

Presented at Greene Towne's Parent Association Meeting – January 13, 2026
Book Review by Greene Towne Parent & Parent Ed Committee Member Dana Levin

The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness by Jonathan Haidt, 2024

Jonathan Haidt is a social psychologist who has taught, researched and published extensively in the United States. He currently teaches at NYU Stern School of Business, where his research focuses on using moral psychology to help people understand each other and help social institutions function better. In *The Anxious Generation*, Haidt argues that the ubiquity of smartphones (phones with unlimited internet/apps) combined with overprotective parenting led to widespread mental illness among adolescents after 2010. Nothing else explains why so many children around the world suffered from the same set of challenges simultaneously.

That's a scary thesis. What does it mean on a day-to-day level?

- Social media, video games and online pornography steadily replaced in-person socializing and physical play. This intense level of stimulation impacts emotional regulation and social development in the vulnerable adolescent brain.
- Posting images of oneself and others on social media invites judgment, from both peers and strangers.
- Free play exposes children to challenges or setbacks that help them learn to navigate conflict and work with others. When free play is replaced by online experiences, the virtual world gains outsized influence.
- Children struggle to differentiate between the "real world" in which people interact in person, in real time, with others in their communities, and the "virtual world" of text-based posts and comments, artificial intelligence and parallel interactions.
- Girls are more likely to have negative experiences with social media.
- Boys are more likely to engage with high-stimulation online video games.

Recommendations for introducing technology:

1. No smartphones before high school (e.g. a phone/device with unrestricted access to internet and apps)
 - a. Simple, programmed phones or watches that allow children to communicate with important adults are beneficial and aid in accomplishing #4.
2. No social media before age 16
 - a. Give the adolescent brain more time to develop complex relationships with family, friends, teachers, coaches, etc. before introducing virtual friends/followers.
3. Phone-free schools, from bell to bell
 - a. Children cannot be expected to focus in school with a computer in their pocket.
 - b. Embodied, real-time interactions with peers are more meaningful than interacting with those same peers virtually.
4. More free play, independence and responsibility in the real world
 - a. Children and adolescents require learning opportunities to become independent and responsible; these skills do not materialize out of nowhere because they reach a specific age.
 - b. Start small, then work up. Enlist others in the community for support.

Recommendations for developing independence and autonomy:

- For young children (ages 0-5), lots of playtime with some age diversity is highly beneficial. They learn best by trying things slightly beyond their current abilities.
- As parents, we don't need to optimize every moment with our children, but we DO need to be strong role models and watch our own phone habits.
- For elementary and middle school children (ages 6-13), help them have more and better experience in the real world rather than being alone with videos, games or social media.
- Recommendations to reduce over-protection: let your kids out of your sight without a way to reach you; encourage sleepovers but don't micromanage; encourage walking to school in a group; after school is for free play; go camping; find a sleepaway camp without devices or safetyism; and form child-friendly neighborhoods.
- Avoid monitoring private texts/conversations in favor of using parental controls/content filters to block age-inappropriate sites and specify when devices can/cannot be used.
- For teens (ages 13-18), increase their boundaries as they get older. Encourage part-time jobs (extra benefit if this involves caring for or mentoring younger children), have them help with appropriate tasks at home like doing their own laundry or cooking, and let them access transportation that makes sense for where you live.

Managing parental anxiety:

- Exposure. Start small and learn your child's capabilities, e.g. stay 20 feet behind them the first several times they walk to school alone.
- Provide structure. Structure is a pre-condition for rituals and activities that strengthen communities and help children develop a sense of belonging, even in a small family. Consider movie nights and phone-free shared meals.
- Watch for indicators of addiction and talk to pre-teens if their phone/technology is interfering in their daily life. Talk about exercising good judgment and staying safe online.
- Remember that a free-range approach to childhood leads to more independent, confident and capable young adults compared to intense over-protectiveness.
- Engage with neighbors and others in your community - and make sure your children do too.

In conclusion:

- We can implement common-sense boundaries and reforms to give our children a healthier, play-based upbringing.
- Children need to learn through play, but they are also capable of real independence.
- Independence is empowering, from earning and controlling their own money to getting from point A to B by themselves.
- The more we practice this as parents, the greater the long-term benefits for our children.