

The Anxious Generation: A Review

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The significance of Jonathan Haidt's *The Anxious Generation* is perhaps best understood through the lens of Pascal's Wager, which Haidt himself refers to in one of his papers (Haidt, 2023a):

"If you listen to the alarm ringers and we turn out to be wrong, the costs are minimal and reversible. But if you listen to the skeptics and they turn out to be wrong, the costs are much larger and harder to reverse."

The subtitle of the book - *How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* - encapsulates its central thesis. As Haidt has summarised in various public interviews: we have overprotected kids in the real world and underprotected them online.

The book is structured into four main parts, of which the first is entitled Tidal Wave. In this introductory section, Haidt presents foundational statistics and empirical data illustrating the mental decline among young people, particularly during the period from 2010 to 2015. This timeframe coincides with the widespread adoption of smartphones among members of Generation Z, which enabled constant access to social media, online video games and other internet-based activities. Haidt refers to this period as "the great rewiring of childhood", suggesting that digital exposure during formative years has effectively altered the neurological development of children.

A key finding in this chapter is the sharp rise in depression, anxiety, and self-harming behaviours among adolescents, particularly girls. In addition to U.S. data, Haidt references comparable international trends, notably in English-speaking and Scandinavian countries. He

draws on the work of Jean Twenge, a psychology professor at San Diego State University, who has conducted over 190 studies on Generation Z and published the influential 2018 book *iGen*. Twenge's work also highlights the detrimental impact of excessive social media use on adolescent mental health.

The second chapter is entitled Decline of Play-Based Childhood, in which Haidt delves into the root causes of deteriorating youth mental health, emphasising the shift away from traditional, play-based childhoods. Haidt discusses how modern childhood - centred around digital devices - has undermined fundamental developmental experiences such as unstructured play, secure parent-child attachments, and a coherent transition from childhood to adulthood.

Referencing the literature on child development, including Stuart Brown, M.D.'s seminal work *Play*, Haidt underscores the critical cognitive and emotional benefits of free play. Brown writes "The genius of play is that, in playing, we create imaginative new cognitive combinations. And in creating those novel combinations, we find what works." (Brown, 2009) According to Haidt, human brain development is supported by two complementary systems: defend mode (which responds to threats) and discover mode (which seeks opportunities). He argues that young people today are increasingly locked in defend mode - constantly vigilant and anxious - at the expense of curiosity and exploration.

The third chapter is entitled The Rise of the

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Phone-Based childhood. Here Haidt provides further evidence of the harm caused by a childhood dominated by smartphones. He explains why these effects are more pronounced in girls, who are especially vulnerable to harmful social comparisons and relational aggression on social media platforms. On page 34, Haidt presents a graph showing that the rate of depression among girls has increased 2.5 times since 2010. While boys have not experienced the same degree of emotional harm, they tend to retreat into online gaming and other digital realms, spending less time in the physical world and forming fewer real-life relationships.

Haidt also applies the economic concept of opportunity cost to digital consumption. He argues that the 40-50 hours per week young people spend on screen-based leisure activities displace time that could be spent on real-world, developmentally essential experiences. This results in four core harms: sleep deprivation, attention fragmentation, and addiction.

The last chapter, *Collective Action for Healthier Childhood* is Haidt's call to action, where he outlines practical steps for reversing the damage. He proposes coordinated interventions involving parents, educators, governments, and technology companies. Key recommendations include:

- Encourage frequent, unstructured, outdoor play among children, ideally in mixed age groups, and with minimal adult supervision.
- Integrate children into real-world communities rather than online networks.
- Prohibit smartphones for children under the age of 14. Their first phone should be a basic device limited to calling and text messaging.
- Delay access to social media platforms until at least high school, preferably age 16.
- Enforce smartphone-free school environments, requiring devices to be stored in locked pouches or lockers

throughout the school day.

A particularly compelling argument is Haidt's collective problem thesis, popularised by Tristan Harris in the film *The Social Dilemma*. It posits that it is difficult for individuals to opt out of social media or smartphone use when their peers remain active users. Effective solutions, therefore, must be collective. Legal frameworks, Haidt argues, are essential tools for resolving such coordination problems. As with tobacco regulation in the 1990s – spurred by whistleblower Jeffrey Wigand – he suggests that meaningful change can occur when society acknowledges corporate responsibility and imposes legal boundaries to protect minors. (Haidt, 2023b)

Haidt also references whistleblower Frances Haugen's 2021 disclosures about Facebook (now Meta), which catalysed regulatory scrutiny of Big Tech. He expresses cautious optimism that, unlike the decades-long struggle to regulate tobacco, the case for protecting children from digital harm may be addressed more swiftly, in part due to the growing body of scientific evidence, including his own.

In conclusion, Jonathan Haidt's *The Anxious Generation* is a landmark publication that offers both a comprehensive diagnosis of a growing public health crisis and a set of actionable solutions. The book's primary strength lies in its integration of scientific research, case studies, and policy proposals tailored to various stakeholders – parents, educators, policymakers, and technology developers.

Haidt effectively illustrates the urgent need to reclaim childhood from the digital sphere and restore the essential elements of human development, particularly free play. While the book is grounded in a solid body of research, Haidt himself acknowledges the necessity of further studies to better understand the long-term implications and to develop effective interventions.

Finally, the book's academic credibility is underscored by its extensive references - 66 pages of cited research and studies - which reinforce the validity of its claims. These claims, for many parents and educators, may already reflect their lived experience.

This book is essential reading for anyone concerned about the mental health and well-being of our children and adolescents, regardless of their prior engagement with this topic.

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