

The Mass Destruction of Human Potential



Jonathan Haidt

Digital Humanities

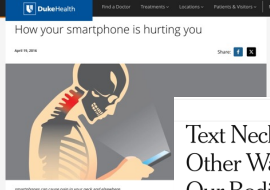
Sept 30, 2025



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How your smartphone is hurting you

April 10, 2014

The New York Times

Text Neck, Pinkie Pain and Other Ways Phones Can Wreck Our Bodies


Health providers say they are seeing more patients than ever with pain and joint ailments in their hands, necks, shoulders and upper backs — and that mobile phones are most likely playing a part.

3

The Economist

Short-sightedness has become an epidemic

To fight it, schools should send their students outside



Jan 19, 2013

"The evidence suggests that regular exposure to bright daylight is vital in properly controlling the growth of children's eyes. Too little light leads to elongated, short-sighted eyes."

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Children's myopia risk linked to smartphone use, study says

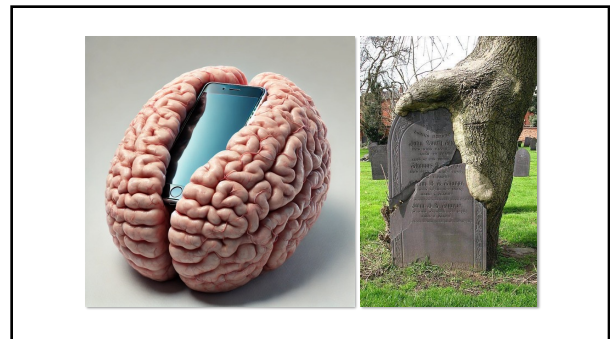
JUNE 18, 2019

Researchers found an association between myopia and prolonged smartphone use, begging the question: What does the future hold for millions of kids growing up in the digital age?

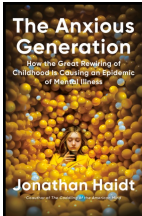


Myopic children use twice as much smartphone data each day as their non-myopic peers, a recent study found, leading researchers to ponder whether kids' unparalleled connectivity from such a young age exacerbates myopia risk.

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

The Great Rewiring of Childhood:

Act 1: The play-based childhood faded out gradually, 1990-2010

Act 2: The phone-based childhood stormed in with the iPhone, social media, and high-speed internet, 2010-2015

We have overprotected our children in the real world and underprotected them online.

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The Mass Destruction of Human Potential

The Damage:

- Physical harms
- Mental illness
- Why is this happening?
- Attention fragmentation and educational decline
- Girls vs. boys
- Spiritual degradation

The Solution: Collective Action

- Four new norms
- Europe should lead



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The Mass Destruction of Human Potential

The Damage:

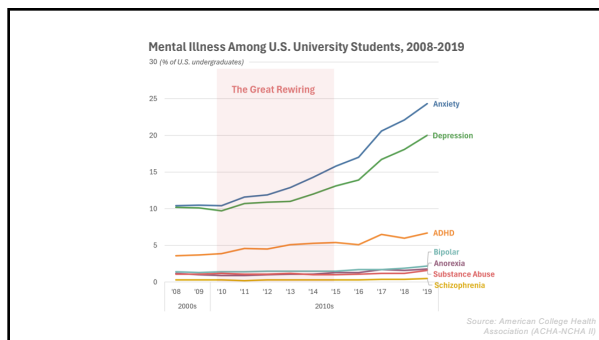
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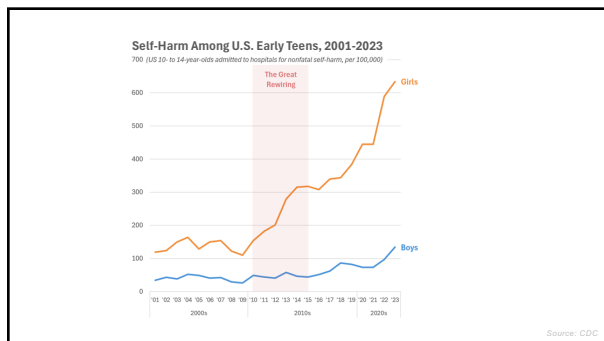
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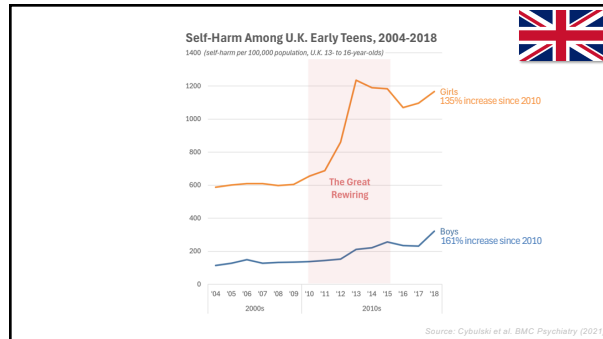
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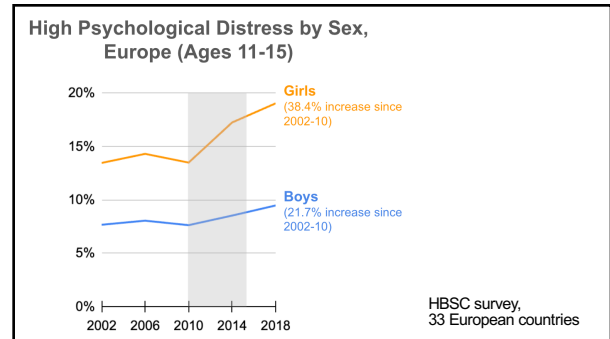
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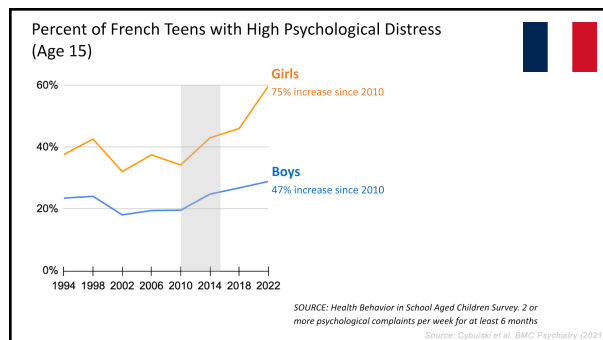
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Only one theory can explain why it happened internationally, beginning around 2012

The Great Rewiring of Childhood:

Act 1: The End of Play-Based Childhood (1990-2010)

Act 2: The Birth of Phone-Based Childhood (2010-2015)

Jonathan Haidt

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The Great Rewiring of Childhood

Millennial Puberty (1995-2011)

A tool for connecting with friends and family:

- No front-facing camera
- No internet
- No Instagram
- No attention economy

Gen Z Puberty (2012-)

A portal by which companies and strangers can get to you:

- Front-facing camera
- High speed internet, Instagram, etc
- Unlimited data and texts
- Unlimited interruptions
- You're the product in the attention econ.

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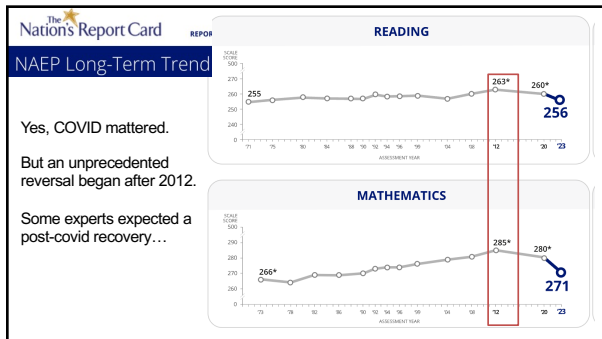
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The Atlantic DECEMBER 19, 2023

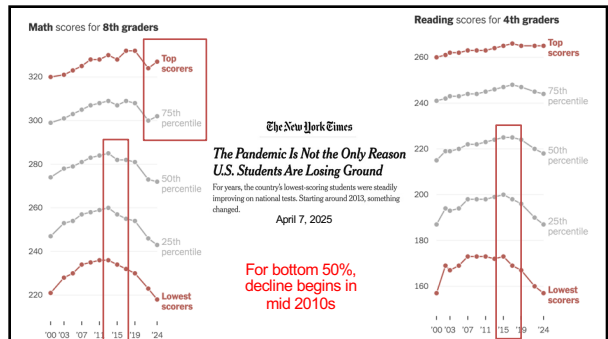
It Sure Looks Like Phones Are Making Students Dumber

Test scores have been falling for years—even before the pandemic.
By Derek Thompson

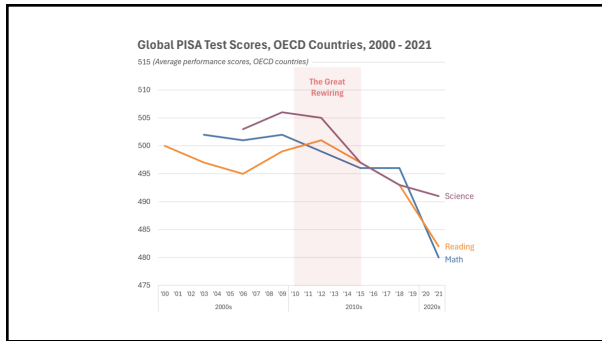
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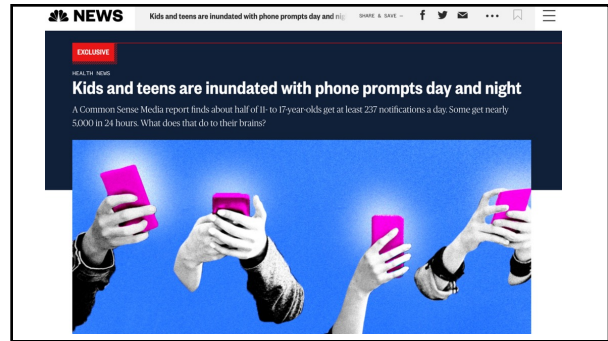
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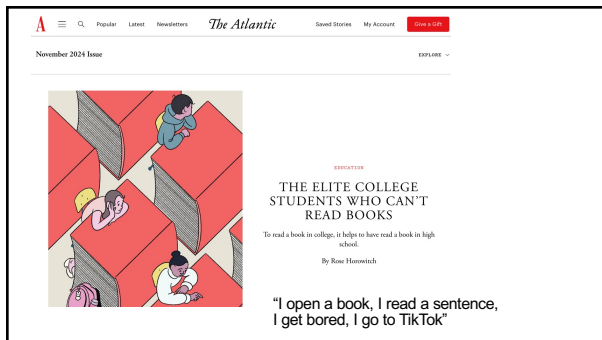
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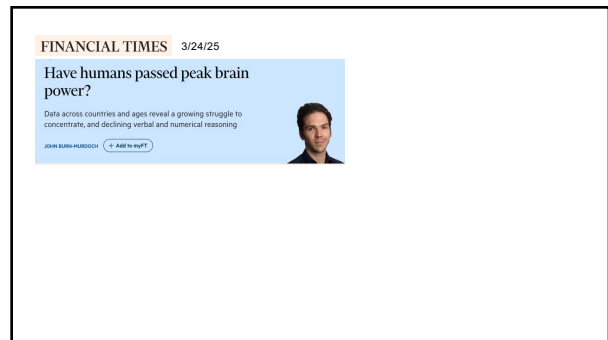
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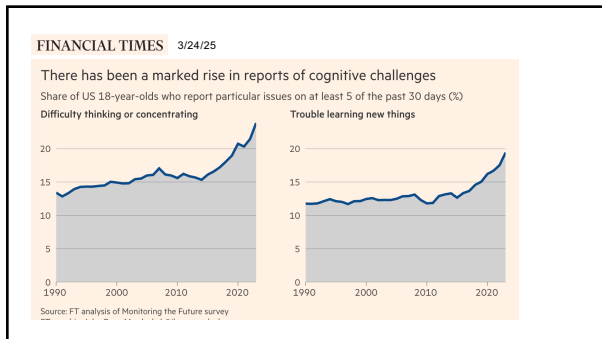
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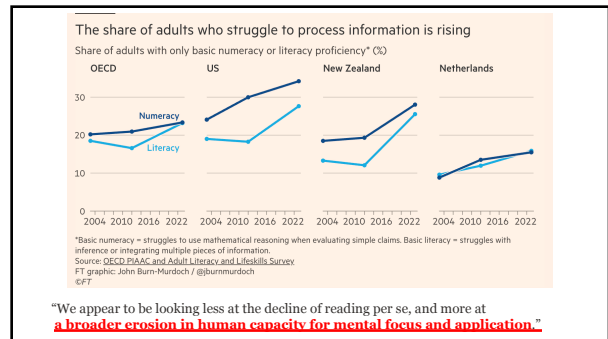
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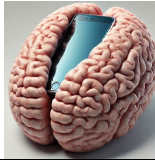
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Why Social Media Harms Girls More (Ch. 6)

1. Visual social comparison (Instagram is the worst.)
2. Perfectionism
3. Relational aggression
4. Girls share emotions, more than boys.
5. Girls are more susceptible to "sociogenic" transmission (e.g., TikTok Tourette's syndrome)
6. Girls are more subject to sexual predation and harassment.

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Fishing for boys using dopamine as bait



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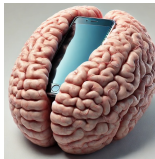
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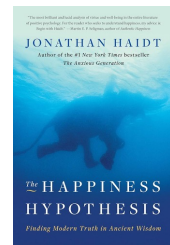


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Declines in Spiritual Development (Ch. 8)

1. Shared and unifying sacredness
2. Embodiment
3. Stillness, silence, and focus
4. Transcending the self
5. Be slow to anger, quick to forgive
6. Find awe in nature
7. The God-shaped hole

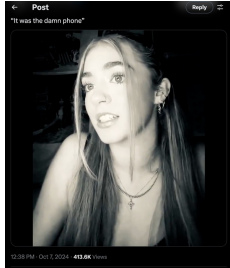
A phone-based life blocks most paths to spiritual experience and growth



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Kori Jane

Post
"It was the damn phone"

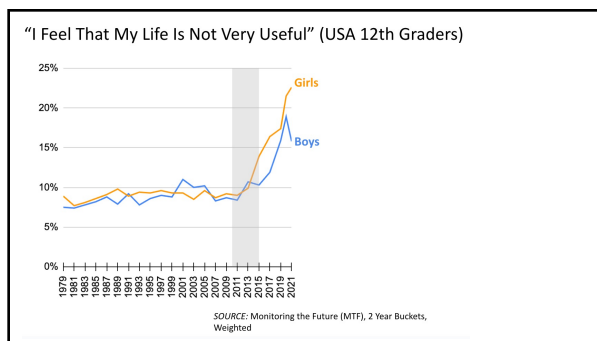


"[the phone is] the medicine that is surely making our souls die"

"I know it's poison but I drink anyway"

"Our parents were right, it was the damn phones"

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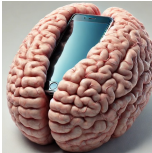
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Four norms to escape collective action problems

1. No smartphones before age 14
2. No social media before 16
3. Phone-free schools
4. More childhood independence and free play

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Four norms to escape collective action problems

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—A norm, not a law; public health campaign
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Four norms to escape collective action problems

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—Need law! Raise age to 16 (not 15)
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--France led on this! But must go full day
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--Beware creeping Anglo norms of overprotection

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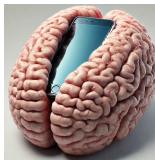
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So far, the Anglo countries are leading

UK: Online Safety Act, 2023

Australia: Raising the age to 16, plus phone free

US: 19 states are now fully phone-free; 19 others partial

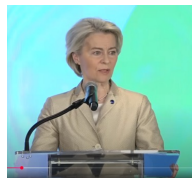
EU: DSA seems more concerned with protecting children's data than protecting their development

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But France and the EU are making commitments



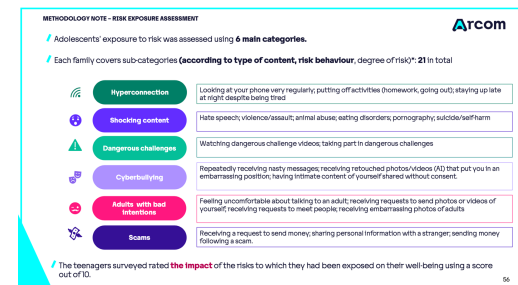
"We will act"



"I will establish a panel of experts to assess what steps make sense at the European level."

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ARCOM: Kids are experiencing multiple dangers online, regularly!



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Sweden leads in reversing the ed-tech mistake

The Guardian

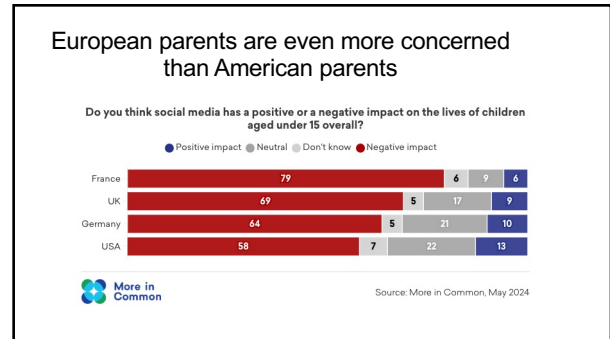
Switching off: Sweden says back-to-basics schooling works on paper

Schools minister Lotta Edholm moves students off digital devices and on to books and handwriting, with teachers and experts debating the pros and cons



"The return to more traditional ways of learning is a response to politicians and experts questioning whether Sweden's hyper-digitalised approach to education, including the introduction of tablets in nursery schools, had led to a decline in basic skills.... **"There's clear scientific evidence that digital tools impair rather than enhance student learning."** Sweden's Karolinska Institute, a highly respected medical school focused on research, said in a statement in August."

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Visit AnxiousGeneration.com


Do you have influence/contacts in your country?

The Amazing Generation Movement

Greater Good's bestselling book *The Anxious Generation* inspired a global conversation that grew into TAG, a movement advocating four new norms to reverse childhood.

Our Mission:

Reverse the two major interlocking changes to childhood: the loss of the play-based childhood and the rise of the phone-based childhood.



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The book launch catalyzed a global revolution.

Parents, physicians, school leaders, and policymakers are taking bold steps to end the phone-based childhood.



Alexa Arnold
Chief of Staff and Managing Director


Read Biography

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Together, we can reclaim childhood in the real world.

Join us:

- Visit AnxiousGeneration.com
- Visit LetGrow.org
- Subscribe to AfterBabel.com
- Contact Alexa@AnxiousGeneration.com



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