Reflections on *The Anxious Generation*

Concurrence and Questions

By

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Just this week there was an article in our local newspaper reporting that the local school district will ban cellphone use in classrooms beginning this year. This is just one of many similar reports I've heard since the publication of social psychologist Jonathan's Haidt's new book, *The Anxious Generation*: *How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness,* which recommends, rather than merely banning their use during classes, schools "should go phone-free for the entirety of the school day."[1] Since its release just four months ago, there have been reports of several public schools or school districts passing similar bans in places like Ontario, Canada, and in U.S. states as conservative as Texas and as liberal as California. I not sure how many of these new bans are in response to Haidt's book, although, given the timing and its success, I'm guessing there is some correlation.

Yet, as the book points out, "Most public schools in the United States [already] say that they ban phones; 77% said so in a 2020 survey."[2] Even so, Haidt argues that smartphones are a major cause of the growing number of kids and young people with anxiety, depression, and other mental or emotional problems. So, merely banning their use during class, where they remain a distraction, isn't enough. Using them at other times during the school day also distracts kids from engaging in the kind of social interactions that are part of healthy human maturation. So, instead of keeping them on their persons, Haidt recommends that "When students arrive, they put their phone into a dedicated phone locker or into a lockable phone pouch. At the end of the day, they retrieve their phones from the locker, or they access a device that unlocks the pouch."[3]

I begin my response to *The Anxious Generation* in this way because the distinction between what Haidt refers to as the phone-based childhood and the play-based childhood is at the core of what it's about. His evidence and reasoning are sound enough that he's made a believer out of me, and I think what he has to say is important enough for us to consider during a church service because it addresses the health of our children and ultimately the health of our society. Fortunately, he concludes each chapter of his book with a summary of his own, which I will distill today. I will, however, for time's sake, leave out much of his research proving his points, so I do recommend you read the book for yourself.

He divides *The Anxious Generation* into four parts: *The Tidal Wave:* Wherein he presents statistics that verify the worsening mental health of young people. *The Decline of the Play-Based Childhood:* Which explores how the reduction in unsupervised play has negatively affected childhood development. *The Rise of the Phone-Based Childhood:* Which examines the negative impacts of smartphone use, with specific chapters addressing the distinct harms to girls and boys. And *Collective Actions for Better Childhood:* Which offers solutions for parents, schools, and policymakers to mitigate the damage being done and promote healthier childhood experiences. So, let's go a little deeper into these areas.

Haidt begins by arguing, with convincing data, that between 2010 and 2015, American teens' social lives shifted significantly to smartphones, fostering continuous engagement

with social media and online activities. This "Great Rewiring of Childhood," as he calls it, is seen as the primary cause for the surge in adolescent mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicide, particularly affecting Gen Z, who experienced puberty during this period. One study show that between 2010 and 2018, anxiety rose 134% and Depression rose 106% among college students.[4] The mental health crisis has hit girls, especially preteens, harder than boys, though boys have also seen significant increases in depression and anxiety. As another survey indicates, between 2010 and 2020 adolescent emergency room visits for self-harm rose 188% for girls and 48% for boys. These trends also extend beyond the U.S. to other Western countries, with similar patterns observed globally, including in Latin America and Asia.

This sudden shift is counter to how human childhood is supposed to work, which is uniquely and normally characterized by an extended period of brain development that allows for extensive cultural learning. By age five, children's brains are 90% of adult size, yet the configuration process continues, making childhood a crucial period for acquiring cultural skills. Free, unsupervised play with other kids is vital for developing social and physical skills, fostering abilities like conflict resolution and attunement with others. However, the shift to phone-based childhoods has hindered this development, as social media's random and performative nature inhibits true social connection, leaving heavy users craving real interactions and often, as the data shows, feeling isolated and alone.

Children innately learn culture through conformist and prestige biases, copying common behaviors and emulating accomplished individuals and role models. But if they are conforming and seeking prestige online rather than on the schoolyard or playground, Haidt thinks it’s easy for things to go awry. Social media, designed for engagement, can actually disrupt traditional social learning by exposing children to online influencers, often of dubious value, overshadowing familial and community cultures. This disruption is particularly impactful during the sensitive ages of 9 to 15, a critical period for cultural learning and identity formation, coinciding with the age most children acquire smartphones and shift their social lives online.

He further points out that the human brain operates in two modes: *discover mode* (approaching opportunities) and *defend mode* (guarding against threats). Post-1995 generations are often stuck in defend mode, remaining overly alert to threats and more anxious. Children naturally require exposure to risks and challenges to develop resilience and strength, akin to how the immune system needs germs. However, increased parental fear and overprotection since the 1980s have limited such experiences, leading to fragile and fearful adults. *Safetyism*, as Haidt calls it, which prioritizes safety above much else, hampers children's ability to handle risks and frustrations, affecting their development and ability to relate well with others. Safetyism blocks essential experiences that teach them to manage anxiety, risks, and self-governance, which is necessary for healthy adulthood. Early puberty, especially, is a period of significant brain rewiring, involving rapid neural pruning and strengthening [myelination] driven by adolescents' experiences. Thriving children typically enjoy a play-based, real-world childhood, unlike those deprived by fearful parenting and a phone-based upbringing.

Traditionally, rites of passage helped adolescents transition to adulthood through structured phases: separation, transformation, and reincorporation. These rites provided

curated experiences that guided adolescents in developing resilience and competence. However, Western societies have largely abandoned these rites, and the digital age has further eroded these milestones, leading to a lack of clear paths to adulthood. Instead, children are now inundated with unfiltered, age-inappropriate stimuli from online sources. For this reason, Haidt believes large, diverse, and secular societies like the U.S. and the U.K. could benefit from reintroducing structured milestones that offer stepwise increases in freedoms and responsibilities. Such milestones, he believes, would help guide adolescents through crucial developmental stages, providing the necessary experiences to foster maturity and competence in the absence of traditional rites of passage.

From here, Haidt describes what he considers the four foundational harms of a phone-based childhood, each profoundly affecting social, emotional, and cognitive development due to the rapid technological shifts of the early 2010s.

1. **Social Deprivation**: Adolescents' face-to-face interactions plummeted, dropping from 122 minutes per day in 2012 to 67 minutes per day in 2019, exacerbated by COVID-19.
2. **Sleep Deprivation**: Smartphone use led to significant declines in sleep quality and quantity, causing issues like depression, anxiety, cognitive deficits, and accidents.
3. **Attention Fragmentation**: Smartphones disrupt attention with constant notifications, hindering the development of executive function and sustained focus.
4. **Addiction**: Social media apps use behaviorist techniques to hook adolescents, leading to behavioral addictions with withdrawal symptoms like anxiety and irritability, akin to gambling addiction.

Again, he believes these foundational harms collectively explain the sudden deterioration in adolescent mental health as childhood shifted to being phone-based.

An important insight from the book, as mentioned, is that heavy use of social media harms girls more than boys, the former exhibiting higher rates of depression and other disorders. Girls use visually oriented platforms like Instagram and TikTok more than boys, intensifying social comparison and perfectionism. Social media also amplifies relational aggression, which girls use to harm others' relationships and reputations. In addition to spreading anxiety and depression, the internet facilitates harassment and exploitation, exposing girls to unwanted attention and pressure from older men and peers. Social media's promise of connection also often leads to increased loneliness and mental health issues, particularly for girls. This may explain the sharp rise in loneliness among girls in the early 2010s, while boys experienced a more gradual increase. In brief, the visual and hyperconnected nature of social media platforms exacerbates mental health issues among girls by fostering negative social comparisons, relational aggression, emotional contagion, and online harassment. These factors collectively contribute to a significant decline in mental health and well-being for girls in the digital age.

But this doesn’t mean that boys are not also being negatively impacted and stunted by this shift to a phone-based childhood. In the early 2010s, boys, like girls, saw increased rates of depression and anxiety, but their struggles began earlier with declining achievement and engagement since the 1970s. Boys retreated from physical activities into the virtual world, Haidt says, leading to issues like "failure to launch." American boys shifted from externalizing behaviors to more internalizing patterns, traditionally seen in girls, and began avoiding risk. The advent of smartphones and high-speed internet exacerbated this,

providing easy access to pornography and immersive video games, which hindered their transition to adulthood and contributed to declining mental health, or so Haidt argues.

In this way, the Great Rewiring of Childhood disconnected boys from real-world communities, leading to increased loneliness and poor-quality social interactions. Video games, while offering some benefits, caused significant impacts for a subset of boys who became problematic users. This shift created a sense of isolation and a lack of normality, even as an understanding of morality dissolved into the flux of online networks. In the end, both boys and girls ended up feeling that their lives were meaningless, despite following different paths through this technological upheaval.

From here, Haidt goes into a chapter titled, "Spiritual Elevation and Degradation," which he begins by saying, "now I'd like to write less as a social scientist than as a fellow human being."[5] Indeed, this was my least favorite chapter and one where his lack of expertise shows. In brief, Haidt believes that morally beautiful things uplift us, while morally repulsive things degrade us, and that a phone-based life is one of those things that degrades us. Part of the solution to this problem, then, is to reconnect with some sort of spiritual tradition. Haidt, who describes himself as an atheist, still appreciates the good he can gain from religious metaphors and practices, including rituals that require us to move our bodies in the real world, mediation which requires us to seek calm and distance ourselves from distractions like our smartphones, seeking self-growth and knowledge rather than approval from others, forgiving rather than judging others, and experiencing the awe and wonder of nature. Overall, he thinks, a phone-based life fills the human need for meaning with trivial content, contrasting the enriching experiences recommended by ancient wisdom.

Haidt concludes *The Anxious Generation* by suggesting some of the things our governments, our schools, and parents can do to fix address the concerns he raises.

Governments, he says, need to revise policies to improve adolescent mental health. In the U.S., state and local governments contribute to the overprotection of children through broad neglect laws that make it a crime for children to ever be unaccompanied, even if they are simply riding their bikes to the playground, for instance. This is so even while the federal government has failed to pass sufficient laws to protect children online. National governments should adopt laws like those in the U.K., he says, which require tech companies to offer extra protections for minors, and to raise the internet adulthood age to 16. Tech companies themselves should develop better age verification and parental control features. In addition to narrowing neglect laws, state and local governments should promote free play and more recess in schools and invest in vocational education to help adolescents transition to adulthood.

Meanwhile, he recommends that schools should, again, go phone-free, and encourage more play during the school day. This means providing safe places to store their devices when necessary, improving recess with more time, building better playgrounds, and having fewer rules. He also recommends the Let Grow Project, which involves children doing new tasks independently, and increases competence and parental trust by encouraging free play and autonomy and the ability for kids to solve and resolve some of their own problems without adult intercession, further building self-reliance and less anxiety. To re-engage boys and address their declining academic progress, Haidt says schools should offer more vocational

training, shop classes, and hire more male teachers. These measures, combined with phone-free and play-full environments, can prevent mental health issues and improve overall student well-being.

Finally, he encourages parents to better prepare children for our world of rapid technological change by giving them more unsupervised free play, fostering independence and responsibility. He recommends delaying the introduction of smartphones until high school to help reduce the negative impacts of a phone-based childhood. Parents can also encourage real-world engagement by sending children to technology-free camps, camping trips, and finding social settings without smartphones. Increasing mobility, part-time jobs, and programs like student exchange or summer wilderness experiences can develop confidence and competence. Reducing screen time, particularly in early childhood, and using parental controls can also help. Overcoming parental anxiety about giving children more independence is crucial, and joining with other parents committed to doing so can make it easier and more enjoyable.

So that's my whirlwind summary of *The Anxious Generation*, a book I think is important and that I mostly agree with. Not long ago, before its publication, I too spoke about the antisocial consequences of looking down at our screens instead of into each other's faces and eyes in order to engage our mirror neurons. While reading Haidt's book, however, I did have a nagging sense that it was missing something. [Not that I am criticizing him for what he has not written, or for not discussing matters beyond the scope of his subject.] Still, upon reflection, I found myself also recognizing the good such technology brings to our lives. Saying, as Haidt does, "The phone-based life produces spiritual degradation, not just in adolescents, but in all of us,"[6] or that, "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,"[7] equates this technology with evil and taboo and makes the conversation sound primitive, at least to me.

Communications technology, from the first writings to the printing press, to books, newspapers, the radio, and all the flatscreen variants that have been in our lives for the past century, have also caused extreme social disruption. But even as they have drawn our attention away from those in our immediate communities and tribes, to an awareness of other lives and better ideas from distant places, they have simultaneously brought us closer as a human species and global community. What Haidt calls the virtual world, virtual lives, virtual networks, and so on, referring to the interactions we have online and on social media, I simply call, the world. They are real interactions with real people, even if they transcend what until now has been limited to those mostly in our immediate vicinity. Today, all of us, including our kids, have the opportunity to meet, and learn, and struggle upon the schoolyards and playgrounds of the world. I believe there is something uplifting about this that is good for us and our kids, although I agree with Haidt that we must adapt our habits to take advantage of this technology's benefits while avoiding its risks.

Again, I agree with Haidt's concerns and his solutions, especially getting kids to look up and engage with those around them most of the time. *The Anxious Generation* is a work of evolutionary adaptation, calling upon us to avoid some of the dangers that have gotten us into serious trouble during the past fifteen years. But I also wonder if anxiety and depression are the worst kinds of mental and emotional stress impacting human societies

today? I think the paranoia and delusional thinking demonstrated by the wider society is far worse, more widespread, and is currently ripping our global societies, our countries, and even our local communities apart. And most of today's paranoid delusional thinkers did grow up with a play-based childhood, not a phone-based one. And, to me, their fear and hatred of those they consider outsiders is as degrading to themselves, to humanity, and to human potential as anything ever has been. The solution to this cannot be to go backward to a more primitive, perhaps over romanticized, kind of living—to the nostalgic "good old days" that never really existed—but forward, toward a more humane way of being with each other than has ever been experienced.

To me this means adapting our technology so that we don't have to use it by withdrawing from those around us, and this is precisely the direction we're heading with augmented reality. In just a few years, far sooner than later since AR already exists, the age of flat screens will go away, and we will be even more engaged with the world and others, both near and far, as never before. I learned a new term just this week, *protopia*. Instead of facing either a perfect utopian future, or a horrifying dystopian future, we can simply work to steadily make the future better for all of us. That's what protopia means, moving forward. And that's what I hope for our anxious and depressed kids, for our paranoid and delusional adults, and for the whole of humanity, that we can keep improving, keep moving forward, becoming our best, making the world better, as, together, we continue to taking small steps and making giant leaps.

[1] Haidt, Jonathan. The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness (p. 249). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., p. 26.

[5] Ibid., p. 199.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid., 218.