

PART 3
Chapter 5
The Great Rewiring
The Rise of the Phone-Based Childhood

IN SUMMARY

In this chapter Haidt describes the four foundational harms of the phone– based childhood. These are profound changes to childhood caused by the rapid technological shift of the early 2010s. Each one is foundational because it affects the development of multiple social, emotional, and cognitive abilities

The sheer amount of time that adolescents spend with their phones is staggering! Even when compared with the high levels of screen time they had before the invention of the iPhone. Studies of time use routinely find that the average teen reports spending more than seven hours a day on screen–based leisure activities (and that is not including school and homework). The opportunity cost of a phone–based childhood refers to everything that children do less of once they get unlimited round–the–clock access to the Internet.

The **FIRST** foundational harm is **social deprivation**. When American adolescents moved on to smart phones, time with friends in face–to face settings plummeted immediately, from 122 minutes per day in 2012 down to 67 minutes per day in 2019. TODAY’S NUMBERS ARE EVEN LESS. Time with friends dropped further because of COVID restrictions, but Gen Z was already socially distanced before COVID restrictions were put in place.

The **SECOND** fundamental harm is **sleep deprivation**. As soon as adolescents moved from basic phones to smart phones, their sleep declined in both quantity and quality, around the developed world. Longitudinal studies show that smartphone use came first and was followed by sleep deprivation.

The **THIRD** fundamental harm is **attention fragmentation**. Attention is the ability to stay on one mental road while many off–ramps beckon. Staying on a road, staying on a task, is a feature of maturity and a sign of a good executive function. But smart phones are kryptonite for attention. Many adolescents get hundreds of notifications per day, meaning that they rarely have five or 10 minutes to think without an interruption.

There is evidence that the fragmentation of attention in early adolescence caused by problematic use of social media and video games may interfere with the development of executive function.

The **FOURTH** fundamental harm is **addiction**. The behaviorists discovered that learning, for animals, is "the wearing smooth of a path in the brain." The developers of the most successful social media apps used advanced behaviorist techniques to “hook” children into becoming heavy users of their products.

Dopamine release is pleasurable, but it does not trigger a feeling of satisfaction. Rather, it makes you want more of what ever you did to trigger the release. The

addiction researcher, Anna Lembke, says that the universal symptoms of withdrawal are "anxiety, irritability, insomnia, and dysphoria." She and other researchers find that many adolescents have developed behavioral addictions that are very much like the way that people develop addictions to slot machine gambling, with profound consequences for their well-being, their social development, and their families.

When we put these four foundational harm together, they explain why mental health got so much worse so suddenly as soon as childhood became phone-based.

Reflection

Dear Parents,

As part of our ongoing reflection on *The Anxious Generation* by Jonathan Haidt, I would like to share a few thoughts on Chapter 5, which introduces what he calls the **four foundational harms** affecting children and adolescents growing up in a phone-based childhood.

What this research is secular, it aligns closely with what we observe daily in schools—and with what our Catholic faith teaches us about the dignity of the human person, the importance of relationships, and the need for balance, rest, and self-mastery.

1. Social deprivation

Haidt explains that increased time on phones and social media has led to a decrease in real, face-to-face interactions. Children are spending less time playing freely, resolving conflicts, and building friendships in person. Play dates are becoming fewer and fewer as children choose online gaming for their interactions.

From a Catholic perspective, this is especially concerning because we believe we are **created for relationship**—with God and with one another. Children learn empathy, patience, and forgiveness, and love through real encounters, not curated online ones. When these opportunities are reduced, social and emotional growth can suffer.

2. Sleep deprivation

Screens—especially in bedrooms—interfere with healthy sleep patterns. Notifications, late-night scrolling, and the mental stimulation of online content disrupt the rest children need... and often that of adults.

Sleep is not a luxury; it is essential. In our faith tradition, **rest is sacred**. God himself rested on the seventh day. When children are chronically tired, it affects their mood, learning, spiritual well-being, and ability to regulate emotions.

3. Attention fragmentation

Constant notifications and rapid–fire content train the brain to shift attention endlessly. Haidt notes that this makes it harder for children to focus, persevere through challenges, or engage deeply with learning.

As a Catholic school, we strive to help students develop **attention, contemplation, and wonder**—skills necessary not only for academics, but for prayer and discernment. A fragmented attention span makes it difficult for children to listen for God’s voice or to be fully present to others.

4. Addiction

Many digital platforms are intentionally designed to keep users engaged for as long as possible. For developing brains, this can lead to compulsive use and difficulty setting healthy limits.

Our face calls us to **freedom and self–control**, not dependence. When a child feels unable to put a device down, it can crowd out family life, prayer, outdoor play, and creativity.

A Shared Responsibility

Haidt is clear that this is not about blaming parents or children. Rather, it is a call to **intentional, collective action**. Schools and families must work together to set developmentally appropriate boundaries that protect childhood.

At our school, we remain committed to nurturing the whole child— **mind, body, and soul**—by encouraging personal interaction, healthy routines, meaningful learning, and a strong moral foundation rooted in Christ.

Thank you for partnering with us in this important work. Please know that we approach these conversations with care, compassion, and a shared desire to help our children grow into joyful, resilient, faith– filled young people.

May God continue to bless your families and guide us all in wisdom.

Grace and Peace,
Mrs. Thompson