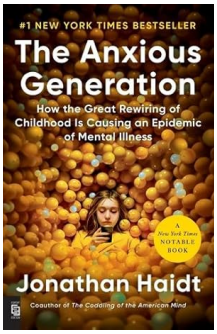


RENEW PARENT FORUM SPRING 2026

The Anxious Generation

Introduction

Imagine that your 10-year old daughter signed up to go to Mars.

- You look into the risks and find many, including radiation and the likely deformation that would result from a low-gravity environment.
- You would not let her go.
- Then you find out that the recruitment company didn't even require proof of parental permission.

This is basically what has happened with the smartphone.

"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." (P. 3)

"They hooked children during vulnerable developmental stages, while their brains were rapidly rewiring in response to incoming stimulation. This included social media companies, which inflicted their greatest damage on girls, and video game companies and pornography sites, sank their hooks deepest into boys." (P. 3)

The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) requires children under 13 to get parental consent before they can sign a contract with a company. Yet **40**% of American children under 13 have Instagram accounts.

"While the reward-seeking parts of the brain mature earlier, the frontal cortex—essential for self-control, delay of gratification, and resistance to temptation—is not up to full capacity until the mid-20s, and preteens are at a particularly vulnerable point in development." (P. 5)

“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.” (P. 6)

The second disastrous shift has been toward overprotecting children and restricting autonomy in the real world. Free play in children began to decline in the 1980s and accelerated in the 1990s.

The late 1980s began the transition from a “**play**-based” childhood to a “**phone**-based” childhood.

Haidt: **“My central claim in this book is that these two trends—overprotection in the real world and underprotection in the virtual world—are the major reasons why children born after 1995 became the anxious generation.”** (P. 9)

When Haidt talks about “the real world”, he is referring to relationships and social interactions that are:

1. **embodied** — we use our bodies to communicate, we are conscious of the bodies of others, and we respond to the bodies of others both consciously and unconsciously
2. **synchronous** — happening at the same time, with subtle cues about timing and turn taking
3. **one-to-one or one-to-several** in communication, with only one interaction happening at a given moment
4. **happening 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)

When Haidt talks about “the virtual world”, he is referring to relationships and social interactions that are:

1. **disembodied** — no body is needed, just language; partners could be artificial intelligences
2. **asynchronous** — happening via text-based posts and comments (video calls are synchronous)
3. **one-to-many communications**, broadcasting to a potentially vast audience; multiple interactions can be happening in parallel

4. **happening in communities that have a low bar for entry and exit**, so people can block others or just quit when they are not pleased; communities tend to be short-lived and relationships are often disposable

"Soon after teens got iPhones, they started getting more depressed. The heaviest users were also the most depressed, while those who spent more time in face-to-face activities, such as on sports teams and in religious communities, were the healthiest." (P. 14)

"The Anxious Generation is a book about how to reclaim human life for human beings in all generations." (P. 17)

Chapter 1: The Surge of Suffering

Parents attest to their constant Chapter with their children as they try to lay down rules and enforce limits on their device use. They often feel like they have lost their child.

Between 2010 and 2015, the social lives of American teens moved largely onto smartphones with continuous access to social media, online video games, and other internet-based activities. This "Great Rewiring of Childhood", Haidt argues, is the single largest reason for the tidal wave of adolescent mental illness that began in the early 2010s.

Across ages, cultures, and countries, girls and women suffer higher rates of **internalizing** disorders (disorders in which a person feels strong distress and experiences the symptoms inwardly, feeling emotions such as anxiety, fear, sadness and hopelessness), while boys and men suffer from higher rates of **externalizing** disorders, (disorders in which a person feels distress and turns the symptoms and responses outward, aimed at other people—conditions like conduct disorder, difficulty with anger management, and tendencies toward violence and excessive risk-taking behavior).

DSM-5-TR defines fear as "the emotional response to real or perceived threat" while anxiety is "anticipation of future threat".

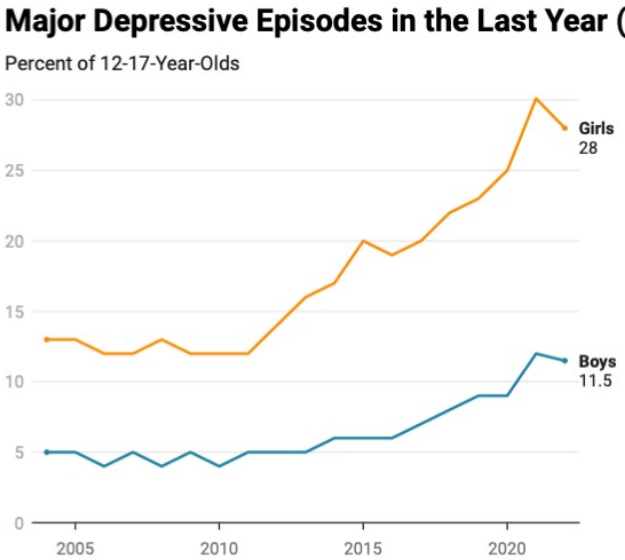
"Anxiety and its associated disorders seem to be the defining mental illness of young people today." (P. 27)

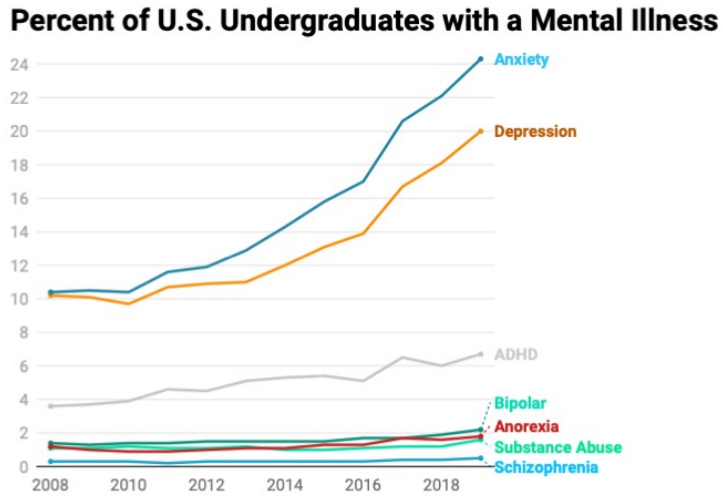
It is healthy to be anxious in the face of true danger, but when our alarm bell is on a hair trigger so that it is frequently activated by ordinary events—including many that pose no real threat—it keeps us in a perpetual state of distress.

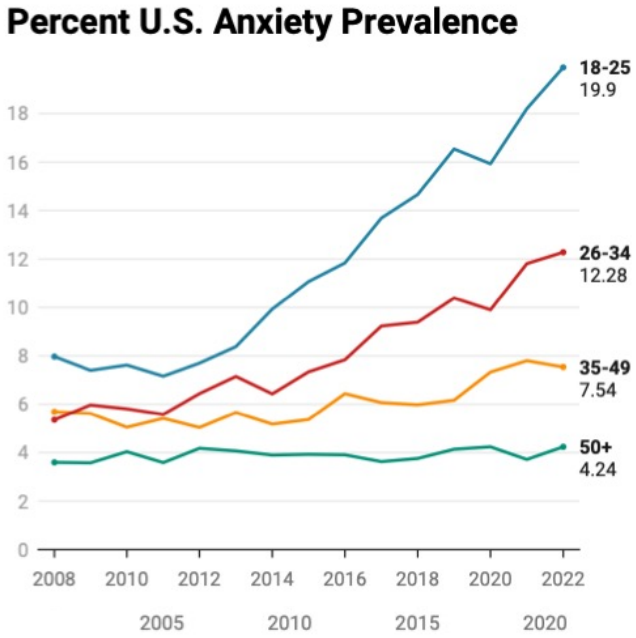
"People—and particularly adolescents—are often more concerned about the threat of 'social death' than physical death." (P. 28)

The second most common psychological disorder among young people today is depression.

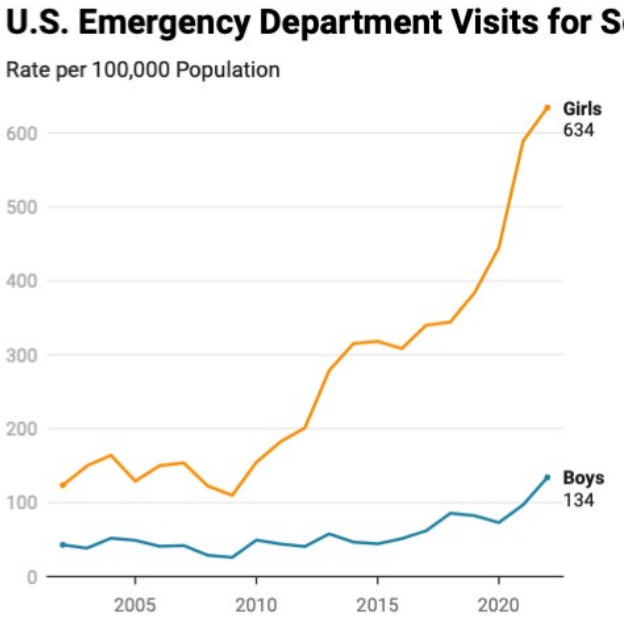
The first generation of Americans who went through puberty with smartphones (and the entire internet) in their hands became more anxious, depressed, self-harming, and suicidal. We now call that generation Gen Z, in contrast to the millennial generation, which had largely finished puberty when the Great Rewiring began in 2010.



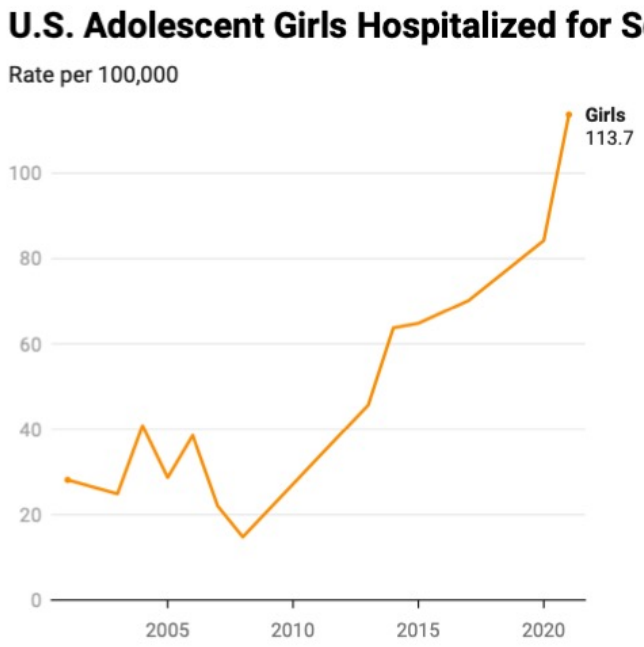




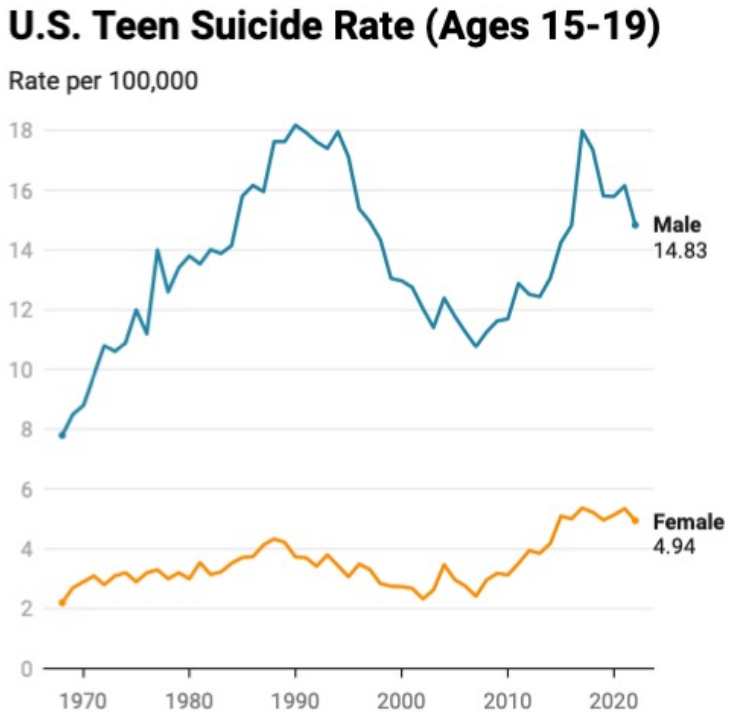
The tidal wave of anxiety, depression, and self-harm hit **girls** harder than boys, and it hit preteen girls hardest of all.



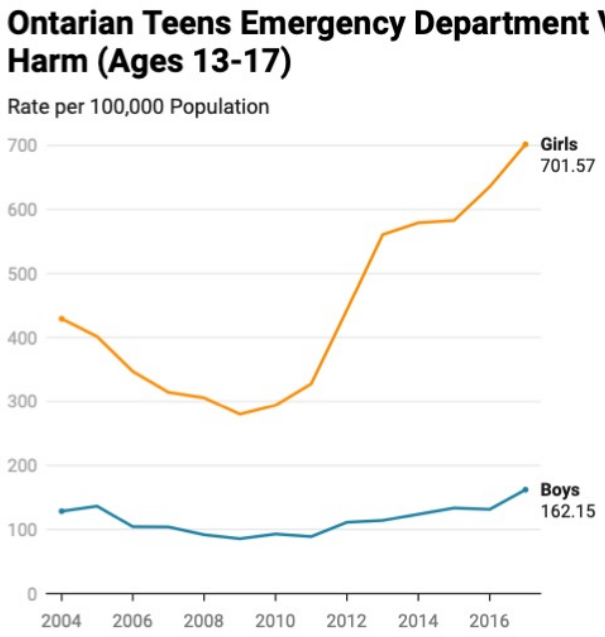
The mental health crisis has also hit **boys**. Their rates of depression and anxiety have also increased a lot, although usually not by as much as for girls. Boys' technology use and mental health difficulties are somewhat different from those of girls, as I'll show in chapter 7.



Suicide rates in the United States began rising around 2008 for adolescent boys and girls; they rose much higher in the 2010s.



The increase in suffering was not limited to the United States. The same pattern is seen at roughly the same time among teens in the U.K., Canada, and other major Anglosphere countries, and also in the five Nordic nations. Feelings of alienation in school rose after



2012 across the Western world. Data is less abundant in non-Western nations, and the patterns there are less clear.

By 2016, **79**% of teens owned a smartphone, as did **28**% of children between the ages of 8 and 12.

A 2015 report by Pew Research shows that 1 out of every 4 teens said that they were online "almost constantly." By 2022, that number had doubled to 46%.

No other theory has been able to explain why rates of anxiety and depression surged among adolescents in so many countries at the same time and in the same way (economic difficulties, climate change, wars, etc.). Other factors, of course, contribute to poor mental health, but the unprecedented rise between 2010 and 2015 cannot be explained by the global financial crisis, nor by any set of events that happened in the United States or in any other particular country.

Chapter 2: What Children Need to Do in Childhood

“After the Great Rewiring…it became common for adolescents to spend most of their waking hours interacting with a smartphone, consuming content from strangers as well as friends, playing mobile games, watching videos, and posting on social media. By 2015, adolescents had a lot less time and motivation to get together in person.” (P. 50)

Human childhood is very different from that of any other animal. Children's brains grow to 90% of full size by age 5, but then take a long time to configure themselves. This slow-growth childhood is an adaptation for cultural learning. Childhood is an apprenticeship for learning the skills needed for success in one's culture.

Free play is as essential for developing social skills, like conflict resolution, as it is for developing physical skills. But play-based childhoods were replaced by phone-based childhoods as children and adolescents moved their social lives and free time onto internet-connected devices.

Gray defines “free play” as “activity that is freely chosen and directed by the participants and undertaken for its own sake, not consciously pursued to achieve ends that are distinct from the activity itself.” (P. 52)

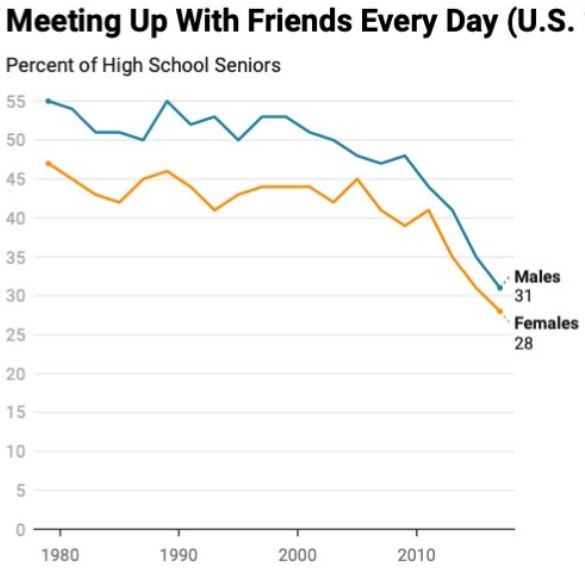
“A key feature of free play is that mistakes are generally not very **costly**.” (P. 53)

“**Experience**, not information, is the key to emotional development.” (P. 53)

Children learn through play to connect, synchronize, and take turns. They enjoy attunement and need enormous quantities of it. Attunement and synchrony bond pairs, groups, and whole communities. Social media, in contrast, is mostly asynchronous and performative. It inhibits attunement and leaves heavy users starving for social connection.

Even if the content on social media sites could somehow be filtered effectively to remove obviously harmful material, the addictive design of these platforms reduces the time available for face-to-face play in the real world.

Surveys show that unstructured time with friends plummeted in the exact years that adolescents moved from basic phones to smartphones—the early 2010s.



Children who are deprived of this joyful, mutually trusting social experience often face emotional difficulties and exhibit erratic behavior in their later years.

By 2014, nearly a third of teen girls were spending over 20 hours a week on social media sites. That's half of a full-time job.

Children are not the only ones being distracted from real world engagement. Pew Research has found that 17% of American parents report they are often distracted by their phone when spending time with their child, with another 52% saying they are sometimes distracted.

Children are born with two innate learning programs that help them to acquire their local culture. **Conformist** bias motivates them to copy whatever seems to be most common. **Prestige** bias motivates them to copy whoever seems to be the most accomplished and prestigious. Social media platforms, which are engineered for engagement, hijack social learning and drown out the culture of one's family and local community while locking children's eyes onto influencers of questionable value.

Our children are imitating the wrong people…

"Prestige-based social media platforms have hacked one of the most important learning mechanisms for adolescents, diverting their time, attention, and copying behavior away from a variety of role models with whom they could develop a mentoring relationship that would help them succeed in their real-world communities.

Instead, beginning in the early 2010s, millions of Gen Z girls collectively aimed their most powerful learning systems at a small number of young women whose main excellence seems to be amassing followers to influence. At the same time, many Gen Z boys aimed their social learning systems at popular male influencers who offered them visions of masculinity that were also quite extreme and potentially inapplicable to their daily lives." (P. 61)

Social learning occurs throughout childhood, but there may be a **sensitive** period for cultural learning that spans roughly ages 9 to 15. Lessons learned and identities formed in these years are likely to imprint, or stick, more than at other ages. These are the crucial sensitive years of puberty.

So what happens to American children who generally get their first smartphone around the age of 11 and then get socialized into the cultures of Instagram, TikTok, video games, and online life for the rest of their teen years?

Gen Z was the first generation to go through puberty and the sensitive period for cultural learning on smartphones.

For **girls**, the worst years for using social media were 11 to 13; for **boys**, it was 14 to 15.

As childhood was rewired—especially between 2010 and 2015—adolescents became more anxious, depressed, and fragile.

Chapter 3: Discover Mode and the Need for Risky Play

In recent decades, America and many other Western nations made two contradictory choices about children's safety, and both were wrong. We decided that the real world was so full of dangers that children should not be allowed to explore it without adult supervision, even though the risks to children from crime, violence, drunk drivers, and most other sources have dropped steeply since the 1990s. At the same time, it seemed like too much of a bother to design and require age-appropriate guardrails for kids online, so we left children free to wander through the Wild West of the virtual world, where threats to children abounded.

In recent decades, parents have had a powerful fear that their child will fall into the hands of a sex predator. But sex 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.

Isabel Hogben, a 14-year old girl from Rhode Island, wrote an essay in The Free Press demonstrating how American parents are focusing on the wrong threats:

I was ten years old when I watched porn for the first time. I found myself on Pornhub, which I stumbled across by accident and returned to out of curiosity. The website has no age verification, no ID requirement, not even a prompt asking me if I was over 18. The site is easy to find, impossible to avoid, and has become a frequent rite of passage for kids my age. Where was my mother? In the next room, making sure I was eating nine differently colored fruits and vegetables on the daily. She was attentive, nearly a helicopter parent, but I found online porn anyway. So did my friends.

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

The human brain contains two subsystems that put it into two common modes: **discover** mode (for approaching opportunities) and **defend** mode (for defending against threats). Young people born after 1995 are more likely to be stuck in defend mode, compared to those born earlier. They are on permanent alert for threats, rather than being hungry for new experiences. They are anxious.

All children are by nature antifragile. Just as the immune system must be exposed to germs, and trees must be exposed to wind, children require exposure to setbacks, failures, shocks, and stumbles in order to develop strength and self-reliance.

Overprotection interferes with this development and renders young people more likely to be fragile and fearful as adults. This fragility began to show up with Gen Z students as they headed off to college.

As soon as Gen Z arrived on campus, college counseling centers were overwhelmed. The previously exuberant culture of millennial students in discover mode gave way to a more anxious culture of Gen Z students in defend mode. Books, words, speakers, and ideas that caused little or no controversy in 2010 were, by 2015, said to be harmful, dangerous, or traumatizing.

What emerged on campus as emotional safety, in contrast, was a much broader concept that came to mean this: I should not have to experience negative emotions because of what someone else said or did. I have a right not to be "triggered."

Kids must have a great deal of free play to develop, and they benefit from risky physical play, which has anti-phobic effects. Kids seek out the level of risk and thrill that they are ready for, in order to master their fears and develop competencies. Risk-taking online may not have comparable anti-phobic effects.

In the 1980s and especially the 1990s, parents in Anglo countries became more fearful for many reasons, including changes in the media ecosystem and news cycle. They lost trust in each other, they started spending far more time supervising their own children, and they did more parenting in defend mode, seeing risks and threats everywhere.

The worship of "safety" above all else is called **safetyism**. It is dangerous because it makes it harder for children to learn to care for themselves and to deal with risk, conflict, and frustration.

"We've created a safe, nonjudgmental environment that will leave your child ill-prepared for real life."

The attachment system helps children learn the skills they'll need to reach adulthood while retreating to their "secure base" when they feel threatened. Fearful parenting keeps children on home base too much, preventing them from having the experiences they need to grow strong and to develop a secure attachment style.

According to a 2015 report from the Pew Research Center parents (on average) say children should be at least 10 years old to play unsupervised in their own front yard. They say that kids should be at least 12 years old before being allowed to stay alone in their own home unsupervised for one hour. They say that kids should be 14 before being allowed to go, unsupervised, to a public park. And these respondents include the same Gen X and baby boom parents who say gleefully and gratefully, that they were let out, in a much more dangerous era, at ages 6, 7, or 8.

Children are most likely to thrive when they have a play-based childhood in the real world. They are less likely to thrive when fearful parenting and a phone-based childhood deprive them of opportunities for growth.

Chapter 4: Puberty and the Blocked Transition to Adulthood

The human brain reaches **90**% of its adult size by age 5.

Early puberty is a period of rapid brain rewiring, second only to the first few years of life. Neural pruning and myelination are occurring at a very rapid rate, guided by the adolescent's experiences. We should be concerned about those experiences and not let strangers and algorithms choose them.

Safetyism is an experience blocker. When we make children's safety a quasi-sacred value and don't allow them to take any risks, we block them from overcoming anxiety, learning to manage risk, and learning to be self-governing, all of which are essential for becoming healthy and competent adults.

Smartphones are a second kind of experience blocker. Once they enter a child's life, they push out or reduce all other forms of non-phone-based experience, which is the kind that their experience-expectant brains most need.

Rites of passage are the curated sets of experiences that human societies arrange to help adolescents make the transition to adulthood. Van Gennep noted that these rites usually have a separation phase, a transformation phase, and a reincorporation phase.

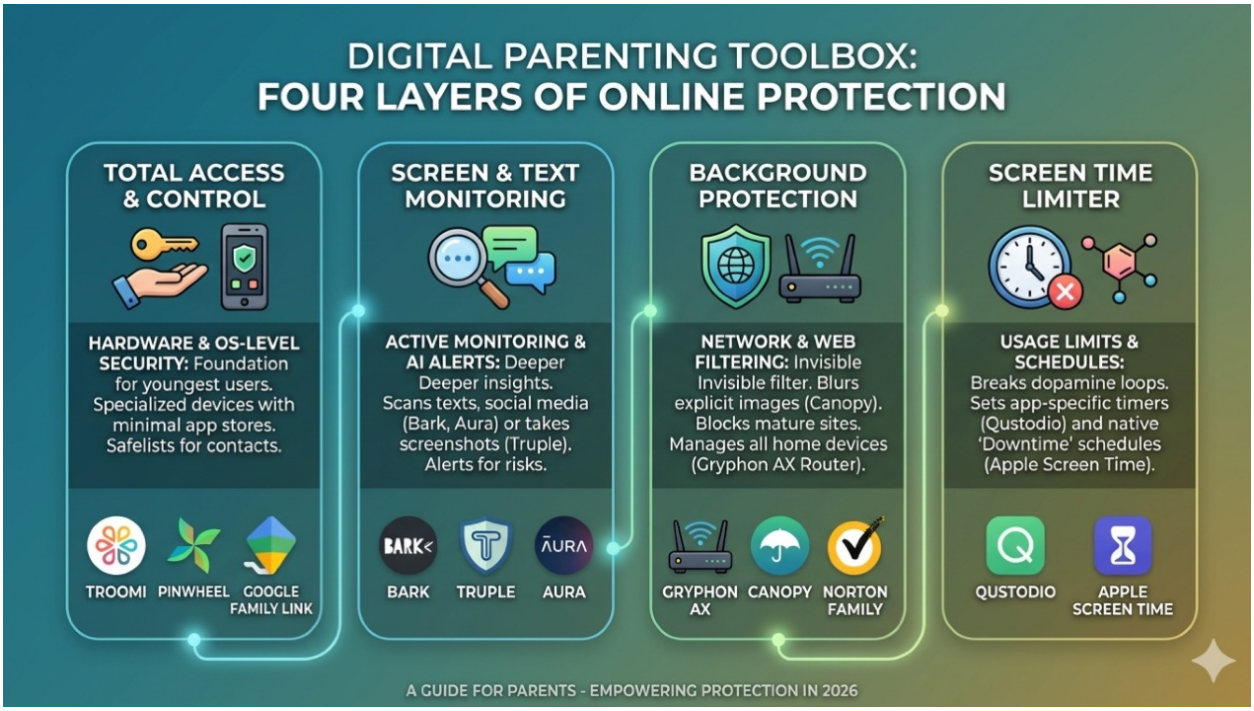
Western societies have eliminated many rites of passage, and the digital world that opened up in the 1990s eventually buried most milestones and obscured the path to adulthood. Once children began spending much or most of their time online, the inputs to their developing brains became undifferentiated torrents of stimuli with no age grading or age restrictions.

Western youth are delaying rites of passage that Gen X considered essential steps to adulthood. Many Gen Xers got their driver's license on the day of their 16th birthday.

At Renew, we are exploring ways the reintroduce new rites of passage into the lives of our children and youth.

A society that is large, diverse, and secular (such as the United States or Canada) might still agree to a set of milestones that mark stepwise increases in freedoms and responsibilities.

Haidt suggests linking even-year birthdays from ages 6 to 18 to increased **freedoms** and **responsibilities**. (See PP. 107-108)



Chapter 5: The Four Foundational Harms: Social Deprivation, Sleep Deprivation, Attention Fragmentation, and Addiction

Haidt shares the story of his 6-year old daughter while on vacation in Vermont: “Daddy, can you take the iPad away from me? I’m trying to take my eyes off of it but I can’t.”

By the early 2010s, our phones had transformed from Swiss Army knives, which we pulled out when we needed a tool, to platforms upon which companies competed to see who could hold on to eyeballs the longest.

Social media has constantly evolved to make this happen more effectively, with like buttons, retweet buttons, algorithmically curated news feeds, push notifications and front-facing cameras.

Pew Research finds that a third of teens say they are on one of the major social media sites “almost constantly,” and 45% of teens report that they use the internet “almost constantly.”

The sheer amount of time that adolescents spend with their phones is staggering, even compared with the high levels of screen time they had before the invention of the iPhone. Studies of time use routinely find that the average teen reports spending more than seven hours a day on screen-based leisure activities (not including school and homework).

The opportunity cost of a phone-based childhood refers to everything that children do less of once they get unlimited round-the-clock access to the internet.

Haidt identifies four foundational harms of the phone-based childhood. These are profound changes to childhood caused by the rapid technological shift of the early 2010s. Each one is foundational because it affects the development of multiple social, emotional, and cognitive abilities.

The first foundational harm is **social deprivation**. When American adolescents moved onto smartphones, time with friends in face- to-face settings plummeted immediately, from 122 minutes per day in 2012 down to 67 minutes per day in 2019. Time with friends dropped further because of COVID restrictions, but Gen Z was already socially distanced before COVID restrictions were put in place.

Jean Twenge has shown that teens who spend more time using social media are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, and other disorders, while teens who spend more time with groups of young people (such as playing team **sports** or participating in **religious communities**) have better mental health.

A 2014 survey of children ages 6-12, conducted by Highlights magazine, found that **62**% of children reported that their parents were "often distracted" when the child tried to talk with them. When they were asked the reasons why their parents were distracted, cell phones were the top response. Parents know that they are shortchanging their own children.

"A 2020 Pew survey found that **68**% of parents said that they sometimes or often feel distracted by their phones when they are spending time with their children. Those numbers were higher for parents who were younger and who were college educated." (P. 122)

If we parents at Renew are ever going to succeed in having our children use technology responsibly, we need to set the example.

The second fundamental harm is **sleep deprivation**. As soon as adolescents moved from basic phones to smartphones, their sleep declined in both quantity and quality, around the developed world. Longitudinal studies show that smartphone use came first and was followed by sleep deprivation.

Sleep deprivation is extremely well studied, and its effects are far reaching. They include depression, anxiety, irritability, cognitive deficits, poor learning, lower grades, more accidents, and more deaths from accidents.

One experiment found that adolescents who restricted their use of screen devices after 9 p.m. on school nights for two weeks showed increased total sleep time, earlier sleep onset times, and improved performance on a task that required focused attention and quick reactions.

"When your sleep is truncated or disturbed, you're more likely to become depressed and develop behavioral problems." (P. 125)

The third fundamental harm is **attention fragmentation**. Attention is the ability to stay on one mental road while many off-ramps beckon. Staying on a road, staying on a task, is a feature of maturity and a sign of good executive function. But smartphones are kryptonite for attention.

When you add it all up, the average number of notifications on young people's phones from the top social and communication apps amounts to 192 alerts per day, according to one study. The average teen, who now gets only seven hours of sleep per night, therefore gets about 11 notifications per waking hour, or one every five minutes.

And that's just for the apps that are about communication. When we add in the dozens of other apps for which they have not turned off push notifications, the number of interruptions grows far higher.

And we're still only talking about the average teen. If we zoom in on heavy users, such as older teen girls, who use texting and social media apps far more often than any other group, we are now in the ballpark of **one** interruption every **minute**.

Many of us will interrupt a face-to-face conversation to respond to a notification.
Our teens are losing their ability to **focus**.

“Attention is a choice we make to stay on one task, one line of thinking, one mental road, even as attractive off-ramps beckon. When we fail to make that choice and allow ourselves to be frequently sidetracked, we end up in ‘the confused, dazed, scatterbrained state’ that [psychologist William] James said is the opposite of attention.” (P. 127)

Capturing the child’s attention with “immediately exciting sensorial stimuli” is the goal of app designers, and they are very good at what they do.

There is evidence that the fragmentation of attention in early adolescence caused by problematic use of social media and video games may interfere with the development of executive function.

The fourth fundamental harm is **addiction**. The behaviorists discovered that learning, for animals, is “the wearing smooth of a path in the brain.” The developers of the most successful social media apps used advanced behaviorist techniques to “hook” children into becoming heavy users of their products.

“We know that Facebook intentionally hooked teens using behaviorist techniques thanks to the Facebook Files—the trove of internal documents and screenshots of presentations brought out by the whistleblower Frances Haugen in 2021.” (P. 133)

Dopamine release is pleasurable, but it does not trigger a feeling of **satisfaction**. Rather, it makes you want more of whatever you did to trigger the release.

The addiction researcher Anna Lembke says that the universal symptoms of withdrawal are “anxiety, irritability, insomnia, and dysphoria.” She and other researchers find that many adolescents have developed behavioral addictions that are very much like the way that people develop addictions to slot machine gambling, with profound consequences for their well-being, their social development, and their families.

In her book, Dopamine Nation, researcher Anne Lembke explains that in the 2010s she began treating teenagers with digital addictions. Like people with heroin and cocaine addictions, those addicted to digital activities found that “nothing feels good anymore” when they were not doing their preferred activity.

When we put these four foundational harms together, they explain why **mental health** got so much worse so suddenly as soon as childhood became phone-based.

Chapter 6: Why Social Media Harms Girls More Than Boys

STORY:
Alexis Spence, a Long Island girl born in 2002, got her first iPad for Christmas in 2012 when she was ten, using it mostly to play Webkinz. She secretly joined Instagram at age 11 despite her parents' strict rules, quickly becoming captivated by the platform. Within months, the app's content shifted toward harmful dieting and pro-anorexia material, contributing to severe mental health struggles that led to hospitalization and years of battling depression and eating disorders. (Read the detailed story, PP. 143-144)

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Social media harms **girls** more than boys. Correlational studies show that heavy users of social media have higher rates of depression and other disorders than light users or nonusers. The correlation is larger and clearer for girls: Heavy users are three times as likely to be depressed as nonusers.

"Around 2013, psychiatric wards in the United States and other Anglo countries began to fill disproportionately with girls." (P. 145)

"Girls who say that they spend five or more hours each weekday on social media are three times as likely to be depressed as those who report no social media time." (P. 147)

Experimental studies show that social media use is a **cause**, not just a correlate, of anxiety and depression. When people are assigned to reduce or eliminate social media for three weeks or more, their mental health usually improves. Several "quasi-experiments" show that when Facebook came to campuses, or when high-speed internet came to regions and provinces, mental health declined, especially for girls and young women.

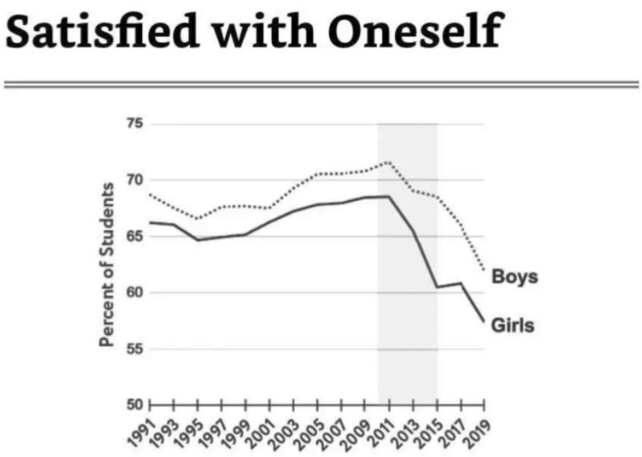
By 2015, one in seven American girls had reach the astronomical level of spending more than 40 hours per week using social media platforms.

Girls use social media a lot more than boys, and they prefer visually oriented platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, which are worse for **social comparison** than primarily text-based platforms such as Reddit.

Two major categories of motivations are **agency** (the desire to stand out and have an effect on the world) and **communion** (the desire to connect and develop a sense of belonging). Boys and girls both want each of these, but there is a gender difference that emerges early in children's play: Boys choose more agency activities; girls choose more communion activities. Social media appeals to the desire for communion, but it often ends up frustrating it.

There are at least four reasons why social media harms girls more than boys.

The first is that girls are more sensitive to **visual** comparisons, especially when other people praise or criticize one's face and body. Visually oriented social media platforms that focus on images of oneself are ideally suited to pushing down a girl's "sociometer" (the internal gauge of where one stands in relation to others). Girls are also more likely to develop "socially prescribed perfectionism," in which a person tries to live up to impossibly high standards held by others or by society.



The Wall Street Journal reports that "teens blame Instagram for increases in the rate of anxiety and depression.... This reaction was unprompted and consistent across all groups."

The second reason is that girls' aggression is often expressed in attempts to harm the **relationships** and **reputations** of other girls, whereas boys' aggression is more likely to be expressed in physical ways. Social media has offered girls endless ways to damage other girls' relationships and reputations.

The third reason is that girls and women more readily share **emotions**. When everything moved online and girls became hyperconnected, girls with anxiety or depression might

have influenced many other girls to develop anxiety and depression. Girls are also more vulnerable to "sociogenic" illnesses, which means illnesses caused by social influence rather than from a biological cause.

In a study and follow-up study by Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler, the research demonstrated that depression was significantly more contagious than happiness or good health and that depression only spread among women. Emotional contagions are very real for girls.

The prestige bias we learned about earlier means that the way to gain followers and likes on social media is to be more extreme, so those who present with more extreme symptoms are likely to rise fastest, making them models that everyone else locks onto for social learning.

The fourth reason is that the internet has made it easier for men to approach and stalk girls and women and to behave badly toward them while avoiding accountability. When preteen girls open social media accounts, they are often followed and contacted by older men, and they are pressured by boys in their school to share nude photographs of themselves.

Brushes with sexual predators are a larger part of internet life for girls than they are for boys. Sexual predation and rampant sexualization mean that girls and young women need to be warier, online, than most boys and young men.

PARENTS:
We need to teach our girls the biblical value of **modesty**. In a world where girls are being baited to post nudes or scantily clad photos of themselves, we need to be extra vigilant about what our daughters are posting online.

Social media is a trap that ensnares more girls than boys. It lures people in with the promise of connection and communion, but then it multiplies the number of relationships while reducing their quality, therefore making it harder to spend time with a few close friends in real life. This may be why loneliness spiked so sharply among girls in the early 2010s, while for boys the rise was more gradual.

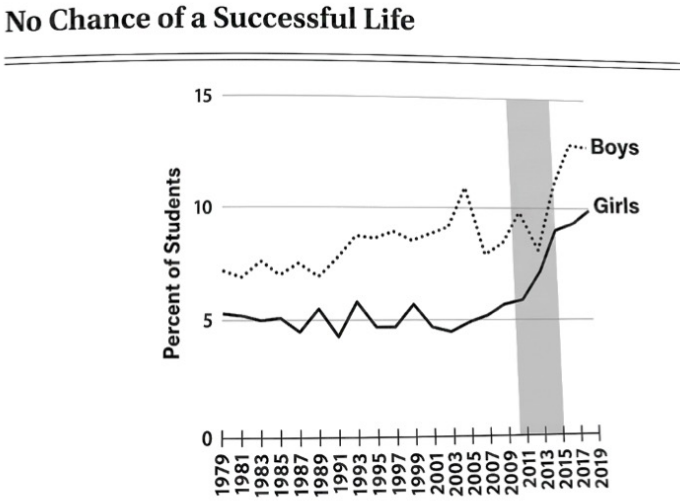
"This is the great irony of social media: the more you immerse yourself in it, the more lonely and depressed you become." (P. 170)

Chapter 7: What Is Happening to Boys?

Like girls, boys got more depressed and anxious in the early 2010s, in many countries. Unlike girls, boys experienced a slow decline since the 1970s in achievement and engagement in school, work, and family life.

Boys and young men withdrew much of their time and effort from the **physical** world (which was increasingly opposed to unsupervised play, exploration, and risk-taking) and invested it in the rapidly expanding virtual world.

Boys are at greater risk than girls of "failure to launch." They are more likely to become young adults who are "Not in Education, Employment, or Training." Some Japanese men developed an extreme form of lifelong withdrawal to their bedrooms: they are called hikikomori.



In 1972, women earned only **42**% of bachelor's degrees. By 1982, women were just as likely as men to graduate from college. But for the next 20 years, women's enrollment rose rapidly while men's did not, so that by 2019 the gap had reversed: Women earned **59**% of bachelor's degrees, while men earned just 41%.

It's not just college completion. Richard Reeves (author of Of Boys and Men) shows that at every level of education, from kindergarten through PhD, girls are leaving boys in the dust.

As Reeves notes, **"A world of floundering men in unlikely to be a world of flourishing women."**

In the early 2010s, American teen boys' thinking patterns shifted from what they had traditionally been (higher rates of externalizing cognitions and behaviors than internalizing) to a pattern more commonly shown by girls (higher rates of internalizing). At the same time, boys also began to shun **risk** (more so than happened for girls).

While this trend has some positive outcomes (such as less teenage pregnancy, drinking and speeding tickets), there is reason for concern. Many are concerned that men are taking fewer risks in general, something that historically has characterized healthy masculinity.

As boys engaged in fewer risky activities outdoors or away from home, and began spending more time at home on screens, their mental health did not decline in the 1990s and 2000s. But something changed in the early 2010s, and their mental health then began to decline.

Once boys got **smartphones**, they—like girls—moved even more of their social lives online, and their mental health declined.

For boys, their time spent with friends started declining in the early 2000s, with an acceleration after 2010.

One way that smartphones—amplified by high-speed internet—have affected boys' lives is by providing unlimited, free, hardcore **pornography** accessible anytime, anywhere. Porn is an example of how tech companies have made it easy for boys to satisfy powerful evolved desires without having to develop any skills that would help them make the transition to adulthood.

"Perhaps as much as 40% of all internet traffic in the late 1990s was porn." (P. 187)

"A Swedish study found that 11% of boys were daily consumers in 2004 and that number had increased to **24**% by 2014." (P. 187)

"Several studies indicate that after watching porn, heterosexual men find real women less attractive, including their own partners." (P. 188)

“Porn separates the evolved lure (sexual pleasure) from its real-world reward (a sexual relationship), potentially making boys who are heavy users turn into men who are less able to find sex, love, intimacy, and marriage in the real world.” (P. 189)

Video games offer boys and girls a number of benefits, but there are also harms, especially for the subset of boys (in the ballpark of 7%) who end up as problematic or addicted users. For them, video games do seem to cause declining mental and physical health, family strife, and difficulties in other areas of life.

“A Canadian judge ruled in 2023 that a group of parents could sue Epic Games for the way that its game Fortnite addicted their sons and took over the boys” lives, leading them to skip eating, showering and sleeping for extended periods.” (P. 191)

As with social media for girls, spending hours “connecting” with others online produces an increase in the **quantity** of social interactions and a decrease in the **quality** of social relationships. Boys, like girls, became lonelier during the Great Rewiring. Some boys use video games to strengthen their real-world packs, but for many others, video games made it easier for them to retreat to their bedrooms rather than doing the hard work of maturing in the real world.

“7% of adolescent boys can be classified as having “internet gaming disorder.”

Another major harm associated with video games is that they impose a large **opportunity** cost; they take up an enormous amount of time.

“In 2000, 28% of 12th-grade boys reported that they often feel lonely. By 2019, that had risen to 35%. This is symptomatic of a broader “friendship recession” among men in the United States. In the 1990s, only 3% of American men reported having no close friends. By 2021, that number had risen fivefold, to 15%.” (P. 193)

The Great Rewiring of Childhood pulled young people out of real-world communities, including their own families, and created a new kind of childhood lived in multiple rapidly shifting networks. One inevitable result was anomie, or normlessness, because stable and binding moralities cannot form when everything is in flux, including the members of the network.

As the sociologist Émile Durkheim showed, anomie breeds despair and suicide. This may be why boys and girls, who followed different paths through the Great Rewiring, ended up in the same place, with a sudden and rapid increase in the feeling that their lives were meaningless.

Chapter 8: Spiritual Elevation and Degradation

Haidt:
"I think I can best convey what is happening to us by using a word rarely used in the social sciences: spirituality. The phone-based life produces spiritual degradation, not just in adolescents, but in all of us."

When people see morally beautiful actions, they feel as though they have been lifted up—elevated on a vertical dimension that can be labeled divinity. When people see morally repulsive actions, they feel as though they have been pulled downward, or degraded.

A phone-based life generally pulls people downward. It changes the way we think, feel, judge, and relate to others. It is incompatible with many of the behaviors that religious and spiritual communities practice, some of which have been shown to improve happiness, well-being, trust, and group cohesion, according to researchers such as David DeSteno. Haidt describes six such practices.

First, Émile Durkheim showed that human beings move up and down between two levels: the **profane** and the **sacred**. The profane is our ordinary self-focused consciousness. The sacred is the realm of the collective. Groups of individuals become a cohesive community when they engage in rituals that move them in and out of the realm of the sacred together. The virtual world, in contrast, gives no structure to time or space and is entirely profane. This is one reason why virtual communities are not usually as satisfying or meaning-giving as real-world communities.

Second, religious rituals always involve **bodily** movement with symbolic significance, often carried out synchronously with others. Eating together has a special power to bond people together. The virtual world is, by definition, disembodied, and most of its activities are conducted asynchronously.

Third, many religions and spiritual practices use stillness, silence, and **meditation** to calm the "jumping monkey" of ordinary consciousness and open the heart to others, God, or enlightenment. Meditation has been shown to promote well-being, even brief regular meditation in fully secular contexts. The phone-based life, in contrast, is a never-ending series of notifications, alerts, and distractions, fragmenting consciousness and training us to fill every moment of consciousness with something from our phones.

Fourth, a defining feature of spirituality is **self-transcendence**. There is a network of brain structures (the default mode network) that becomes less active during moments

of self-transcendence, as if it were the neural basis of profane consciousness. Social media keeps the focus on the self, self-presentation, branding, and social stand- ing. It is almost perfectly designed to prevent self-transcendence.

Fifth, most religions urge us to be less **judgmental**, but social media encourages us to offer evaluations of others at a rate never before possible in human history. Religions advise us to be slower to anger and quicker to forgive, but social media encourages the opposite.

Sixth, the grandeur of **nature** is among the most universal and easily accessible routes to experiencing awe, an emotion that is closely linked to spiritual practices and progress. A simple walk in a natural setting can cause self-transcendence, especially if one pays close attention and is not attending to a phone. Awe in nature may be especially valuable for Gen Z because it counteracts the anxiety and self-consciousness caused by a phone-based childhood.

"From a spiritual perspective, social media is a disease of the mind." (P. 211)

There is a "God-shaped hole" in every human heart. Or, at least, many people feel a yearning for meaning, connection, and spiritual elevation. A phone-based life often fills that hole with trivial and degrading content. The ancients advised us to be more deliberate in choosing what we expose ourselves to.

Chapter 9: Preparing for Collective Action

Collective action problems (social dilemmas) require **collective** action solutions.

"Few parents want their preteens to disappear into a phone, but the vision of their child being a social outcast is even more distressing. Many parents therefore give in and buy their child a smartphone at age 11, or younger." (P. 223)

If we act collectively, we can roll back the phone-based childhood and restore, to some degree, a healthier play-based childhood.

Chapter 10: What Governments and Tech Companies Can Do Now

Governments at all levels need to change policies that are harming adolescent mental health and support policies that would improve it. In the United States, governments at the state and local level are partly responsible for the overprotection of children in the real world (via vast overreach of vague neglect laws), and the federal government is partly responsible for the underprotection of children in the virtual world (by passing an ineffective law in 1998 and failing to update it as the dangers of life online became more apparent).

To correct underprotection online, national and federal governments should enact laws of the sort first passed in the U.K., which require companies to treat minors differently than adults, with an extra duty of care. National governments should also raise the age of internet adulthood to 16.

Tech companies can be a major part of the solution by developing better age verification features, and by adding features that allow parents to designate their children's phones and computers as ones that should not be served by sites with minimum ages until they are old enough. Such a feature would help to dissolve multiple collective action problems for parents, kids, and platforms.

To correct overprotection in the real world, state and local governments should narrow neglect laws and give parents confidence that they can give their children some unsupervised time without risking arrest or state intervention in their family life.

State and local governments should also encourage more free play and recess in schools. They should consider the needs of children in zoning and permitting, and they should invest in more vocational education and other programs that have been shown to help adolescents, especially boys, make the transition to adulthood.

Chapter 11: What Schools Can Do Now

U.S. middle and high schools have seen an increase in mental illness and psychological suffering among their students since the early 2010s. Many are implementing a variety of policies in response.

There is a Polynesian expression: “Standing on a whale, fishing for minnows.” Sometimes what you are looking for is right there, underfoot, and it is better than anything you could find by looking farther away. I suggested two potential whales that schools can implement right away, with little or no additional money: going phone-free, and becoming more play-full.

Most schools say they ban phones, but that typically means only that students must not use their phones during class. This is an ineffective policy because it incentivizes students to hide their phone use during class and increase their phone use after class, which makes it harder for them to form friendships with the kids around them.

A better policy is to go phone-free for the entire school day. When students arrive, they should put their phones into a dedicated phone locker or into a lockable phone pouch.

The second whale is becoming a play-full school. The simple addition of a Let Grow Play Club—an afternoon option in K-8 schools of playing on the school playground, with no phones, plenty of loose parts, and minimal adult supervision—may teach social skills and reduce anxiety better than any educational program, because free play is nature's way of accomplishing these goals.

Schools can become more play-full by improving recess in three ways: Give more of it, on better playgrounds (such as those incorporating loose parts and “junk,” and/or more natural elements), with fewer rules.

The Let Grow Project is another activity that seems to reduce anxiety. It is a homework assignment that asks children to “do some- thing they have never done before, on their own,” after reaching agreement with their parents as to what that is. Doing projects increases children's sense of competence while also increasing parents' willingness to trust their children and grant them more autonomy.

Haidt is currently advocating for 4 major changes:

1. No smartphones before high school.
2. No social media before 16.
3. Phone-free schools.
4. Far more unsupervised play and childhood independence.

Chapter 12: What Parents Can Do Now

Being a parent is always a challenge, and it has become far more challenging in our era of rapid social and technological change. However, there is a lot that parents can do to become better “gardeners”—those who create a space in which their children can learn and grow—in contrast to “carpenters” who try to mold and shape their children directly.

If you do one thing to be a better gardener in the real world, it should be to give your children far more unsupervised free play, of the sort you probably enjoyed at that age. That means giving them a longer and better play-based childhood, with ever-growing independence and responsibility.

If you do one thing to be a better gardener in the virtual world, it should be to delay your children's full entry into the phone-based childhood by delaying when you give them their first smartphone (or any “smart” device). Give only basic phones before the start of high school, and try to coordinate with other parents so that your children do not feel that they are the only ones without smartphones in middle school.

There are many other ways to increase your children's engagement with the real world and embeddedness in communities, including sending them to a technology-free sleepaway camp, going camping. and helping them find additional settings in which they can hang out with other children who are not carrying smartphones.

As your children get older, increase their mobility and encourage them to find part-time jobs and ways to learn from other adults. Consider an exchange program, a summer wilderness program, and a gap year.

A free-range childhood is more likely to produce confident, competent young adults, with lower levels of anxiety, than is a childhood ruled by safetyism, fear, and constant adult supervision. The biggest obstacle is the parents' own anxiety about letting a child out of sight, unchaperoned by an adult. This takes practice, but the ultimate pleasure of being able to trust your child outweighs the temporary anxieties of letting go.

Most authorities recommend little or no screen time in the first 18-24 months (other than video calls with family members) and limited screen time through the age of 5 or 6.

For children in elementary and middle school, use parental controls, provide clear limits, and designate some times and places as no-device zones. Look out for signs of problematic or addictive use.

Your actions as a parent can contribute to solving the collective action problem. If you delay giving your child a smartphone, it makes it easier for other parents to do so. If you give your child more independence, it makes it easier for other parents to do so too. If you do it together, with other families, it will make it easier still, and more fun.

Parents of Young Children (Ages 0-5)

1. Until 18 months of age, limit screen use to video chatting along with an adult (for example, with a parent who is out of town).
2. Between 18 and 24 months, screen time should be limited to watching educational programming with a caregiver.
3. For children 2-5, limit noneducational screen time to about one hour per weekday and 3 hours on the weekend days.
4. For ages 6 and older, encourage healthy habits and limit activities that include screens.
5. Turn off all screens during family meals and outings.
6. Learn about and use parental controls.
7. Avoid using screens as pacifiers, babysitters, or to stop tantrums.
8. Turn off screens and remove them from bedrooms 30-60 minutes before bedtime.

For Parents of Children Ages 6-12 (Elementary and Middle School)

1. Practice letting your kids out of your sight without them having to reach you.
2. Encourage sleepovers, and don't micromanage them.
3. Encourage walking to school in a group.
4. After school is for free play.
5. Go camping.
6. Find a sleepaway camp with no devices and no safetyism.
7.]Form child-friendly neighborhoods and playborhoods.

PERSONAL STORY FROM JONATHAN HAIDT:

When he was 12, [our son] Max had become very interested in tennis, and I had taken him to the U.S. Open, in Queens, a 40-minute subway ride from our apartment, with one transfer. The next year, when he was 13, he wanted to go to a particular night match by himself. Jayne and I were hesitant, but Max assured us that he could do it, and he really did know the subway system better than we did. So we conjured up an image of Lenore (the author of Free Range Kids) in our minds, and we said okay.

Max had a fantastic time at the match, which ran past 11:00 p.m. No problem, he flowed with the boisterous crowd to the nearby subway afterward. The problem arose at the transfer station; the train Max needed for the last mile home was not running that night. Max was nervous, but he improvised. He walked upstairs from the subway station and hailed a yellow cab-which I had taught him how to do but he had never done on his own-and made it home safely at 1:00 a.m. From that day on he was a different person, with more confidence, and from that day on we treated him differently and gave him still more independence. Jayne and I would not have said yes to Max's request had we not let him walk to school years earlier, and grown to trust him without tracking his blue dot at every moment.

For Parents of Teens Ages 13-18 (High School)

1. Increase their mobility.
2. Rely more on your teen at home.
3. Encourage your teen to find a part-time job.
4. Find ways for them to nurture and lead.
5. Consider a high school exchange program.
6. Bigger thrills in nature.
7. Take a gap year after high school.

Next Steps for Renew Parents

Remember, collective action problems require collective action solutions; we need to work together as a community if we are going to have any widespread success.

After much discussion, the Renew leadership (including children and youth leaders) are encouraging parents to put the following standards in place:

All Parents

Set a godly example in both your quantity of social media use and the nature of your social media use. Be present with your children. Direct your family toward more in-person engagement.

Suggested Guidelines for Renew Children and Youth

Parents of Young Children (Ages 0-5)

1. Until 18 months of age, limit screen use to video chatting along with an adult (for example, with a parent or grandparents who are not at home).
2. Between 18 and 24 months, screen time should be limited to watching educational programming with a caregiver.
3. For children 2-5, limit noneducational screen time to about one hour per weekday.
4. Avoid using screens as pacifiers, babysitters, or to stop tantrums.

For Parents of Children Ages 6-12 (Elementary and Middle School)

1. If they do not yet have a smartphone, hold off until high school. Use a flip phone or smart watch.
2. If they already have a smartphone, limit use to talk and text with no use during school hours and one hour of screen time per day during non-school hours. Do not use a data plan. Parents set up parental controls.

For Parents of Teens Ages 13-18 (High School)

1. For ages 13-15, allow kids have a basic phone (talk, text and limited apps with no internet browser).
2. Allow teens to have a smartphone (preferably paying for their own plan) when they enter grade 9, but no social media before age 16. No phone use during school hours (first bell to last bell).
3. If they already have a smartphone before grade 9 and are on social media: No phone use during school hours (first bell to last bell). Limit social media to 1 hour per day. Parents set up parental controls.
4. Parents reserve right to look at phone activity and personal communication (even if the child is paying for their own phone).
5. Parents must approve every app and video game that their child installs. This will require thoroughly investigating and understanding the app or video game first.

For All Ages

1. Turn off all screens at least 60 minutes before bedtime.
2. No smartphones or screens in bedrooms.
3. Turn off all screens during family meals and outings.
4. Put away phone when in the presence of adults or in social settings (like Ignite).
5. Consider practicing social media sabbaths—1 day per week, 1 week per year.
6. Get to your child's heart rather than simply trying to make them conform to a list of rules.

    - ➡ How much of my media is for escape? And what am I escaping?
    - ➡ Does my screen time leave me more recharged or more depleted?
    - ➡ Is my media diet enriching my time with Christ or eroding it?
    - ➡ Am I honouring Christ by my online activity?
    - ➡ Is my social media use helping me fulfill my God-given calling, potential and duties, or distracting me from them?
    - ➡ How consistent and vital is my personal devotional and prayer life?
    - ➡ Am I allowing anything other than Christ to have mastery over me?
    - ➡ Is my social media use contributing to healthy, personal relationships or detracting from real intimacy?
    - ➡ Am I using social media to build myself up or others?
    - ➡ What is the condition of my heart?

What Do I Do Next?

1. Talk with your spouse (or if single—with others involved in your child's life) and discuss how you could implement these guidelines. Take note of particular points that will be more difficult.
2. Talk with other parents at church and see what they are thinking. The more that the parents of friends implement the same guidelines, the more easily the children will comply with the new boundaries that are being set.
3. Take a week to pray about how God would have you implement new guidelines before finalizing your plan. (Remember that plans can always be adjusted.)
4. Meet with your child to discuss the new boundaries you are putting in place. Apologize if you have been too lenient in the past. Talk to them about the facts presented by the Anxious Generation. Assure them that you want the best for them and that these changes are being made out of love. Assure them that other children at church will be living by very similar guidelines.
5. Find some new activities (in your family and with other families) that will help replace screen time.
6. Continue to communicate with other parents and church leaders. We are in this together! Make adjustments as necessary. We have created a WhatsApp chat group called Renew Church Parents to encourage this kind of communication.