

Book Review: The Anxious Generation

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Over winter break, I had the amazing opportunity to read for fun again. One of the books that I read was *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* by Jonathan Haidt. If I'm being honest, it wasn't necessarily a fun read; however, it was extremely informative and eye-opening to the way that society has shifted from a carefree childhood to a digital childhood.

Haidt splits the book up into digestible sections that dive into a number of topics revolving around the effects of the increase of phones and social media starting in Gen Z's childhood. First, Haidt tracks how the shift from a childhood set in the real world to a childhood set in the virtual world took place over the years. The increase of safety concerns for children, such as the phrase "stranger danger" suggests, rose along with stricter rules at school and on playgrounds that limited children's ability to be kids and to use their imaginations. Haidt talks about the importance of free play for children which allows them to learn social skills and experiment with their autonomy. He acknowledges that there is a risk of physical injury but it is minimal such as small cuts and bruises, rarely broken bones. If a child doesn't fall, how will they learn to pick themselves back up again? The days of free play seem to be in the past as now children are supervised wherever they go and have shorter recess times. Haidt provides a number of studies done in other countries and some areas of the United States that have implemented free play again for children both before, during, and after school and how it has decreased poor behavior exhibited by students and has increased attendance and attentiveness during school.

Expanding into digital childhood, he talks about the negative effects that have increased the percentage of American children and young adults who have been showing signs of anxiety and depression. Haidt looks into the issue even more, pointing out how social media negatively impacts girls more than boys while video games and access to porn on the internet is negatively impacting boys more than girls. Ultimately, shifting childhood from reality into virtual reality has heavily influenced and halted the growth and development of children that they require to experience to become a person able to contribute and function in society. This portion of the novel is the largest section as it explores his argument the most and he admits to leaving out

more studies due to space limitations. Haidt also mentions that people further interested in this topic can visit his website to take action and to follow his research which he actively continues and corrects if there are any errors on his behalf.

By this point in the novel, the outlook on society is quite grim, so Haidt ends with a section of his suggestions to get back into a reality-based childhood, addressing chapters to parents, schools, the government, social media companies and individuals, such as Gen Z members who have been affected by the digital childhood, who would like to take action. Haidt admits that his opinions on how to transition back into a reality and free play-based childhood aren't all evidence-based but are what he believes to be the most effective although possibly not the most realistic to implement in other people's eyes. Most of his ideas require change as a society, meaning that everyone would need to be on the same page in order to create a new socially acceptable way of living. However, starting on a smaller level such as at one school or having a group of parents withhold from allowing their children to have a smartphone until high school can create a ripple effect that will encourage other areas to follow suit.

Overall, there are far more topics that Haidt dives into in this book which I suggest you read for yourself. As our generation is beginning to have families, we can be the ones to prevent them from having a screen in their faces twenty-four-seven and instead encourage them to hang out with friends and have fun in nature. It's also not only the kids who need to put the phone down.

For more information visit: <https://www.anxiousgeneration.com/>