



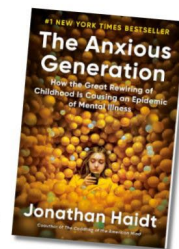
**Call to Action**

## **How To Reverse The Youth Mental Health Crisis**

**A Community Conversation**



Dr. Lisa Novak  
Facilitator



## **The Anxious Generation: A Community Call to Action**

September 30, 2024

CATCH recently hosted *The Anxious Generation: A Community Call to Action*, at Glenbrook North High School in Northbrook, IL. The program was facilitated by Dr. Lisa Novak, Licensed Clinical Psychologist; Director of Education, CATCH; and Co-Founder, Illuminate Psychological Assessments, PLLC.

The program focused on topics raised by Jonathan Haidt, author of the New York Times bestselling book [\*The Anxious Generation, How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness\*](#).

### **The Dilemma Parents Face Regarding Smartphones and Social Media**

Parents are struggling between allowing their children to have access to smartphones and social media before their brains are ready, or not allowing them access and risking their children feeling isolated and excluded.

### **The Great Rewiring of Childhood**

We have shifted over time from play-based childhood to phone-based childhood, starting with the advent of the smartphone in 2007. Additions of the App Store, “like”, “retweet” and “share” buttons, and front-facing cameras (for selfies), have dramatically changed what childhood looks like and contribute to today’s high rates of anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicide in children.

In the 1980s and 1990s, play-based childhood began to decline, with a culture of ‘safetyism’ – a focus on safety above all else, including less risky play, over-scheduled kids, and constant supervision. At the same time, there was a greater emphasis on grades, academics, more homework, and longer school days.

As a result, the problem is two-fold: (1) Over-parenting in the real world, and (2) Under-parenting online.

### **Brain Development in Children**

Although children’s brains are almost full size by age 5, many functions take several years to develop. Specifically, the pre-frontal cortex, which is responsible for decision-making, executive functioning, strategic thinking, inhibiting responses, understanding cause/effect relationships, etc., isn’t fully developed until the late 20’s. Until that time, kids make decisions largely based on their amygdala – the more emotional, primitive center of the brain. Because kids’ brains



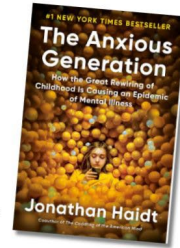
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develop through experiences, they need experiences – specifically free play -- to grow, learn, and develop.

### **What is needed for healthy brain development?**

- **Free play** -- play without structure or adult supervision (i.e., not a structured, soccer team practice). This allows kids to become self-reliant, make mistakes, and learn from them independently.
- **Synchronous experiences** – interacting and communicating directly with other people (i.e., not typing into a phone with prolonged pauses or avoidance).
- **Embodied experiences** – learning to respond with appropriate physical and facial expressions, including tone of voice, to navigate social dynamics.
- **Discover mode** – learning to explore, finding new experiences, and getting hurt/learning to recover, rather than Defend mode (staying protected, safe).

*"Just as the immune system must be exposed to germs, and trees must be exposed to wind, children require exposure to setbacks, failures, shocks, and stumbles in order to develop strength and self-reliance. Overprotection interferes with this development and renders young people more likely to be fragile and fearful as adults." – Jonathan Haidt*

### **How the Brain is Impacted by Puberty**

- The brain **changes rapidly** during puberty, as it builds regulation skills. There is also a lot of rewiring that occurs in the brain at this time, and it is said that "neurons that fire together, rewire together", so practicing skills enable them to occur more naturally over time (e.g., practicing gratitude).
- This is considered a "**sensitive period**" because although the brain is more receptive to learning and adapting to experiences, it is also more vulnerable to the stressors it is encountering.
- **Developing skepticism** is a skill that is developed around age 14. Prior to this age, kids are less adept at thinking critically about what they are hearing/seeing; they tend to accept things as "facts".

### **Harms of Smartphones and Social Media:**

- **Social deprivation** – Time spent with friends in person has dropped dramatically. As a result, kids are less able to practice their social skills, including resolving social problems, and modulating their voice, tone, and expressions when communicating with others.
- **Sleep deprivation** – Kids are getting less sleep overall and less quality sleep, which is critical for brain development. Kids need 8-9 hours of sleep per night, and the deficit is causing mood, attention, and regulation disorders.



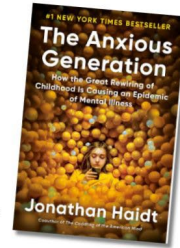
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- **Attention fragmentation** – Kids are having difficulty staying focused because they are receiving notifications on their phones all day long, even if their phone is silenced. It prevents them from having uninterrupted time to practice new skills, develop their executive functioning skills, and learn/do their work.
- **Addiction** – Smartphones are designed to hook kids; the dopamine release is pleasurable, but it does not lead to satisfaction. Many kids have become so addicted to their phones that they can't do their work, interact with others, etc.
- **Other harms** – These include exposure to harmful/age-inappropriate content, cancel culture/bullying, and greater emphasis on external validation.

### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

- Chasing Childhood (documentary) – [chasingchildhoodoc.com](https://chasingchildhoodoc.com)
- Let Grow Project, by Lenore Skenazy: [letgrow.org](https://letgrow.org)
- Screenagers: [screenagersmovie.com](https://screenagersmovie.com)
- Common Sense Media: [commonsensemedia.org](https://commonsensemedia.org)
- Wait Until 8<sup>th</sup>: [waituntil8th.org](https://waituntil8th.org)