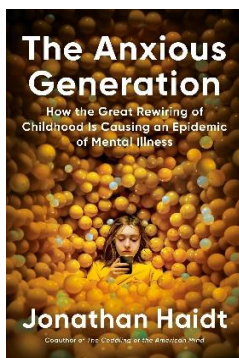


A Book Review: by Betty Kelly



The Anxious Generation:

How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing
an Epidemic of Mental Illness

By Jonathan Haidt

**Available in the Knox library*

The Anxious Generation was published in 2024 and quickly caught people's attention. Mayor Fawcett chose it for his Book Club gathering at the Brandon City library last fall. The author, Jonathan Haidt is a social psychologist whose main premise is that today's Generation X young people, i.e. those born after 1995 are experiencing a uniquely different childhood, and that rates of mental health concerns, depression, and anxiety in teens have skyrocketed because of it. He lays out a well-organized, easy-to-follow argument that these mental health issues and social problems are due to changes in parenting practices, albeit well intentioned, and the advent of smart phones and social media.

While I don't want to oversimplify the content, the two main themes that caught the public's interest are that as a society we are now protecting our children in the outside or real world more than ever before, while at the same time, these same children often have totally unsupervised access to an online world full of danger and risk.

Each chapter in the book offers readers clear information about one aspect of the larger issues, with easy-to-understand data from across the world to help the reader follow Haidt's reasoning and his developing thesis. A summary at the end of each chapter makes it easy to check back and review the content. A Notes section for each chapter gives citations and detailed information on how to source more background data..

The book is divided into 4 Parts. In Part 1, Haidt describes in detail "A Tidal Wave" of increasing mental health issues experienced by young people. Part 2 "The Backstory: the Decline of the Play-based Childhood" talks about children's cognitive and emotional development and describes why risky undirected play is so important for their future mental health and wellbeing. In the four chapters in Part 3 "The Great Rewiring: The Rise of the Phone-based Childhood" the author lays-out detailed explanations of the harm that chronic exposure to smart phones and social media is causing today's young people. For example, Chapter 6 introduces the premise that Social Media harms girls more than boys and tells us why. Part 4 shifts to recommendations for the future and is entitled "Collective Action for Healthier Childhood".

Understandably, Part 4 is a key section of the book. Jonathan Haidt is confident that a healthier childhood can exist again, even in this new digital age. He describes how parents, schools, governments and tech companies must all step up and make changes and provides important detailed guidelines for those changes he sees to be essential. In short, the recommendations include holding off on introducing smart phones and social media to adolescents and introducing them in a carefully monitored way once teens are in high school. Haidt also returns to his opening premise about childhood and stresses the need for children and youth to have more independence, free play and responsibility in the real world.

This book speaks to many of the challenges facing our youth and thus affecting all of society today. His recommended actions to free the Anxious Generation are not easy, and they require action from all parts of the wider community. Like so many others, I believe this book is an important read for all of us, for youth, for parents & grandparents, for teachers, school boards and governments, for tech companies; actually, for everyone concerned about the future of our young people.