

Chapter 4

Puberty and the Blocked Transition to Adulthood

In summary

Early puberty is a period of rapid brain rewiring, second only to the first few years of life. Neural pruning and myelination are occurring at a very rapid rate, guided by the adolescents experiences. We should be concerned about those experiences and not let strangers and algorithms choose them.

Safetyism is an experience blocker. When we make children's safety a quasi-sacred value and don't allow them to take any risks, we block them from overcoming anxiety, learning to manage risk, and learning to be self-governing, all of which are essential for becoming healthy and competent adults.

Smartphones are a second kind of experience blocker. Once they enter a child's life, they push out or reduce all other forms of non-phone-based experience, which is the kind that their experience-expectant brains most need.

Rites of passage of the curated sets of experiences that human societies arrange to help adolescents make the transition to adulthood. It is noted that these rights usually have a separation phase, a transformation phase, and a reincorporation phase.

Western societies have eliminated many rights of passage, and the digital world that opened up in the 1990s eventually buried most milestones and obscured the path to adulthood. Once children began spending much or most of their time online, the inputs to their developing brains became undifferentiated torrents of stimuli with no age grading or age restrictions.

A society that is large, diverse, and secular (such as the United States or the UK) might still agreed to set to a set of milestones that mark stepwise increases in freedoms and responsibilities.

COMMENTS

1. "Our good intentions may be working against our children."

Chapter 4 challenges us to reflect honestly on how modern parenting—though loving and protective— may be unintentionally limiting children's growth. Many of us were raised with far more independence than our children have today. Haidt's research shows that constant adult intervention can actually **increase** anxiety rather than reduce it.

2. "Children need real play to build real confidence "

Haidt emphasizes that unstructured, child-led play teaches problem-solving, builds social skills, allows children to experience manageable failures, and strengthens emotional resilience. When children resolve conflicts on the playground without adults stepping in immediately, they learn skills that no lesson can teach. Not every scraped knee or hurt feeling is a crisis—it is often a lesson learned

3. "Risk is not the enemy— fear is."

Chapter 4 distinguishes between danger and reasonable risk. Climbing, exploring, negotiating rules— these experiences teach judgment and courage. Children who never practice risk in small ways are more fearful when real challenges arise.

4. "When adults manage everything, children manage nothing."

Haidt explains that constant adult oversight can prevent children from learning self-regulation, undermine confidence, increase dependency and anxiety. Sometimes the most loving thing we can do is step back. Children grow when they discover "I can handle this"

5. "School and home must work together."

At school, we intentionally foster healthy independence, social problem solving, and resilience. We ask parents /guardians to support this at home by allowing more unstructured time, fewer adult-managed solutions and fewer screens. This builds trust and unity between families and school.

6. Practical takeaways for parents ask yourself this week

Where can I step back just a little? Could my child walk ahead of me, solve a peer conflict, or play without a schedule? These small changes can have a big impact on anxiety.

Our goal as a Catholic school is not just academic success, but the formation of confident, resilient children who know they are loved by God and capable of meeting life's challenges. Chapter 4 reminds us that freedom, play, and trust are essential tools in that formation.

This concludes Part 2, which presented the lead-up to the Great Rewiring of Childhood that occurred between 2010 and 2015.

Jonathan Haidt explained why human childhood has the unique features that it has and why a play- based childhood is so well matched to those features. He showed evidence that the play- based childhood was in retreat well before the arrival of smart phones.

Now we're ready to move on to Part 3, in which he tells the story of what happened when adolescents transitioned from basic phones to smart phones, which began in the late 2000s and accelerated in the early 2010s.

He'll present the evidence that the new phone-based childhood that emerged in those years is bad for children and adolescents, and he will show that the harm goes **far beyond** increases in mental illness.