Is it Monday Yet? 2/28/25

The Anxious Generation Reading Group: Takeaways and Resources for Parents

From September through January, a small group of parents, students, and I met periodically to discuss our reading of Jonathan Haidt's The Anxious Generation. My thanks to Hemant Bhanoo (Dad of Student Council President Naina '25 and Keshav '29) for the inspiration and leadership, and to my stalwart reading/discussion partner-parents Lee Edward (Dad of Nora '31), Mark Urista (Dad of Kira '34), and Rebecca Terry-Novak (Mom of Ollie '26 and Mylo '30), and to our student participants, Naina, and Ollie.

Oftentimes throughout our meetings, I found myself thinking, "Wow, I wish we had all of our parents and students engaged in this discussion," and then realized that many of you probably were already engaged in discussions of this nature, likely including your own children… and then I found myself wishing I were a part of THOSE discussions.

In this spirit, I thought I would devote my February installment of IIMY? to The Anxious Generation reading group's takeaways, and maybe in so doing, get close to making you a part of these discussions.

For those of you who do not know the title, <u>The Anxious Generation</u> explores the alarming rise in adolescent anxiety, depression, and social dysfunction, particularly in Western societies, due to the widespread use of smartphones, social media, and a decline of childhood independence including related impacts on a child's ability to think critically. Together, these factors have created an environment that is psychologically troubling for young people.

Below are our top five takeaways from Haidt's book, along with actionable steps our Explorer parents can take to mitigate the negative impacts of these factors in the lives of their children.

1. The Decline of Independent Childhood

One of Haidt's primary arguments is that children today are far less independent than previous generations. Overprotective parenting, resulting from increased fear of crime and accidents, has led to a dramatic reduction in free play, exploration, and unstructured social interactions. This decline in independence, and related impact on their ability to think critically, has contributed to increased anxiety and decreased resilience in children (at the same time parents seem to be super permissive and hands off in the activities their children are engaging in, in the virtual world).

Actionable Steps for Parents:
- Encourage independent outdoor play and socialization with minimal adult interference.
- Organize community efforts to create safe play spaces where children can explore without constant or obvious supervision.
- Engage in play with your children and model "doing" risky play safely vs. avoiding risky play altogether.
- Gradually expose children to age-appropriate risks to build resilience and problem-solving skills.
- Allow your children the time they need to work through tough decisions on their own before you jump in and save the day, or before they resort to simply "Googling it" or, even more detrimental to their critical thinking skill development, "ChatGPT'ing it"!

2. The Rise of Smartphone-Centric Adolescence

Haidt presents extensive data showing that the introduction of smartphones, especially around 2010, coincides with a sharp increase in mental health struggles among adolescents. He argues that social media platforms, particularly Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, exacerbate body image issues, cyberbullying, and addictive behaviors, especially among teenage girls.

Actionable Steps for Parents:
- Delay giving children smartphones until at least middle school or later (he advocates the [Wait Until 8 Program](#), deferring smartphones until high school).
- If a phone is important (and there could be lots of reasons for this), consider giving them a flip phone (Fairly Limited Intelligence Phone… see what I did there?), which are certainly more durable and less expensive than the typical smartphone.
- If your child has a smartphone, use parental controls and monitoring apps to limit screen time and website access (knowing that this could be a game of whack-a-mole and that they could very well disable this by the time you pat yourself on the back).
- Normalize the reality that a phone of any kind is a privilege and that, as a condition of ownership, since YOU are paying the bills, YOU have access to their password and login credentials.
- Establish tech-free zones and times at home, such as during meals and before bedtime, and (maybe harder to do, but essential) model this behavior yourself.

3. The Effects of Social Media on Mental Health

Haidt emphasizes that social media fosters an unhealthy comparison culture, where adolescents are constantly bombarded with curated images of others' lives. He also discusses the role of industry-created algorithms to keep users engaged through emotionally triggering content, which can lead to addiction, increased stress, depression, and anxiety, not much different from algorithms used by casinos and online gambling sites *that know just how much to let you win* to keep you engaged.

Actionable Steps for Parents:
- Encourage children to engage in offline hobbies, such as sports, arts, or reading, to counterbalance social media's effects.
- Have open conversations about the deceptive nature of social media and how it can distort reality.
- Encourage children to limit their use of social media and take regular digital detoxes as a family.

4. Sleep Deprivation and Cognitive Impairment

The increased use of screens, particularly at night, has led to widespread sleep deprivation among teenagers. Haidt highlights the link between insufficient sleep and increased rates of anxiety, depression, and poor academic performance, in part because ready access to content available via smartphones has transplanted the need to think critically or to do the work needed to develop higher order thinking skills.

Actionable Steps for Parents:
- Enforce a strict no-screen policy at least an hour before bedtime.
- Ensure that devices are charged outside of bedrooms overnight.
- Educate children on the importance of sleep and create a bedtime routine.
- Know that blue light blocking glasses and other screen filters are not necessarily the answer (current research is spotty except in rare cases)

5. The Loss of Meaningful Social Interaction

Haidt argues that the shift from in-person to online interaction has hindered children's ability to develop deep, meaningful relationships. The rise of digital communication has led to increased loneliness, social awkwardness, and difficulty navigating real-world social scenarios.

Actionable Steps for Parents:
- Encourage in-person socialization by facilitating activities such as group sports, family gatherings, and community events.
- Limit the use of digital communication tools in favor of face-to-face interactions.
- Model healthy social behaviors by prioritizing in-person interactions over screen time in your own life.

The Path Forward

What I really liked about Haidt's The Anxious Generation is that it is not another sensationalized revelation demonizing technology or "the sky is falling" cataloging of the challenges of modern childhood. Indeed, there is not a lot here that you have not already heard elsewhere, but what it does bring to the discussion is updated research and a specific call to action regarding smartphones. This is not an attempt to blanket criticize the use of all screens or phones by our children, past examples of which have always made me feel like the worst father alive, but a specific calling out of smartphones, and an offering some actionable steps parents can take to respond.

His findings align with other psychological and sociological research you might want to explore, including Jean Twenge's iGen, which also discusses the impact of smartphones and social media on Gen Z. Similarly, Sherry Turkle's Alone Together warns of the dangers of over-reliance on digital communication at the cost of our emotional lives and actual, authentic human connections.

For me, the most important idea in Haidt's entire book is that parents, educators, and policymakers need to take proactive measures to mitigate these harmful trends. Some of these measures you have seen play out at Ashbrook School, in our decision not to

move to a 1:1 environment (where each student has their own dedicated device they carry from class to class, and all teachers utilize these devices to teach, assign, and assess), or in our decision to maintain the sacredness of the teaching-learning space by making our campus phone free (a policy that was recently updated by adding the prohibition of smartwatches). As Haidt writes, "children need independence to grow, challenge to thrive, and real-world socialization to develop." By delaying smartphone use, fostering real-world play, and prioritizing in-person connections, parents can help their children to be independent while also safeguarding their mental health and well-being.