



The Anxious Generation

by Jonathan Haidt

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Tuesday Night Book Discussion

Tues, November 11 at 7:00PM, Aurelio's Pizza, 1466 W. Lake St.
Addison, IL

Author Bio

Jonathan Haidt (pronounced "Height") is the Thomas Cooley Professor of Ethical Leadership at New York University's Stern School of Business. He obtained his PhD in social psychology from the University of Pennsylvania in 1992 and taught at the University of Virginia for sixteen years. His research focuses on moral and political psychology, as described in his book *The Righteous Mind*. His latest book, *The Anxious Generation*, is a direct continuation of the themes explored in *The Coddling of the American Mind* (written with Greg Lukianoff). He writes the *After Babel* Substack.

Book Summary

In *The Anxious Generation*, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt (pronounced "height") lays out the facts about the epidemic of teen mental illness that hit many countries at the same time. He then investigates the nature of childhood, including why children need play and independent exploration to mature into competent, thriving adults. Haidt shows how the "play-based childhood" began to decline in the 1980s, and how it was finally wiped out by the arrival of the "phone-based childhood" in the early 2010s. He presents more than a dozen mechanisms by which this "great rewiring of childhood" has interfered with children's social and neurological development, covering everything from sleep deprivation to attention fragmentation, addiction, loneliness, social contagion, social comparison, and perfectionism. He explains why social media damages girls more than boys and why boys have been withdrawing from the real world into the virtual world, with disastrous consequences for themselves, their families, and their societies.

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/729231/the-anxious-generation-by-jonathan-haidt/>



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Book Reviews

A pitched argument against the "firehose of addictive content" aimed at children via technology. Psychologist Haidt, author of *The Righteous Mind* and co-author of *The Coddling of the American Mind*, turns to the disaffection of children rendered zombielike by their smartphones and social media. "The members of Gen Z are...the test subjects for a radical new way of growing up," he writes, their sensibilities formed by the instant gratifications and instant peer-pressure judgments delivered by online outlets. Before 2009, writes the author, social media use was largely harmless, mostly a means of keeping up with friends and family, without the toxicity inherent in being constantly subject to opinions given and received—a good way to get locked into "defend mode...on permanent alert for threats, rather than being hungry for new experiences." This corresponds to the shift, beginning in the 1980s, from what Haidt calls "play-based childhood" to "phone-based childhood," one effect of which is to remove children from the socialization they would otherwise have undergone simply by one-on-one play. It wasn't necessarily phones but overanxious parents who took down the sky-high monkey bars. However, coupled with the rapid rise of addictive technology, this drove children indoors and into anxieties and depressions of their own as their lives are "radically rewired." Haidt concludes by advocating a regime of free play and strictly monitored social media use, including not allowing children under high school age to have smartphones and forming parental associations that would essentially police for this kind of behavior. That program may seem draconian, especially to a 12- or 13-year-old, but Haidt argues persuasively that it's an essential defense against the assaults on mental health that social media inflict on unformed young minds. A strong case for tempering children's technological dependency in favor of fresh air and sunshine

—Kirkus Review

Portable telephones were originally celebrated as a way to stay connected to friends and family. But in the early 2010s, with the onset of smartphones and their easy access to the internet, children's brains were being effectively rewired, shifting from "play-based" to "phone-based." Parents, who worked to keep their children safe from outdoor play and predators, now allowed their kids to stroll unfettered through the internet. Excessive phone use can lead to social deprivation, sleep deprivation, attention fragmentation, and addiction. For young women, Haidt writes, it can lead to depression; for young men, it can lead to existing in their own separate realities. The author admits to some benefits of online use for children, including lower rates of injury and alcohol use and a measure of intellectual stimulation, but the pluses are overshadowed by the loss of social interactions and life experiences. Academic Haidt (*The Coddling of the American Mind*, 2018) backs up his claims with scientific studies and graphics, and presents plans to limit the effects of smartphones by large tech companies, schools, and parents. This is a practical look at a vital topic.

—Booklist

Discussion Questions

- 1..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?
2. What problems do smartphones, social media and screens solve in your family, and what problems do they create?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. How are your kids different online and offline?

PLAY:

6. 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?
7. Think back on your own childhood. What are your most thrilling memories? Could your child have a similar experience today?
8. What did you get from "just playing" as a kid?
9. "Free play" means playing without adults organizing or even supervising. What reservations do you have about allowing your own children more unsupervised time?
10. 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?

INDEPENDENCE:

11. 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?
12. What are some things you do for your children that they could start doing for themselves?
13. What are some things you do for your family that your children could start doing for you?
14. Think about a time when you were a child and something went wrong when no adult was around. How did you solve the problem?
15. How can you give your kids more opportunities to be part of the real world rather than the virtual one?
16. 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?

FOR YOU:

17. What problems do smartphones, social media and screens solve in your own life, and what problems do they create?
18. Do you have any tech rules for yourself? Do they work?



Discussion Questions

19. 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?

20. How are you different online and offline?

OVERALL:

21. In what ways can we better prepare our kids to wisely navigate the virtual world?

22. In what ways can we better prepare our kids to wisely navigate the real world?

23. 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?

24. 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?

<https://www.readinggroupguides.com/reviews/the-anxious-generation/guide>



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