Free the Anxious Generation

The Problem: The New Phone-based Childhood

Adolescents are in a mental health crisis. Major depressive episodes among American teens have more than doubled since 2010 as their social lives moved onto smartphones loaded with social media apps.

The only available explanation for why this happened in many countries at the same time is that the ancient "play-based childhood" was replaced by the "phone-based childhood" in the early 2010s. Specifically, children and adolescents began to spend much more time on smartphones, social media, video games, and porn, and much less time doing healthy activities such as face-to-face interactions with friends and family, sleep, exercise, and reading books.

Students are bringing their phone-based behavior patterns into the classroom, which is causing classroom conflicts, teacher burnout, endless drama, cyberbullying, and massive distraction. This is the probable cause of the dramatic decline in academic achievement in the United States and around the world since the early 2010s.

The Solution:

Schools and education departments can take the lead in setting new norms that will roll back the phone-based childhood, restore more free play and independence, and improve mental health.

Take the steps!

▶ Take the steps!

1 Phone-free schools

Smartphones (and "smart" devices) fragment and absorb attention. All K-12 schools should require that phones (and any device that can receive texts or access social media) be placed in phone lockers or Yondr pouches out of reach all day, giving students seven hours a day to attend to their teachers and peers. No school regrets going phone-free.

2 More independence and free play

Give longer recess in grades K-8. Institute "Play Club" for students in grades K-8: Keep the playground open before or after school as a no-phone zone for mixed-age free play with minimal adult intervention so parents can sign up their kids for it as a regular activity. Play has proven benefits for mental health.

3 Assign the Let Grow Experience in grades K-8

Students' homework is to go home and do something new, with their parents' permission but without their parents, such as walking the dog, running an errand, or making dinner. The kids do it and then reflect on the experience. The effects are transformative—on parents as well as their children, who become more confident and less anxious.

4 Send a memo to parents

A memo from a principal or head of school recommending that parents delay smartphones until at least high school and social media until age 16 to support the school's efforts to improve mental health would catalyze collective action and reset the community's norms.

Note that the cost of these measures, combined, is very little. (State legislatures and education departments could support schools by allocating money for any school that wants to buy phone lockers or contracts with Yondr.) Yet when combined, these four actions would give students—and teachers—a much healthier and happier seven hours a day at school, and more developmentally rich time outside of school, too. They would also help parents, many of whom are engaged in constant battles with their children over screen time. Let's roll back the phone-based childhood!

To learn and do more, check out these resources:

AnxiousGeneration.com for more about the problem and what schools can do to help. Sign up for our mailing list.

The Anxious Generation: Buy the book!

The Case for Phone-Free Schools by Jonathan Haidt; lays out the evidence

LetGrow.org to find manuals for teachers to implement the Let Grow Experience and Play Club.

PhoneFreeSchools.org and **PhoneFreeSchoolsMovement.org** for support in implementing phone-free policies.

Everyschool.org for support in managing EdTech in your school.

AnxiousGeneration.com/aligned to see our allied organizations

ConstructiveDialogue.org to try out the Perspectives Program, to teach skills of productive disagreement to high school students.

Subscribe to Jonathan Haidt's free Substack: **AfterBabel.com.**