

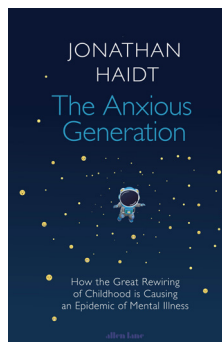


THE ANXIOUS GENERATION

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THE BOOK



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

By Jonathan Haidt



INTRODUCTION

Are you feeling uneasy about children and young people's use of new digital technologies? Do you worry that social media could be damaging and that Generation Z is losing touch while spending too much time glued to screens?

In *The Anxious Generation*, Social Psychologist and Author Jonathan Haidt undertakes an eye-opening exploration of these issues and what he calls 'The Great Rewiring'. Haidt noticed a downward shift in the mental health of young people starting around 2010, interestingly enough, around the same time as the widespread introduction of smartphones such as the iPhone. This change, Haidt established, was the time when childhood shifted in the Western world from 'play-based' to 'phone-based'.

His theory is that this shift, which started in the 1980s but consolidated with the introduction of smartphones, is devastatingly destructive to children and youth.

More than a diatribe about 'young people today', *The Anxious Generation* is a call to arms complete with practical solutions. It is as much a guide to change as a breakdown of problems and is a call that maybe should not be ignored.



5 BEST QUOTES

"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."

"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."

"People don't get depressed when they face threats collectively; they get depressed when they feel isolated, lonely, or useless."

"Social media platforms are ... the most efficient conformity engines ever invented."

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



7 BIG IDEAS

1. LIFE ON MARS

Haidt starts his book with an analogy. Imagine if your 10-year-old daughter came to you and said that, unbeknownst to you, she has signed up and been accepted to live on Mars. Not only will you have no option of supervising her, but the different gravity and atmosphere on Mars may damage her in the long run.

Would you let her go? Of course not.

While this is hyperbole, as Haidt admits in the book, it is still painfully relevant to children exploring the world of smartphones and social media, where they only have to be 13 to sign up (or only have to say they're 13) and then enter a damaging world over which you have no control.

It's a frightening thought, but this is the reality that most parents live with in the modern world.

2. THE GREAT REWIRING

Generation Z, born roughly between 1995 and 2010, was the first to grow up in a world with the internet at their fingertips.

Even Millennials, the previous generation, can remember a time in their lives when there were no mobile phones or connected devices. For Gen Z, though, their entire lives have been experienced in conjunction with the online realm. Haidt calls this the Great Rewiring. He says Gen Z has grown up in a radically new way, far from the real-world interactions of small communities in which humans evolved.

The Great Rewiring is about more than digital technology. It started much earlier, in the 1980s, when issues of children's safety began to shift the way in which parents allowed their children to play and explore.

3. THE DECLINE OF PLAY-BASED CHILDHOOD

Throughout the vast majority of human history, children have learned and grown through what Haidt describes as play-based childhood.

This is the baseline of more than human childhood, too. It is a mammalian childhood. Just as you might watch puppies roll around together and kittens awkwardly pouncing on pieces of string, human children too, learn through intersections with each other and the environment. Since the 1980s, this form of play has been in decline. With the onset of stranger danger, busier roads and a general feeling that the world is not safe for children to be out on their own, parents have been restricting play-based childhood.

At the same time, technology has been evolving in ways that make it increasingly enticing for children to discard a play-based childhood. All this came to a head in 2010 when the iPhone made its debut.



7 BIG IDEAS

4. PHONE-BASED CHILDHOOD

While it was a gradual change, the arrival of the smartphone in the early 2010s marked the official shift from play-based childhood to phone-based childhood.

Haidt explains that he uses the term 'phone-based' to encompass a broad selection of internet-based personal electronics, including smartphones, gaming consoles, notebook computers and tablets.

Rather than getting outdoors, playing together in person and taking risks, children and young people are now doing a significant part of their play and interaction through digital devices.

5. THE HARM

Haidt outlines four specific harms that a phone-based childhood is having on the younger generation.

- Social Deprivation

Despite its name, social media does not provide real socialisation. Children need actual face-to-face interactions to learn social cues and other key factors in human communication. Dozens, if not hundreds, of online friends who come and go are no match for a few real-life friends.

- Sleep Deprivation

Children and teens with devices in their rooms are likely to sleep less. The blue light that the screen emits tells the brain that it is morning and not time to sleep. Sleep is vital to proper functioning, and children and teens need more sleep than adults. Regular sleep deprivation due to staying up with a screen or waking up and checking a screen in the middle of the night is highly detrimental.

- Attention Fragmentation

Smartphones and other devices with push notifications are a constant distraction. Not only is it hard to pay attention to the task at hand with constant notifications that might provide a dopamine hit, but the mere idea that you might get a notification is distracting.

- Addiction

Finally, and unsurprisingly to most parents, digital tech can be highly addictive. Without going into the details of how this addiction works and how tech companies have been complicit in increasing the addictive nature of their apps, as Haidt does in the book, it's enough to say that taking tech away from young people can cause significant issues and behavioural problems that take some time to settle.

**7 BIG IDEAS****6. GIRLS AND BOYS**

Girls and boys are affected in different ways by the Great Rewiring.

For girls, social media is the bigger problem, while for boys, it's video games and pornography.

Social media lures girls in with its promise of connection and communion and then actively works to break down their self-esteem and self-worth.

Video games and online pornography allow boys to retreat entirely from the world in a way they never could before. In the past, being shut in a bedroom for days on end would have been torturously boring. Now, though, boys can have as much entertainment as they need, as well as a false sense of companionship.

7. WHAT TO DO?

Haidt outlines a series of possible ways to tackle the issue for Governments, tech companies, schools and parents.

The crux of it is that children need to be protected less in the real world and more in the virtual world.

Haidt believes that children should not have access to smartphones and social media at so young an age. In contrast, he believes children and teens should be allowed more autonomy and responsibilities at an earlier age in the real world.

**3 ACTION STEPS****1. RESTRICT ACCESS TO SOCIAL MEDIA**

Haidt believes children should not have smartphones before high school and should not have access to social media before the age of 16.

This allows young people to form proper social bonds and learn social lessons in the real world rather than losing those skills in a blur of screens and likes.

2. SCHOOLS NEED TO BE PHONE-FREE

Whether or not they pull their phones out in class, the mere knowledge that it's in their pocket or bag can be distracting to students.

They need to be able to focus in class and school without the inevitable draw of the smartphone.

3. ALLOW MORE UNSUPERVISED PLAY AND INDEPENDENCE

Children need to explore and take risks to learn. This means both physically and socially.

Getting outdoors, playing sport and interacting with others in person is essential.

**1 KEY TAKEAWAY**

The key takeaway of *The Anxious Generation* is that active change is necessary to save younger generations from increasing mental health issues.

Access to smartphones and unfiltered internet at too young an age needs to be controlled and monitored.

Along with this, children need to be able to return to a play-based childhood where they take risks and learn alongside their peers, without overprotection from adults.



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