

Vol. 7 Principal's Acorn Ally- Together Nurturing Acorns Into Mighty Oaks

Chapter 5: The Four Foundational Harms: Social Deprivation, Sleep Deprivation, Attention Fragmentation, and Addiction

Daily Time with Friends, by Age Group

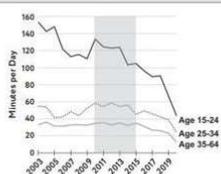


Figure 5.1. Daily average time spent with friends in minutes. Only the youngest age group shows a sharp drop before the 2020 data collection, which was performed after COVID restrictions had begun. (Source: American Time Use Study.)

As I continue reading *The Anxious Generation* by Jonathan Haidt, I'm reflecting on the ways childhood has changed and how those changes are impacting our children's emotional health, even here in our K-5 classrooms.

Chapter 5 focuses on a major cultural shift to what Haidt refers to as the phone-based childhood. What's been lost is real-world experiences that build confidence, independence, creativity, and emotional resilience.

Below you will learn about four foundational harms that have emerged in this new "phone-based childhood":

Social Deprivation

One of the biggest shifts in children's lives is the decrease in unstructured, free play. Many children are spending less time outside, using their imaginations, or engaging in spontaneous activities. Instead, much of their time is now consumed by screen-based entertainment or adult-directed activities. This lack of independent play stunts their ability to build resilience, creativity, and problem-

solving skills. As children spend more time on devices, they're having fewer opportunities for face-to-face, real-world interaction that teach key social skills like conflict resolution and empathy.

Sleep Deprivation

Social media and the constant digital engagement contribute to sleep deprivation. Many children stay up late texting, watching videos, or scrolling through social media, worried about missing out. This lack of sleep is not just about rest, it has serious consequences for emotional regulation and cognitive functioning. Children who aren't getting enough sleep can become more anxious, moody, and distracted, which negatively impacts their ability to focus and engage meaningfully with peers and at school.

Attention Fragmentation

Haidt describes how today's digital environment has led to a fragmentation of attention. Some children are constantly interrupted by notifications, and messages. This attention fragmentation means children are less able to focus on longer, deeper tasks, and struggle to finish what they start. In the classroom, this looks like restlessness, a lack of perseverance, and difficulties with concentration. The addictive nature of these interruptions also makes it harder for kids to build the sustained focus needed for academic success.

There's growing evidence that this constant fragmentation can impact brain development, particularly in children who may be vulnerable to ADHD. Research shows that frequent distractions and constant switching between tasks can impair the brain's ability to sustain attention over time. This is especially concerning for kids with ADHD, as their brains already struggle with regulating attention and impulse control. The constant interruptions, like pings or social media updates, can compound these challenges, making it harder for children to engage in tasks that require focus. Over time, this can contribute to long-term issues with impulse control, working memory, and executive functioning, which are all key

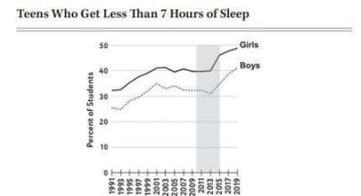


Figure 5.2. Percent of U.S. students (8th, 10th, and 12th grade) who get less than seven hours of sleep on most nights. (Source: Monitoring the Future.)²⁷

components of a child’s cognitive and emotional development.

Addiction

Finally, we see the impact of addiction to screens, particularly the constant dopamine-driven rewards of apps and games. Platforms are engineered to be addictive, with features like variable-ratio reinforcement schedules that keep kids coming back for more, whether through likes, shares, or streaks.

This creates a cycle of dependency, making it harder for kids to disengage and enjoy other forms of entertainment or interaction. As a result, many children are finding it difficult to focus on schoolwork or social activities outside the digital space.

And layered into all of this is social media’s powerful impact on a child’s self-worth. The introduction of “like” buttons, retweets, filters, and follower counts has created a culture where children start to tie their value to public approval. These tools promote constant comparison and encourage kids to present a curated version of themselves, rather than developing identity through authentic trial and error.

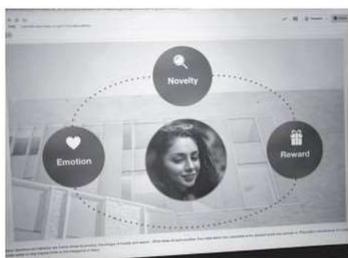


Figure 5.4. Screenshot of an internal Facebook presentation, brought out by Frances Haugen. The caption says, “Teens’ decisions and behavior are mainly driven by emotion, the intrigue of novelty and reward. While these all seem positive, they make teens very vulnerable at the elevated levels they operate on. Especially in the absence of a mature frontal cortex to help impose limits on the indulgence in these.” (Source: The Facebook Files, section 42/15, p. 53.)¹⁶

This chapter reminds us that while we can’t change the world our kids are growing up in, we can take small, meaningful steps to guide them through it. Raising our own awareness and having open, honest conversations with our children can be a powerful starting point. The more we talk about what they’re experiencing, how it makes them feel, and share what we are learning, the more we empower them to develop resilience, self-worth, and balance in an increasingly digital world.

Thank you for being such thoughtful and engaged partners in this important work. It has brought me so much joy to hear from many

of you how this interaction is making a difference with your families.

Warmly,
Mrs, Christierson
Principal