

# Free the Anxious Generation



**For Parents**



## The Problem: The New Phone-based Childhood

Adolescents are in a mental health crisis. Major depressive episodes among American teens have more than doubled since 2010 as their social lives moved onto smartphones loaded with social media apps. Self-harm and suicide rates are way up too.

The only available explanation for why this happened in many countries at the same time is that the ancient “play-based childhood” was replaced by the “phone-based childhood” in the early 2010s. Specifically, children and adolescents began to spend much more time on smartphones, social media, video games, and porn, and much less time doing healthy activities such as face-to-face interactions with friends and family, sleep, exercise, and reading books.

Many parents feel hopeless or resigned. They don’t want their child to spend all day swiping at a screen, but they are afraid to let their kids have adventures in “the real world.” And they are also afraid to take away their kids’ phones or social media, lest they consign their child to isolation, because “everybody else” is spending all day online.



## The Solution:

Parents can coordinate with each other to establish four new norms that will roll back the phone-based childhood, improve family life, and protect their children’s mental health.



**Take the steps!**





## Take the steps!

1

### No smartphones before high school

There's strength in numbers. Link up with the parents of your child's friends to commit together to waiting until high school (at least) before giving a smartphone. Nostalgia is big right now; bring back the flip phone! It did no harm to the millennials!

- If you live in the U.S., see [this list](http://waituntil8th.org) from [waituntil8th.org](http://waituntil8th.org) of smartphone alternatives.
- If you live in the UK, see [this list](http://delaysmartphones.org.uk) from [delaysmartphones.org.uk](http://delaysmartphones.org.uk).

2

### No social media until 16

Social media platforms expose children to a wide variety of harms, including sextortion, feelings of inadequacy, and contact with ill-intentioned strangers; there is no way to make it appropriate for children. Link up with the parents of your child's friends to commit together to not allowing your children to open social media accounts until 16.

3

### Advocate for phone-free schools

Policy changes follow public opinion. If other parents in your kids' schools share your concerns (and they do!), then gather them together to sign and send a petition to the school's leadership asking for the school to go phone-free and to offer more free play and independence. When children are in school they should be paying attention to their teachers and to each other, not to their phones.

4

### Give more independence, free play, and responsibility in the real world

Kids develop social skills and overcome anxiety naturally through independence and unsupervised play. This means letting them do more activities and errands on their own, unsupervised, in the real world. From second or third grade on, kids can walk to school (ideally in a group, which is more fun), or they can walk or ride a bicycle to a nearby store to buy a few groceries. Teens can grab pizza with friends or get part-time jobs. Schools can help parents to foster this independence by assigning The Let Grow Experience (which gets kids doing new things on their own) and starting a Play Club for students in K-8: keeping the playground open before or after school as a no-phone-zone for mixed-age free play with minimal adult intervention.

Note that the cost of these measures, combined, is essentially zero.

## To learn and do more, check out these resources:

[AnxiousGeneration.com](http://AnxiousGeneration.com) for more about the problem and what schools can do to help. Sign up for our mailing list.

[The Anxious Generation](#): Buy the book!

[LetGrow.org](http://LetGrow.org) to find manuals for teachers to implement the [Let Grow Experience](#) and [Play Club](#).

[PhoneFreeSchools.org](http://PhoneFreeSchools.org) and [PhoneFreeSchoolsMovement.org](http://PhoneFreeSchoolsMovement.org) for support in implementing phone-free policies.

[AnxiousGeneration.com/aligned](http://AnxiousGeneration.com/aligned) to see our allied organizations

[ConstructiveDialogue.org](http://ConstructiveDialogue.org) to try out the Perspectives Program, to teach skills of productive disagreement to high school students.

Subscribe to Jonathan Haidt's free Substack: [AfterBabel.com](http://AfterBabel.com).