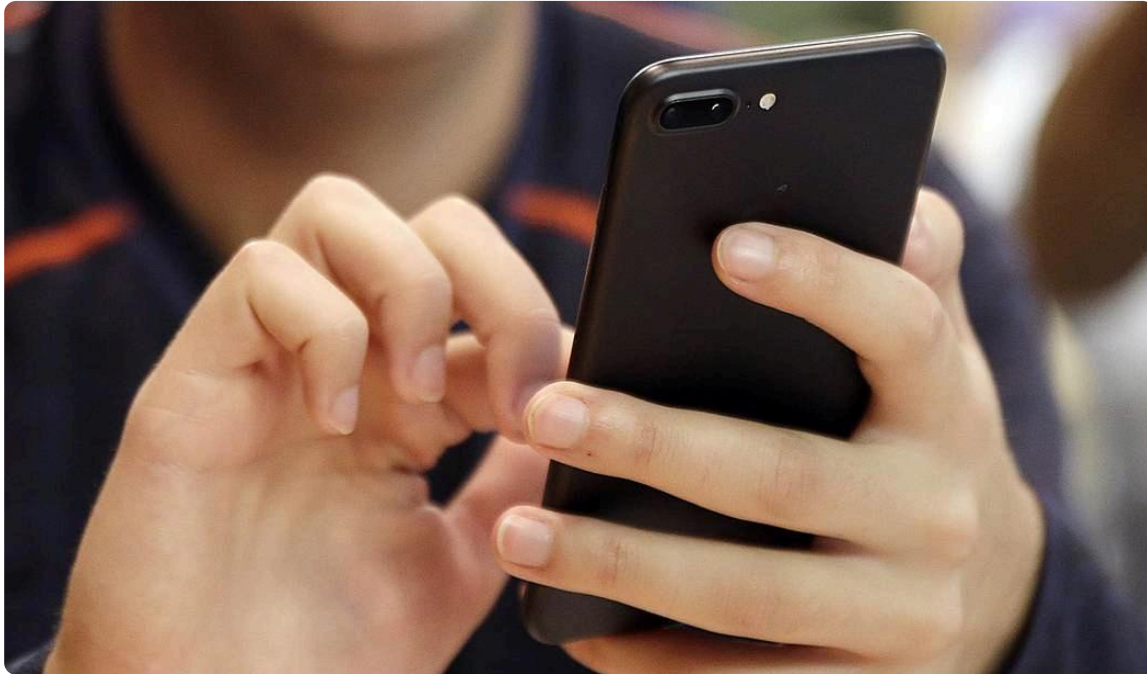


Jonathan Haidt on the Dangers of a Phone-Based Childhood

JOHN SEXTON 4:00 PM | March 13, 2024



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Regular readers know we've covered this story before. Social psychologist and author Jonathan Haidt has been working on a book about the topic of teen mental health and the impact of cell phones [for some time](#). Today the *Atlantic* published a lengthy piece in which he lays out his case in detail. He starts with the data showing today's teens are [not doing well](#).

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Something went suddenly and horribly wrong for adolescents in the early 2010s. By now you've likely seen the [statistics](#): Rates of depression and anxiety in the United States—fairly stable in the 2000s—rose by more than 50 percent in many studies from 2010 to 2019. The suicide rate rose 48 percent for adolescents ages 10 to 19. For girls ages 10 to 14, it [rose](#) 131 percent.

The problem was not limited to the U.S.: Similar patterns emerged around the same time in [Canada, the U.K., Australia, New Zealand, the Nordic countries, and beyond](#). By a variety of measures and in a variety of countries, the

members of Generation Z (born in and after 1996) are suffering from anxiety, depression, self-harm, and related disorders at levels higher than any other generation for which we have data.

And that brings us to the question of why this is happening. Haidt notes in passing that there are a variety of theories but the one he believes fits the data the best is smart phones. Starting around 2010, many teens moved from flip phones to smart phones. The first iPhone was released in 2007 and the first Android phone was released a year later in 2008. The iPhone 4 was released in the summer of 2010, though it seems like Haidt is looking at 2012 as the moment when the adoption of these devices by teens reached [a critical mass](#).

Those were the years when adolescents in rich countries traded in their flip phones for smartphones and moved much more of their social lives online—particularly onto social-media platforms designed for virality and addiction. Once young people began carrying the entire internet in their pockets, available to them day and night, it altered their daily experiences and developmental pathways across the board. Friendship, dating, sexuality, exercise, sleep, academics, politics, family dynamics, identity—all were affected. Life changed rapidly for younger children, too, as they began to get access to their parents' smartphones and, later, got their own iPads, laptops, and even smartphones during elementary school...

My claim is that the new phone-based childhood that took shape roughly 12 years ago is making young people sick and blocking their progress to flourishing in adulthood. We need a dramatic cultural correction, and we need it now.

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Haidt shows that the ubiquity of phones and social media gradually pushed out the kind of in-person play and hang-out time which characterized earlier generations. Why does that matter? Because play and in-person conversation teaches kids skills they don't learn as readily when most interaction is text-based and non-synchronous. Kids are still

learning how to interact, just not face to face which may help explain why young people getting their first jobs sometimes struggle interacting with older managers who grew up in a different era. In any case, the phones now take up immense [amounts of time](#).

The most recent [Gallup data](#) show that American teens spend about *five hours a day* just on social-media platforms (including watching videos on TikTok and YouTube). Add in all the other phone- and screen-based activities, and the number rises to somewhere between seven and nine hours a day, [on average](#). The numbers are [even higher](#) in single-parent and low-income families, and among Black, Hispanic, and Native American families.

Haidt admits that there are some real upsides to phones and social media. They allow some form of community for people who are socially or geographically isolated. But the evidence suggests that for many teens the phones are doing a lot of harm. Haidt says that somewhere between 5 and 15% of phone users get into real trouble, meaning some kind of addictive behavior (porn, video games, social media) which takes over their life. But even for those who don't fall completely off the deep end the result is often an increased sense of alienation and despair.

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A long-running survey of American teens found that, from 1990 to 2010, high-school seniors became slightly less likely to agree with statements such as “Life often feels meaningless.” But as soon as they adopted a phone-based life and many began to live in the whirlpool of social media, where no stability can be found, every measure of despair increased. From 2010 to 2019, the number who agreed that their lives felt “meaningless” increased by about 70 percent, to more than one in five.

One of the most interesting parts of the piece comes near the end where Haidt lays out the ways in which social media creates pressure on non-users who fear being left out of the social loop.

A recent study led by the University of Chicago economist Leonardo Bursztyn captured the dynamics of the social-media trap precisely. The researchers recruited more than 1,000 college students and asked them how much they'd need to be paid to deactivate their accounts on either Instagram or TikTok for four weeks. That's a standard economist's question to try to compute the net value of a product to society. On average, students said they'd need to be paid roughly \$50 (\$59 for TikTok, \$47 for Instagram) to deactivate whichever platform they were asked about. Then the experimenters told the students that they were going to try to get most of the others in their school to deactivate that same platform, offering to pay them to do so as well, and asked, Now how much would you have to be paid to deactivate, if most others did so? The answer, on average, was less than zero. In each case, most students were willing to pay to have that happen.

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Haidt identifies this as a collective action problem where individuals believe they (and everyone else their age) would be better off if they ditched social media but so long as most people their age are using it, they can't afford to be the first people to leave it behind.

Haidt argues the solution would be for parents/society to set norms such as no cell phones before age 14 and no social media before age 16, plus no phone use at school. Most schools already have rules about phone use at school but the rules are not enforced and are widely disregarded by students.

All of these things seem doable but in reality my guess is this will become another area where there is a vast divide between heavily engaged parents who may adopt this advice for the benefit of their children, even if the kids complain, and disengaged parents who don't want to be bothered. This will gradually create one more advantage some kids (presumably the same kinds whose parents make them do their homework, practice an instrument and attend SAT prep classes) have over other kids whose parents see this as a problem for teachers to solve.

Haidt's article is certainly timely given the passage of the [TikTok bill](#) this week. Hopefully a few Senators will read it and decide to stop slow-walking the bill.

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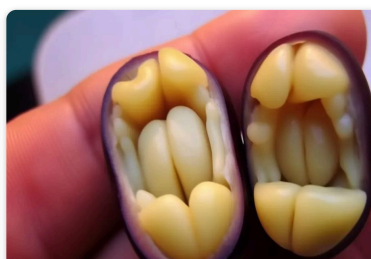
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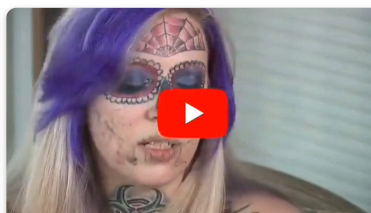
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