative bonds.”*, wrote the developmental psychologist Peter Gray.

For the first time in human history, the youth are not spending the majority of their leisure time playing outdoors with peers. Rather, most teens, as well as many children, are spending their free time with necks crooked downward staring at phones or tablets. According to a 2023 study, the average teen spends 6 to 8 hours a day in front of a screen, with 4.8 of the hours spent on social media. And as Haidt writes:

*“This is a profound transformation of human consciousness and relationships, and it occurred, for American teens, between 2010 and 2015. This is the birth of the phone-based childhood. It marks the definitive end of the play-based childhood.”*

*Jonathan Haidt, The Anxious Generation*

And as Haidt continues:

*“Many parents were relieved to find that a smartphone or tablet could keep a child happily engaged and quiet for hours. Was this safe? Nobody knew, but because everyone else was doing it, everyone just assumed that it must be okay.”*

*Jonathan Haidt, The Anxious Generation*

Excessive use of smartphones and tablets is not safe for children and teens. Time spent using these devices robs young people of a play-based childhood and submerges them in a virtual world which Haidt describes as “poisonous” for the mental health of children and adolescents.

The most obvious reason why a phone-based childhood is ruining the mental health of the youth is because many apps, most notably social media apps, are intentionally designed to be addictive. *“The creators of these apps use every trick in the psychologists’ tool kit to hook users as deeply as slot machines hook gamblers.”*, comments Haidt. Young people are more vulnerable to developing addictions because the frontal cortex, which gives us the ability to resist rewarding stimuli and delay gratification, is not fully developed until after the age of 20. Social media companies are aware of this vulnerability and they actively try to exploit it. In 2021, the whistleblower Frances Haugen released the Facebook Files which contained photos of slides from in-company presentations, one of which stated that *“teens are highly dependent on their temporal lobe where emotions, memory and learning, and the reward system reign supreme.”* A subsequent slide showed a picture of teen girl, and as Haidt notes,

*“...the presenters were not trying to protect the young woman in the center from overuse and addiction; their goal was to advise other Facebook employees on how to keep her “engaged” for longer with rewards, novelty, and emotions.”*

*Jonathan Haidt, The Anxious Generation*

And as Haidt continues:

*“When we gave children and adolescents smartphones in the early 2010s, we gave companies the ability to...[train] them like rats during their most sensitive years of brain rewiring. Those companies developed addictive apps that sculpted some very deep pathways in our children’s brains...By designing a firehose of 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.”

*Jonathan Haidt, The Anxious Generation*

In becoming addicted to apps at a young age, children and teenagers are missing out on the in-person interactions needed to develop social skills. Some argue that social media is augmenting our capacity to connect with other people; however, this is only true in terms of the quantity of connections. In terms of quality, social media connections are shallow at best. Spending hours alone scrolling through social media feeds, sending memes and emojis to friends, playing multiplayer video games with strangers online, and posting content to elicit likes and reactions from others, are not valid substitutes for real-world face-to-face social relationships. In these disembodied virtual interactions there is no opportunity to learn to interpret body language, read subtle vocal or facial cues, maintain eye contact, develop charisma, or empathize with the embodied emotions of others. Unlike real-world socialization, the use of social media does not require that one develop social skills and it offers little to no opportunity to form deep, lasting, mutually empathic relationships. The poor quality of online social interactions helps explain why many in Gen Z are lonelier and more socially handicapped than any other generation.

“This is the great irony of social media: the more you immerse yourself in it, the more lonely and depressed you become.”

*Jonathan Haidt, The Anxious Generation*

And as Haidt continues:

“We are physical, embodied creatures who evolved to use our hands, facial expressions, and head movements as communication channels, responding in real time to the similar movements of our partners. Gen Z is learning to pick emojis instead.”

*Jonathan Haidt, The Anxious Generation*

Smartphones and social media are also negatively impacting mental health by destroying the ability to focus. The 20th century psychologist William James noted that, since the higher cognitive capacities of the youth are not fully developed,

*“Sensitiveness to immediately exciting sensorial stimuli characterizes the attention of childhood and youth. . .the child seems to belong less to himself than to every object which happens to catch his notice.”*

By bombarding the mind with “*exciting sensorial stimuli*”, the smartphone-social media ecosystem is making it exceedingly difficult for young people to cultivate their attentional capacities. The way this is playing out was eerily anticipated in Kurt Vonnegut’s 1961 short story Harrison Bergeron.

In this story an egalitarian ideology has infected a society to such a degree that a constitutional amendment is passed that disallows anyone from being more skilled, intelligent, or capable than anyone else. To facilitate this enforced equality, the government’s “handicapper general” attaches an earpiece to above-average individuals which buzzes every 20 seconds in order to disrupt their focus. Considering that those in Gen Z receive an average of 192 notifications per day—roughly one every 5 minutes—and that older teen girls, the heaviest smartphone

users, are interrupted by 1 notification every minute, by carrying around a device that is hindering their ability to focus, “many members of Gen Z are now living in Kurt Vonnegut’s dystopia.” (Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*). They are spending their days in what William James called “the confused, dazed, scatterbrained state”, in which no skill can be developed, no knowledge absorbed, and nothing of worth achieved. At the critical junction between adolescence and adulthood, many in Gen Z find themselves stagnant and hence afflicted with depression and anxiety disorders. For as the English writer Colin Wilson observed:

“...stagnation is the beginning of mental illness, which propagates itself like the scum on a stagnant pond.”

Colin Wilson, *New Pathways in Psychology*

While the mental health of girls and boys is negatively affected by the addictive and attention destroying nature of the smartphone-social media ecosystem, this ecosystem is also affecting the genders in different ways. For example, social media is harming young girls more than boys for two reasons; firstly, girls use social media more than boys, and secondly, girls are more vulnerable to the negative effects of social comparison. The social status of a girl is closely tied to her physical appearance and thus her self-esteem is heavily influenced by the way she compares her looks to other girls she sees. As social media platforms are flooded with images and videos of women who either possess exceptional beauty or whose features are heavily altered by filters or photo editing apps, the more time a girl spends on social media, the more likely she is to develop a negative self-image which drives mental health problems. Or as Haidt writes:

“...social media exposes girls to hundreds or even thousands of images every day, many of which feature girls too good to be true, with perfect bodies living perfect lives. Exposure to so many images is sure to have a negative effect on comparison machines...The more time a girl spends on social media, the more likely she is to be depressed.”

*Jonathan Haidt, The Anxious Generation*

While girls are heavier users of social media than boys, boys still spend hours each day on social media on top of playing video games, browsing online forums, and watching pornography. This immersion in a virtual world is contributing to problems with depression and anxiety as well as to what Jonathan Haidt called “a failure to launch”. For example, young men in their 20s are more likely to live at home compared to women of the same age, and in the U.K. and the United States the vast majority of NEETs, which stands for “Not in Education, Employment, or Training”, are young men. There is even a growing movement of boys and young men who are so riddled with depression and anxiety that they spend most of their time isolated in the bedroom of their parents’ house. While being shut up in one’s room would have been torture to boys of previous generations, today many boys are compensating for their failures in the real world by living their life almost entirely online. Or as Haidt remarks regarding an American boy who retreated from the world into his room at the age of 12.

“Luca, however, found an online world just vivid enough to keep his mind from starving. Ten years later, he still plays video games and surfs the web all night. He sleeps all day.”

*Jonathan Haidt, The Anxious Generation*

Yet even boys who do not go to these extremes are still suffering from a screen-based childhood. In the past, due to their tendency to engage in unsupervised and risky play, boys between the ages of 10 and 19 had higher rates of hospitalization than all other age groups. Today, in contrast, in terms of rates of injury “*adolescent boys are now not much different from adolescent girls, or from men in their 50s and 60s.*” (*Jonathan Haidt, The Anxious Generation*) While on the surface this may seem to be a positive trend, there is a negative underside to it. Because boys are not engaging in risky play and confronting and overcoming small anxieties on a daily basis, their small anxieties are intensifying and developing into full blow anxiety disorders. Or as Haidt writes:

*“Imagine a childhood where all risk had been eliminated. Nobody ever felt the rush of adrenaline from climbing a tree when an adult had told them not to. Nobody ever experienced butterflies in their stomach as they mustered the courage to ask someone out. Picture a world where late-night outdoor adventures with friends were a thing of the past. In this childhood, there would be fewer bruises, broken bones, and broken hearts. It might sound like a safer world, but is it one you would want for your children?...something close to this is the world in which many members of Gen Z are growing up...these changes came about not because Gen Z is getting wiser, but because they are withdrawing from the physical world...they are engaging in less risk-taking overall—healthy as well as unhealthy—and therefore learning less about how to manage risks in the real world.”*

*Jonathan Haidt, The Anxious Generation*

Although the problems associated with a screen-based childhood are dire, fortunately the solution is simple – at least in theory. Teenagers need to be made aware of the dangers which smartphones, tablets, and social media pose to their mental health. Parents need to stop pacifying their children with screens – a practice that in the future may be regarded as a passive form of child abuse. And the screen-based childhood, which Haidt described as “*the largest uncontrolled experiment humanity has ever performed on its own children,*” needs to be thrown in the dustbin of history so that children return to a play-based childhood. For as Haidt writes:

*“Far more unsupervised play and childhood independence. That’s the way children naturally develop social skills, overcome anxiety, and become self-governing young adults.”*

*Jonathan Haidt, The Anxious Generation*