

Vol. 6 Principal's Acorn Ally- Together Nurturing Acorns Into Mighty Oaks

Chapter 4: Puberty & the Blocked Transition to Adulthood

In Chapter 4, *Jonathan Haidt*, focuses on how societal shifts have delayed the natural process of growing into independence.

He begins the chapter by explaining how brain development in childhood and adolescence is shaped by experience. Early in life, the brain undergoes rapid growth, with neurons forming countless connections. Between birth and age **6**, the brain is especially plastic, meaning it is highly sensitive to new experiences. Through a process called **myelination**, these connections are strengthened and made more efficient, while unused connections are pruned away. This makes early childhood and adolescence **sensitive periods**—times when the brain is particularly open to learning and adapting based on real-world experiences. From ages **7 to 12**, children refine their motor skills, social abilities, and emotional regulation, largely through active play and direct interaction with the world. If children do not engage in hands-on, independent activities during these crucial years, they may struggle to develop essential problem-solving, emotional regulation, and resilience skills later on.

In the past, puberty (around ages **11–13** for girls and **12–14** for boys) marked the beginning of a gradual shift toward adult responsibilities. Adolescents took on meaningful roles within their families and communities, gaining confidence and resilience through these experiences. However, Haidt identifies two “**experience blockers**”, known as **safetyism** and **smartphones** that interfere with this natural development.

Safetyism, the belief that children should be shielded from all risks and discomfort, has led to increased adult intervention in nearly every aspect of a child’s life. While well-intended, this overprotection prevents children from learning how to assess and manage risks on their own. When we remove opportunities for kids to climb trees, walk to a friend’s house, or solve minor conflicts without adult involvement, we deprive them of the experiences that build resilience and self-reliance. When I was a preteen it was a norm for children to roam the neighborhood after school playing independently, as well as have small responsibilities. Now, many children remain under close adult supervision even into their teenage years, delaying the development of key life skills.

Additionally, **smartphones** have replaced real-world engagement. Instead of learning through direct experiences—working, problem-solving, and navigating face-to-face relationships—many children and teens spend their time in virtual spaces that offer constant stimulation but little personal growth. This shift disrupts brain development during critical sensitive periods, leaving young people less equipped to handle the challenges of adulthood. By **ages 13–18**, teens should be practicing independence through work, managing their own schedules, and navigating complex social situations. Today, many teens struggle with anxiety and uncertainty, lacking the foundational experiences needed to build confidence.



Building a Ladder from Childhood to Adulthood

Haidt argues that children need a gradual path to independence—like climbing a ladder, step by step—rather than being thrown into adulthood unprepared. In previous generations, this ladder was built through increasing responsibilities:

- By **ages 5–7**, children engaged in free play, learned basic problem-solving, and took on simple responsibilities at home.
- By **ages 8–10**, they had greater independence in their neighborhoods, ran small errands, and resolved minor conflicts without adult help.
- By **ages 11–13**, they contributed more at home, learned to navigate public spaces alone, and gained skills through structured activities like sports or clubs.
- By **ages 14–16**, they worked part-time jobs, managed their schedules, and took on responsibilities that prepared them for adulthood.

Today, many children reach adolescence without having taken these steps, leading to anxiety and uncertainty about how to handle independence. By blocking real-world experiences and increasing risk management on behalf of our children, we unintentionally create more anxious, less confident young adults. Haidt stresses that while safety and caution are important, children also need opportunities to take age-appropriate risks, experience small failures, and learn how to recover from them. This is how resilience is built. Parents and educators can help by intentionally creating opportunities for children to practice independence—allowing them to make mistakes, solve problems, and gradually take on more responsibility. By understanding how experience shapes brain development, we can create environments that support healthy growth and prepare our children for the future.

Sincerely,
Mrs. Christieson