



How we are losing our children to the virtual world and jeopardising their mental health. Jonathan Haidt's new bestseller is a wake-up call.

Reading time 9 minutes

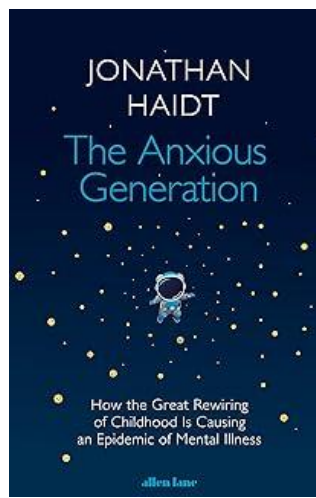
When a new book appears on my various information channels at the same time, it's usually worth looking into it and it was worth it. Very much so. Even if the news is frightening.

Imagine for a moment that your 10-year-old daughter is selected to take part in the first human settlement on Mars. She is ready to go, but needs your permission.

You accidentally learn that the billionaire architect of the mission failed to consider the risks posed by the toxic environment of the red planet, such as children developing "deformities of the skeleton, heart, eyes and brain".

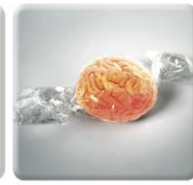
Would you still let her go?

With this thought-provoking piece, social psychology professor Jonathan Haidt sets the tone for everything that follows in his profound, captivating and ground-breaking new book "The Anxious Generation". Toxic red Mars is representative of the harmful world of social media. We ban travelling to Mars. We underestimate the fundamentally damaging effect of social media on children's brain development.



We no longer manage to anchor our children firmly in the non-digital reality. The result can no longer be ignored: Maldevelopments of the brain and heart - anxiety, depression, suicidal tendencies - are plaguing our youth.

Haidt is a man who wants to end this collective failure. He wants to prove that young people are experiencing a "tidal wave" of suffering. In one chapter and with a dozen carefully compiled diagrams, he shows the increase in mental illness and problems from 2012 onwards. Adolescent girls are the most affected, but boys and older teenagers are also suffering. The data comes from America, but the effect on European children's brains will have to be comparable.



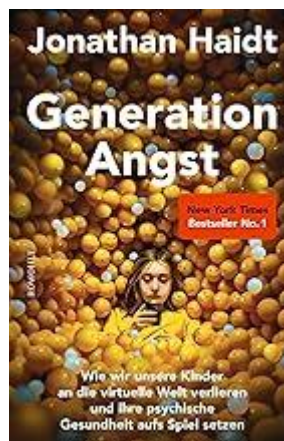
I see data from various studies that show that young people are having more and more problems. The [loneliness barometer](#) just presented by Federal Minister for Family Affairs Paus shows that 18 to 29-year-olds are the adult group that feels the loneliest. I could never have imagined that.

2012 coincides with the advent of what Haidt calls "phone-based childhood". Smartphones, crammed with social media apps and fuelled by high-speed internet, are ubiquitously broadcasting their siren song, which is addictive and constantly distracting. As a result, children are quickly whisked away into worlds that are beyond our control.

It wasn't just the phones. A second phenomenon went hand in hand with the decline of playful childhood. Even before the turn of the millennium, declining risk tolerance drove parents to fear-based over-education. This reduced children's unsupervised, self-determined playtime. Smartphones have further decimated this.

This keeps children out of discovery mode, where they face challenges, take risks and experience - the building blocks of antifragility or the ability to grow stronger through adversity. Compared to a generation before us, our kids are spending more time on their mobile phones and less on sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. While fewer hospital visits and teenage pregnancies are a benefit, low risk-taking and lack of resilience overall will affect their future independence. If we deprive children of the opportunity to have real social life experiences and the chance to experience self-efficacy, then we will create many weak, dependent

adults who will need more support and care from the welfare state. Or, as my colleague Florian Klaus puts it: kids are experiencing dopamine hacking with social media. An ultra-fast reward boost without having to do anything for it. Why then still face challenges in the real world, such as the risk of being turned down?

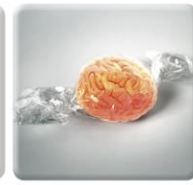


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Haidt argues that parents should become more like gardeners, creating conditions in which children can grow and thrive independently, and less like carpenters, working obsessively to control, mould and shape their offspring. We have overprotected our children in the real world, while we have underprotected them in the virtual world and left them too much to their own devices.

It's this one-two punch of smartphones and overprotective parenting, Haidt says, that has led to the major rewiring of childhood and the associated damage that leads to mental illness: social withdrawal, sleep deprivation, attention fragmentation and addiction.

He has a lot to say about each of these points. It is worth looking at them in detail.



Incidentally, the social context also plays a role in how strong an effect social media can have. More intensive real-life social structures mitigate the negative effect. Individualistic cultures intensify the effect. Everyone talks about this generation being the sovereign digital natives. Dependent followers are now probably the widespread reality.

Are there solutions to the problem? Yes, Haidt has studied it intensively. He is certain that drastic measures are needed to protect child development. The final sections of the book contain advice on reducing harmful, predatory aspects of technology and helping parents, educators and communities to garden more and carpenter less. Some tips will be familiar. Ban smartphones from school; give kids more independence for real-world playful development. Other advice might scare parents, but it's worth considering: no smartphones before high school (age 14); no social media before 16.

The suggestions sound almost impracticable, but Haidt is quite optimistic after many discussions with pupils. After all, the kids themselves realise that spending so many hours on their smartphones is not good for them. If the limits applied to everyone and were enforced, most of them would actually be in favour of doing without. Successful young influencers probably see it differently. School headmasters would probably also be in favour. Because, as Haidt quotes a secondary school headmaster, schools without a phone ban would be like a "zombie apocalypse with all these kids in the corridors who don't talk to each other". Before Haidt's book, I saw the draconian corona measures in Germany as the biggest cause of the kids' problems.

But in light of Haidt's research, the lockdowns and school closures have massively amplified the already ongoing effect of social media and helicopter parenting. Real contacts have now been replaced by social media for good, with the frightening consequences we are witnessing.

Now readers are probably wondering whether social media has the same effect on us adults? Haidt sees a big difference in the fact that GenY and GenX were still able to experience their socialisation in analogue form and should therefore have the emotional tools to deal with social media. But we see in people's toxic behaviour on social media that negative social effects also arise here, which can actually endanger the democratic tools of societies.

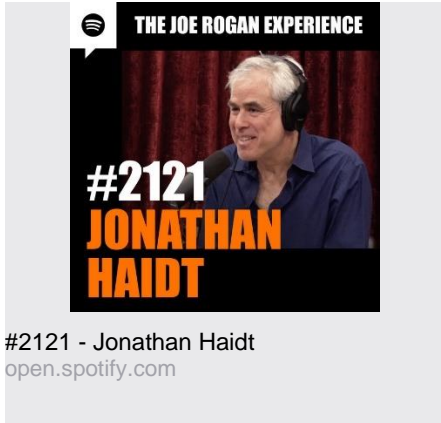
I recommend that all parents read the book. Podcasts can also be a good start. I particularly enjoyed two podcasts. One is the interview with Joe Rogan, one of the most successful podcasters in the world. It's a long interview, but Rogan keeps tweaking Haidt, as Rogan feels particularly at home in the digital world. Or the clever interview by Simon Sinek (Golden Circle). Just click on the links.

And now a little innovation for book reviews at the end: I try to summarise the book in one sentence:

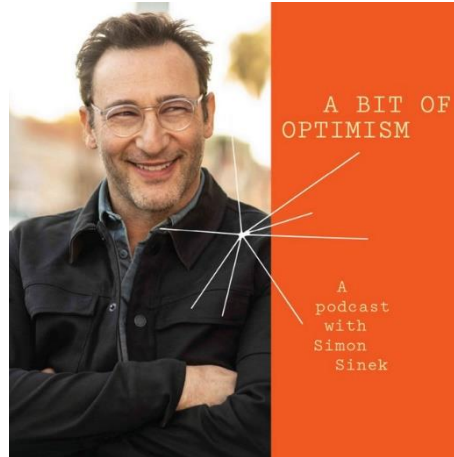
The Anxious Generation shows how smartphones, social media and helicopter parents have led to a deterioration in young people's mental health and offers workable solutions to help both our children and ourselves become mature, emotionally stable adults.



Sources:



#2121 - Jonathan Haidt
open.spotify.com



[The Anxious Generation](#)
[with social psychologist](#)
[Jonathan Haidt](#)

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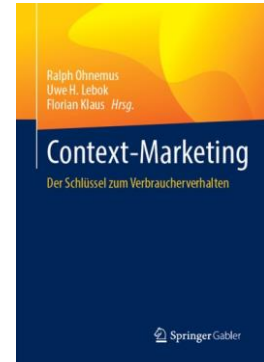


Book recommendation

By Ralph Ohnemus, Uwe H. Lebok, Florian Klaus:

Context marketing

The key to consumer behaviour for [ordering](#).



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