

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

Episode 26: Are the Kids Alright?

Jonathan Haidt

Why did rates of depression and anxiety skyrocket right around 2012, especially for girls?

Tristan Harris

That's Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist who's been studying the effects of social media on teen mental health.

Jonathan Haidt

Millennials are not really more depressed than previous generations, but suddenly kids born in 1996 and later are very different from the millennials. And this is a real puzzle, and this is a very interesting psychological and demographic puzzle.

Tristan Harris

Jonathan is a careful researcher. He doesn't leap from data to definitive conclusion. More often he leaves room for debate like this.

Jonathan Haidt

Well, a piece of the puzzle is social media.

Tristan Harris

But there's one trend that Jonathan argues is remarkably clear. Generation Z, the kids who grew up on social media, are being swept up in a current of mental health issues unlike anything researchers have seen since World War II.

Jonathan Haidt

You never get really sharp lines between generations. The only one I know of is 1946. So if you were born when, you know the soldiers came home, there's a baby boom. You're born in 1946. You're different from kids born in 1944. Okay. So that's like a really sharp line, big changes in American history.

Tristan Harris

If you've seen the film, *The Social Dilemma*, you probably remember Jonathan's searing presentation on teenage depression and suicide rates, both of which skyrocket along with social media usage. But the correlation is so distressing you might reasonably ask, is that correlation or causation? It seems unimaginable that the stuff we see in our screens could drive such devastating trends. What mechanics of manipulation could lead to a generation wide shift in depression, self-harm, and suicide. Well, when we talk about how technology is manipulating us, people think we're talking about the rhetoric of an advertisement, or whether Russia or China are creating comments that are persuasive or not persuasive, but all of this misses the core mechanism. Is social feedback a very powerful lever for influencing what we do? I'll give you an example. When TikTok was trying to figure out, 'How do we get users away from Instagram?'

Tristan Harris

They inflated the amount of social feedback that we get when you post a video or a photo. Maybe I get 10 likes and one or two comments on Instagram. What if for the same video I get a thousand likes and 20 comments on TikTok. Which of those two products is going to be more persuasive at keeping me coming back? One of the ways

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they do this is they don't actually label what a heart or a like, or a view is. They just put a big heart and then have a big number next to it. And so these companies are in a race to the bottom to manufacture the kind of social approval that developmentally kids are seeking. And then if you tell kids that it doesn't really matter because they like how it feels, and because their social status among their friends is based on the fact that they get more likes and views than their friends do.

Tristan Harris

And so it's kind of like, you know, the way that we inject a cow with growth hormones so it produces more milk. TikTok is injecting into our videos a kind of social feedback growth hormone that is inflating the amount of feedback that we get from others, which is more and more addicting. And that's the problem in the race to the bottom of the brainstem is that each company is forced to go deeper into this social approval mechanic. The other aspect of how this attention economy evolves is to find cheaper and cheaper ways for us to create the content. We are the unpaid laborers who will generate content for free, because we will post about our cats and our dogs and our beach photos to get social feedback rewards. And we will generate the attention that will make money for the advertisers. One of the diabolical things about TikTok is that they actually invite each of us to create content for advertisers.

Tristan Harris

When you open up TikTok and you go to the Discover tab, you're going to see a list of hashtags for things like Pati challenge or Doritos dance, and each hashtag shows on the right hand side, the number of views 21 billion, 600 million, 1.6 billion. It doesn't say whether those are views or likes or real people. They obviously can't be real people because the numbers are too big, but they give you the sense that there's a large audience awaiting you if only you were to post a video. And so when you do hashtag Doritos dance and you show someone that they're going to reach 1.6 billion dancing while you eat Doritos, now we are the useful idiots who are generating advertisements for Doritos. And we have hundreds of millions of teenagers who will happily do the creative work for Doritos. Do we want a world where your children are the unpaid laborers to generate advertising for other kids?

Tristan Harris

Do we want a world where this is the future of children's development? The easiest standard of moral and ethical behavior is not what I would just endorse for myself, but would I endorse it for my own children, and many tech executives don't allow their own kids to use social media. That should tell you everything. If you can't even meet that standard, just stop. And we want to make sure we're not doing naive, moral panics here. I mean, we have worried about every new medium from radio to television, and how they've affected children. But I also want you to keep in mind that as we crunch the numbers and argue the data that this is the environment that our children are growing up in. At some point if you work at Coca-Cola and the best you can do is just have it be, you know, sugar inducing and diabetes creating, but then just the minimal amount, we're still in the wrong conversation. The question is, 'What's good for people?' That's the

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question of humane technology. Not, 'What's less bad for people?' And too often the tech companies ask us to take the bad with the good. You've heard these arguments before.

Mark Zuckerberg

Obviously I care about this for my own two girls.

Tristan Harris

That's Mark Zuckerberg in an interview with Fox News.

Mark Zuckerberg

And the research is pretty clear. What it says is that, um, all internet use is not the same. Or all screen use is not the same. If you're using it to interact with people then that is associated with all of the positive aspects of wellbeing that you'd expect. Do you feel more connected, less alone, happier and over time healthier too.

Tristan Harris

And we've heard where some of these arguments can take us.

REP. RON WYDEN

Do you believe nicotine is not addictive?

MR. WILLIAM CAMPBELL

I believe nicotine is not addictive, yes.

REP. RON WYDEN

Mr. Johnston?

MR. JAMES JOHNSTON

Uh, Congressmen, cigarettes and nicotine clearly do not meet the classic definitions of addiction. There is no intoxication.

REP. RON WYDEN

We'll take that as a "no." Again, time is short.

Tristan Harris

When it comes to kids and potential harm, our standards need to be higher.

MR. JOSEPH TADDEO

I don't believe that nicotine or our products are addictive.

MR. ANDREW TISCH

I believe nicotine is not addictive.

Tristan Harris

And our burden of proof lower.

MR. EDWARD HARRIGAN

I believe that nicotine is not addictive.

MR. THOMAS SANDEFUR

I believe with nicotine it's not addictive.

Tristan Harris

Today on the show we asked Jonathan Haidt, a professor of business ethics at NYU, to lead us through a more nuanced and academic debate on teens and tech without losing sight of the more critical question: Are the kids alright? I'm Tristan Harris. And I'm Aza

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Raskin. And this is Your Undivided Attention. Jon, welcome to Your Undivided Attention.

Jonathan Haidt

Thank you, Tristan.

Tristan Harris

There's a lot of moral panic seemingly about how technology is affecting young people and teenagers and mental health. And a lot of headlines, 'are smartphones ruining a generation?' a lot of debate back and forth. And we've actually never covered this topic explicitly on this podcast. So do you want to take us back to how you got into this, a little bit on your background?

Jonathan Haidt

Yeah, sure. I'm very happy to go through it because it's a real branch off of my main research, but it's been a really fascinating branch.

Jonathan Haidt

So I study morality. That's what I've always done. I picked that topic in graduate school when I was at the University of Pennsylvania. I studied morality, how it varies across cultures, beginning of the early 1990s. And then in the early 2000s, as the American cultural war was heating up, it began to be clear that left and right are like different cultures and warring cultures. And so then I began to study political polarization. That's the main line of my work. And then along the way, my friend Greg Lukianoff came to me in 2014 and said, 'Jon, weird stuff is happening on college campuses.' Greg is the President of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, defending free speech rights on campus. And Greg had noticed that suddenly for the first time in his career college students were demanding protections from speakers and books and words, and they were using the same arguments that Greg had learned to stop using when he learned cognitive behavioral therapy for his own depression.

Jonathan Haidt

And I'd begun to notice this weirdness on college campuses, this new moral culture of safe spaces, trigger warnings, microaggressions. And so, because I study moral psychology, moral culture, there was a natural match there. And I began to see this weird new pattern. So that got me into studying what was going on on college campuses. And when Greg and I wrote an article in The Atlantic in 2015, which the editors titled "The Coddling of the American Mind," we didn't like the title, but it sure stuck. So that got us into studying what is happening to college students. They have rising rates of depression. Why is that? And so that's what that article was about. We thought that there are ways of thinking that are very harmful, that are self-destructive that encouraged people to think of themselves as victims. And we speculated, we had one line in the article about how, how students who arrived on campus around 2014 were also the first generation to really get on Facebook and other social media around the time it came out around 2007, 2008, they were in middle school.

Jonathan Haidt

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So we speculate well maybe, you know, maybe that has something to do with it, but there was no evidence back then. Well, in the couple years after that, what Greg and I learned is that one of the biggest things that happened on college campuses is that Gen Z arrived around 2014. So the millennials are not really more depressed than previous generations, but suddenly kids born in 1996 and later are very different from the millennials. Jean Twenge, who has been studying generations for a while now, comes out with a big article in the Atlantic called "Are Smartphones Ruining a Generation?" And she reviews the evidence that well actually, yes, the smartphone generation growing up on smartphones does seem to impact mental health. That was 2017. And she has a book called "iGen," when Greg and I read that that was a big missing piece of the puzzle. So for me, this has been a really gigantic puzzle with enormous social ramifications. Twenge's research at least suggested that, well, a piece of the puzzle is social media. And another piece is the overprotection, which is what Greg and I had been focusing on. So that's what got me started.

Tristan Harris

I think it's important for people to know in your book that you were not coming from a background of, we really have to care about kids, they are all so vulnerable. We have to make sure we're coddling them. The point of your book, "The Coddling of the American Mind," is that we've been overprotective. So just to name for people, as we start to veer into the territory of how we deal with and protect or care about the mental health of especially teenage girls, this isn't starting from a perspective of, we need to be so delicate. They're so delicate. We have to be so careful with them. Do you want to talk just a little bit more about that side? Because I think it qualifies that your concern would be so opposite when it comes to social media and teenage girls.

Jonathan Haidt

Yeah, well, that's right. Because the core psychological idea, the most important psychological idea in the book is anti-fragility, it's such a useful idea and everybody knows it. We all understand that the immune system is an open system that requires exposure to pathogens in order to develop immunity. That's how a vaccine works. And most people understand that if you raise your kid in a bubble because you're afraid of bacteria, and so you never let the kid be exposed to bacteria, that doesn't help. We need to be exposed to bacteria. And psychologically speaking, if you protect your kid and you say, I'll make sure you never get lost, I'll make sure that you're never teased or threatened by other kids. Well, you're not helping the kid, obviously bullying that goes on for days is terrible, but kids have to have normal conflicts, to get lost, to get scared sometimes.

Jonathan Haidt

And then you find your way back. We need this. Kids must have a lot of negative experiences to develop normal strength and toughness. So I start from that position that we do need to let kids out. We need to let them have all kinds of negative experiences and not protect them. And then they learn to protect themselves. So there's gonna be an interesting twist when we get to the question of, well, 'Shouldn't, they be out on

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social media being publicly shamed, wouldn't that be good for them?' But we're getting ahead of the story. So, okay. Let's put right on the table here. What do we mean by social media and why is it sometimes bad? And let's be clear. Obviously social media does enormous good, Facebook in particular is very good at getting groups to organize and do things. I would never want to do a blanket thing like, Oh, social media is terrible or, you know, the internet is terrible.

Jonathan Haidt

So let's be clear about what are the mechanisms here that make a little part of what we do online harmful both to democracy and to teen mental health. And writing this article in The Atlantic last fall with Tobias Rose-Stockwell, who knows a lot more about social media than I do, what I learned, what I really began to see in the evolution here is that when social media began, Friendster and MySpace and the Facebook, they were just like glorified address books. Like, look, here's me. Look at all the friends I have. Look at all the bands I like. So that's not toxic. That's just public display. And sure you're boasting about your popularity, but that's not bad for democracy. And that doesn't drive people to suicide. The big change, the period where everything got transformed is 2009 to 2012 or 13. And in 2009, Facebook adds the like button and then Twitter copies it. Twitter adds the retweet button, and then Facebook copies it.

Jonathan Haidt

And now the platforms have enormous amounts of information about what people will click on what engages them. So now they algorithmicise their news feeds. And so suddenly now everything's custom tailored to you to maximize the degree to which you will stay on, you will click, you will forward something. And the net effect is that by, first of all, for the teen mental health, in 2009 most teens were not on these platforms every day. And by 2011, they were. So that's the two year period where teen social life goes from mostly face-to-face. And of course, they're texting a lot there. It's not that they're, you know, like the old days, but these platforms where you create content and other people rate your content and other people like it or ignore it. And then you will look and you're watching and you're watching the meter go up or not.

Jonathan Haidt

And you're feeling shame because your post didn't get many likes. This is when everything changed in 2009 to 2011. That's the transformative period for teen mental health and also for democracy because by 2011, 2012, we've now created what Tobias calls the outrage machine. We have the ability now for anything to happen and anybody, an individual or an organization can distort it, repackage it in a way that triggers outrage, retweet it. And then it can go viral very quickly. And now we're in a state of perpetual outrage. This is not about forming a group of dog walkers in a neighborhood. This is about a way of engaging that maximizes public performance, which means we all become brand managers trying to manipulate other people in a way linked together so that things can move very, very quickly. And we can all be immersed in outrage forever and ever. The world changed between 2009 and 2011-12, and then mainstream media now

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has no choice, but to hook into this. So this is the key period that people need to focus on.

Tristan Harris

I think it's important to go back and just have everyone remember, or if you happened to use Facebook back in 2005, 2006, there's a famous talk that Mark Zuckerberg gave at Stanford, where I was at the time where he was asked what Facebook is. And he said, it's a social utility, it's an address book. It's just a page that you go check on a Facebook page and you see what's on your friend's wall. To speak personally to my own experience and many others at that time, especially I think with the launch of photo tagging, that's really when things revved up, but just to sort of say, that's very, very, very different than this infinite scrolling feed of 'more like that, click, more like that, click, more like that, click' and getting that instant approval and validation and having that tight feedback loop. Because if we take the argument, the detective case back to, is there a problem with social media and impacts on, say, mental health?

Tristan Harris

Oftentimes the way this started was with this flat term, 'screen time.' Screen time is the problem. And it's this hours, you know, debate. And it's like the glowing rectangle in front of your kids that glowing rectangle's going to give your kids cancer. And this feels kind of like other moral panics that we've had in history. TV, that glowing rectangle's going to melt your brain. You know, Elvis is shaking his hips, you know, whatever the thing was, where we were worried about just the eyeball and the glowing rectangle. And you're saying something explicitly different. I want to maybe track some of that debate, because even until recently screen time has been used as the vehicle for this debate about what is good or bad.

Jonathan Haidt

Yeah, that's right. That's where it gets really interesting as a scientific detective story, as a sociological detective story. So really important to note that any time there's a new technology that the young people use, the older people freak out about it. This was true for novels and the 18th century. It was true for radio, television, comic books, video games. And in general, you know, there's a very common dynamic. And so especially once the iPhone comes out in 2007, the touch screen technology is so much more addictive, I would say. And here I'm speaking as a psychologist, almost as a behaviorist, that the day I got my first iPhone and my two-year-old son was able to master the input-output. The fact that I didn't put all my money in Apple on that day is one of the biggest mistakes of my life, because it is an amazing interface and it's much more pleasing than going through a keyboard to a computer screen.

Jonathan Haidt

So yeah, this was shaping up to be a classic moral panic, where all the kids were on their phones and the adults were saying, well, this is going to melt their brain. Now, if we just focus on depression and anxiety, okay. So we have to be clear. What are the input variables? Is it screen time? Is it social media? And what are the outcome variables? Is it depression? Is it laziness and failure to launch? You know, what are we talking about?

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And so most of the research has focused on depression and anxiety because that's the big mystery. That's the giant thing that has to be explained. Why did girls rates of depression and anxiety skyrocket around 2012? And there is no other explanation that anyone's been able to offer for why then and why mostly girls. So understandably people point their finger at social media. Well, kids are doing a lot of things on their iPhone. It's not just social media. So the original panic was about smartphones and the editors at The Atlantic make up the titles. I don't think Jean Twenge made up the title, 'are smartphones ruining a generation?' That was something that the editors made up, but—

Tristan Harris

They were having to play into the clickbait economy to get into Facebook. So then, they developed an article which then creates a full system closed loop.

Jonathan Haidt

Exactly. That's right, because had they had a more low key title, it wouldn't have been such a panic.

Tristan Harris

Well, same thing with your article, "The Coddling of the American Mind," too, that you probably didn't use an extreme word like coddling. And again, ironically Facebook and the social media feeds and Twitter are responsible for the naming of your books, which then—we should bring people back to that, you know, Jean, who wrote that article in 2017, 'are smartphones ruining a generation?' She's received so much anger and blowback for being so extreme and just the title alone I think also instigates this kind of outrage trolling machine, which again, ironically, she probably experienced on social media as the kind of same trolling and shaming behavior that, that unfortunately other people face.

Jonathan Haidt

That's right. So, you know, we evolved in a world where Newton's laws applied. I forget which one is, for every action there's an equal and opposite reaction. But after 2012, that's no longer true. For every action there's an opposite reaction that's multiplied by a factor of two or three, and we're all immersed in outrage all the time. So thank you for pointing that out that both Jean and my articles—of course they had big impact because they were in The Atlantic and because the Atlantic did this—but this is the very problem.

Aza Raskin

It also shows the way that social media or the race to the bottom of the brainstem attention economy sort of leaks out. Even if you're not on social media, the world still is. And so you live in that world, there's no escape.

Jonathan Haidt

That's right. And people will tell you about it. So there are those who think that social media is harmful then there are the skeptics. So the skeptics make a good case that if you look at history, there's all these moral panics, why should this be different? So I agree with them that the burden of proof is on people like me and Jean. We can't just say, look, they came in around 2011 and in 2012 depression rates go up, see, we're

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done. We proved it. Like, no, that's not enough. That's a correlation. It does not show causality. So what Jean did in iGen and her other work is she looked at almost all the data here is correlational, but some of it is time lag. And some of it, you can dig into the data and show it's not just that like historical event A happened and then historical event B happened. You can show that it only happened for people who are heavy users. So at least the straightforward correlations are there.

Tristan Harris

So we're not just talking about screen time. We're talking about, it's not the light users, the medium users, there's a disproportionate for the heavy users. You really get some kind of lift. Is that right?

Jonathan Haidt

Exactly. So to the extent that there's evidence of harm, the clearest evidence is the graphs that show based on the number of hours per day, along the X axis, what is the rate of depression shown on the Y axis? And the lines are not straight. They are curves. So typically someone who uses social media two hours a day is not doing any worse than someone who doesn't use it at all, but somebody who's at four or five hours a day is. And so you generally get these curves. So it's heavy use, not light use. And the curves are generally bigger for girls. And in a few studies, I've seen the effects are biggest for young girls in middle school. So we have sort of round one is we have Jean's article and Oh my God, it's smartphones are destroying a generation.

Tristan Harris

The glowing rectangles.

Jonathan Haidt

It's glowing rectangles, that's right.

Jonathan Haidt

And then we have the skeptics. And so it's Amy Orben and Andrew Przybylski are two of them. They published a big article in Nature Human Behaviour in January 2019 and they do a big analysis of these, some of the same, big datasets that Jean Twenge looked at. And they say, look, we did this giant analysis with 60,000 combinations of variables. And yeah, we do find a relationship between the amount of time a kid spends using devices and their mental health. But it's tiny. It's microscopic. It's the same size as we find in the dataset for eating potatoes. It's not zero, but for those who understand correlation coefficients, we're talking correlation, coefficients around like .02-.03, in that ballpark. They're statistically significant in a giant sample, but they're so small that you can basically ignore them. And this article came out right after Greg and I had published our book and I thought, 'Whoa, were we wrong about this?'

Jonathan Haidt

Because in our book we say, you know, we've got this mystery, what happened to Gen Z? And we think it's overprotection and social media. And so I created a Google Doc where I put all these articles that were coming out on both sides. And I invited Jean to join me as a co-curator because she knows a lot more about the substance of them. This is not my area of expertise. And as soon as we posted it, we got some pushback.

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People saying, Oh, come on. This isn't even a real thing. There isn't even really a mental health crisis. That's another moral panic. And we had to say, wait, wait, what, what do you mean? And they say, Oh, it's just, self-report like, sure kids are saying they're depressed. But you know, that's just because they're really comfortable talking about it now more than older generations.

Jonathan Haidt

So, okay. That's a valid objection. So I had to go back and make a second Google Doc, where I gathered all the evidence as to whether there's actually evidence of a mental health crisis. And once you put it out there and you have evidence on depression, anxiety, self-harm and suicide. Now, if it's just depression, anxiety, self report, you could say, maybe it's just a change in diagnostic criteria. But when you have hospital admissions, this is not subjective interpretation. This is kids who were brought to the hospital because they're bleeding because they cut themselves deliberately. And when you have suicide data, this is as objective as can be. I mean, there are sometimes there's some play into whether something gets called suicide, but the fact that they all line up, same magnitude, same timing means there's no doubt about this. There is a mental health crisis. It is very serious.

Jonathan Haidt

For suicide, boys and girls are both up a lot. For self harm, it's only the girls, boys don't generally self harm. They either kill themselves or they don't. Girls will self harm. It's more of a social thing and an anxiety reduction thing. So I think that's a big step forward just to establish this is real. And this is really big. And it's not just in America, same thing in all the other Anglo countries. We haven't looked everywhere in the world, but in Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, it's smaller in the South Pacific places. But in the UK, Canada is very similar to the US. So we created that Google Doc, and there's been zero pushback on that. Once we put it up there. So now it's very widely accepted. There really is a crisis here. So let's talk about the Orben and Przybylski study because that is the most widely cited study.

Tristan Harris

Specifically the ones saying there actually isn't something to worry about here. I mean, I remember the New York Times article saying that, no, it looks like smartphones are not ruining a generation or something like that.

Jonathan Haidt

Yeah. And so the one of the Times was I think don't freak out about screen time during the pandemic. And it seems to give the all clear signal to parents to say, don't worry about it. Let your kids do what they want. But what Jean and I found, because we were puzzled like, wait a second. How can there be no effect in their study when there's a bigger effect in others? But if you dig into it, what you find is this, the hypothesis here is heavy use of social media by girls is associated with depression. Let's call that a pitchfork. Let's take that pitchfork, stick in the ground. And now let's do 60,000 analyses. We'll just pile analysis and analysis on top of that, each one being like a straw.

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And before you know it, you've got this giant haystack of analysis, 60,000 of them, almost all of them have nothing to do with that pitchfork.

Jonathan Haidt

So almost all the analyses are about television use or video games or all sorts of other digital device activities. So only a few of the analyses are actually about social media. It's mostly about screen time. And on the outcome side, they don't just use the questions about depression. They have this one measure of mental—It's not even mental health. This got 32 questions on all sorts of things. Only four or five are actually about depression. So this one scale accounts for thousands and thousands of analyses when only a couple are relevant. Anyway, there's a lot of other stuff like this. I'm not accusing them of anything. This is not like they're trying to be devious. The analysis they did is so impressive, but yet only a little bit of it is actually relevant to the hypothesis. So to come back to our detective story, we have a crime or a, you know, a body as it were, we have giant increase in rates of depression, anxiety, self harm, and suicide, started around 2012, who done it. And it's as though some of the crime scene data was sent to one lab, which analyzed it and came back saying, nah, it doesn't really look like there's any evidence here. And then Jean and I say, well, actually we think they did the wrong lab test. If you do the right lab test, you actually get evidence that the culprit or the accused is in the right place at the right time. And this is with a dose response model that is that the kids who use it more are the ones who suffer more.

Tristan Harris

It reminds me in your book, "The Coddling of the American Mind," I mean, part of it in terms of argumentation is we have this desire for simplicity. We have this desire for just quick, easy answers. And the answer that we really want people to do is move towards complexity and nuance. Like what is the complex and nuanced perspective. But in this case, it almost feels like there's been a weaponized use of complexity because we took 60,000 possible variations. And as you said, sort of hiding a pitchfork of sort of some very obvious, very clear harm that's in there, right?

Jonathan Haidt

That's right. That's right. But you know what, let me respond to your point about nuance. I should be careful about calling it weaponized and using battle metaphors, but science is actually advancing as it should in that you have people making a claim. You have critics who say, no, that's wrong. And then you have the first batch saying, well, actually, no, your rebuttal had some errors. And the new ones that we're advancing too, I think is actually pretty good here. It is that screen time is not a good measure. And here Amy Orban has been, I think, really good on this. She's had a lot of articles saying, stop talking about screen time. And she actually has convinced me about that in my debate with her. Now screen time still matters overall in the sense that parents need to decide and kids need to decide, do you want to spend all day on your screen? But if we're talking about does screen time cause depression or anxiety? No, it looks like it doesn't. So if we just focus on depression and anxiety, I think we are honing in on the idea that screen time is not the problem, but social media is. We're not accusing all

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screen time activities. We're actually now focusing on, you know, we think this is the guy that did it, so it's not resolved, but I think we've got the guy.

Tristan Harris

So we've gone through the detective story with these statistical models, but the content that's beneath the word social media is different for each application and on a given day and in a given year, are we talking about Facebook? Are we talking about Instagram? Are we talking about TikTok? Are we talking about Facebook in 2009, third quarter where they changed the algorithm and all the weights are different? I think what's really hard about this is how do we kind of move the debate and our conversation to kind of a common sense orientation of, okay, if I'm a 12 year old kid, I'm forming my identity from a teenage girl and I'm especially attuned to my physical appearance and I post a photo and I don't use a filter on it. And I see that the photo that doesn't have as much of my skin showing doesn't get as many likes as when I used to have a lot more skin showing, I actually will delete that. This is a known behavior.

Tristan Harris

The teenage girl will delete the photo that doesn't get very many likes because she's worried about how she'll be perceived given all of her other ones have this high social rating. And so the kind of basic mechanics, it's almost like saying, well, with climate change, we could do a million statistical models. Or we can just look at the mechanism that says, this tends to amplify that. And I'm curious when, Jon, when you think about that, because there's so many nuances of what we can say here, I mean, obviously people will say things like, but look at all the creative things that people are doing on TikTok, look at all these amazing videos, but we can look at key mechanics at content beneath the word, social and media that I think we can clearly say are harmful. What do you think about that?

Jonathan Haidt

Yeah. So Nir Eyal wrote the book "Hooked," he and I actually became friends during a debate over whether or not social media is harmful. We have daughters the same age who became friends. But Nir has this thing he calls the regret test. And if you ask consumers, do they regret their involvement with the product? And they say, yes, well, that's pretty damning. You know, the whole moral basis of capitalism is that it creates wealth and allocates resources in ways that satisfy people's wants. And if it's doing things that people don't want or, you know, catching them up in behaviors that they wish they didn't have. Well, that's, that's pretty damning. There was a study done on users of Moment. And one was the percentage of users who are happy with the amount of time they spend on each app. And at the top, the most happy in order is FaceTime, mail, phone, messages, and Messenger.

Jonathan Haidt

In other words, to the degree that technology helps us talk to our friends. That's great. There's nothing wrong with that. Nobody wishes they spent less time on FaceTime with their friends, but at the other end, the bottom was Instagram at 37%, only 37% of Instagram users are happy with the amount of time they spend. Tinder is 40%. Facebook

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is 41%. Reddit is 43%. So I think this is very, very important. I think this really shows there's something wrong here and now let's dig deeper. Okay. So what is it about those programs that not just people regret using, but what is it that actually is the mechanism of harm. And here, you know, look, if people over 18, choose to do something, if they choose to gamble or try heroin, that's their choice. I don't want to get involved in that, but the internet, this was pointed out to me by Beeban Kidron, a member of Parliament who studies this in the UK, the internet was not built with children in mind.

Jonathan Haidt

Yet, a third of the people on the internet are children under 18. If we really take this seriously and say, well, what kind of internet would we have built? If we knew that a third of the people on it would be children, would it look like this? For adults, you know, I don't want to tell adults they can't do something because I think it's harmful, but you know, for children it's different. And then the other thing that's crucial here is that social media is not an individual choice. I mean, on one level, it is of course by the children and the parents. But when my son started sixth grade and everybody else was on Instagram at his middle school in New York City. And I said, no, you can't go on. Well, then he was excluded. And presumably none of the other parents wanted their kids on, but we all let our kids on most people because the other kids are on it.

Jonathan Haidt

So the social media companies, either wittingly or unwittingly, have created a trap. Everybody lies about their age. They can get on whenever they want. Actually to answer your question, you did say, well, aren't there all these good things. Yeah, of course there are. And if it wasn't for the mental health, suicide, and self-harm, I would say, Hmm, let's try to add up the pluses and minuses. We're talking between 50% and 150% increases in suicide for teenagers in the United States. So given that, I think we can say you can be as creative as you want on Instagram and TikTok, but maybe wait until at least the legal age of 13 and maybe even longer.

Tristan Harris

I know people who are on say the wellbeing team of Instagram or Facebook, you know, they actually have teams of people who are worried about wellbeing. They'll hire the statisticians, they'll hire the subjective wellbeing experts who worked under Ed Diener and Martin Seligman and positive psychology people. And hire as many PhDs as you want. But if you were in that room, back in 2004 and 2005, when Sean Parker would literally just tell his friends, if we haven't got you yet, we will. Because once we get all your other friends on and you will not have a choice and we can provide those cocaine rewards faster than you will. I think someone who set up a service that tapped into those same reward pathways, everything else is almost a distraction because the wellbeing team is just there to justify and to try to do the best they can with a product whose entire basis is addiction.

Tristan Harris

And it was never designed with the best interests of society or wellbeing or the developing child in mind. Never. We didn't get here because people were asking what's

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best for society. We're now trying to reverse into that position. Many people would say you don't blame a baker for making an addictive croissant, or you can't blame someone for inventing the shipwreck when they invented the ship. You can't invent a ship without inventing the shipwreck. So, I mean, I'm curious how you respond to this, this notion of what is the responsibility of technology companies when making these products.

Jonathan Haidt

Yeah. Well, so those are two different arguments. They're both interesting arguments. You can't blame a baker for baking an addictive croissant. Sure. And if it's adults buying it, it's fine. But suppose there was a company that provided school lunches and they realized that providing Kool-Aid, providing sugar powder, the kids love it. There are different responsibilities when you're dealing with kids. And so we do take a more paternalistic approach to kids. And as for the other argument, you can't invent the ship without inventing the shipwreck. Yeah, that's fine. And if maybe what will happen here is that this is just like, you know, when the automobile was first invented and they, I presume they had brakes on the initial automobiles, but they didn't have turn signals. They didn't have windshield wipers. They didn't have seat belts. And over time they got those. But because market pressures were such that people preferred safer cars and normal market mechanisms meant that you'd improve the product by making it safer.

Jonathan Haidt

And if that was working, if we saw evidence that social media is getting better and better every year, it gets better for mental health every year, it gets better for promoting civil discourse and supporting democracy. Well, then I'd say that argument applies here. But you know, if it's this, you know, Metcalfe's Law, if it's the sort of thing where once they get big, they can basically stop these sorts of changes. Well, then I would say the shipwreck argument doesn't apply. Ships got better and better because nobody wanted ships to wreck. If there was some commercial interests that from more and bigger shipwrecks, well, we'd be in a different situation. We know that there is a mental health crisis affecting our kids. We got to do something about that. So what do we do? I would suggest we start with some simple experiments we can find out.

Jonathan Haidt

There are ways of finding out the answers to this. The simplest experiment we can do that is urgently needed is if anybody listens to this podcast who knows anybody who works in a school district or a middle school, suggest this simple experiment: Take some school district, they're all coping with the rise of depression, anxiety, self harm. They're all worried about this. Take some school districts and ask them to do a simple experiment. Ask half the schools in the district to strongly discourage kids from opening social media accounts, because it has to come centrally. You can't expect individual parents to ban Instagram. You have to have a school-wide effort to say, just don't let your kids have an account until high school. And have a policy in school of keeping the devices locked away during the day.

Jonathan Haidt

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As long as kids have it in their pocket, they're thinking about it. They're not paying attention to the teacher as much. They're thinking about the drama and they go to the bathroom, they add to the drama. So if there are school districts out there that are concerned about this and they all are, do experiments, middle school is where I think we really can get a handle on the problem. And if the school district has, you know, especially in the city, 10 different middle schools, if five of them do this and five go with this standard policy where they all are on all the time. Then we'll see in a year or two, we'll see. Because social media changes the fundamental fabric of connection, you can't do it one person at a time. It has to be done group at a time, community at a time. So I think we have an emergency. We have a likely suspect. And we have simple scientific methods for trying to figure out if social media is really the culprit. And middle school is the best place to look.

Aza Raskin

What I love about this suggestion is if we actually ran those experiments and said of middle schools, you see the kids making better sense of the world, have better relationships with themselves, that creates a race to the top. Do you want to have your kid in the schools where they're going to be more likely to commit self harm or not?

Jonathan Haidt

Exactly? That's right. We'd know within two years, we know within two years. Because the curves are going up and up and up, we are not flattening the curves on mental health. And if some schools are able to flatten the curve and actually bring down the rates of suicide and self-harm, yeah, I think you're going to see a lot more parents wanting to move to that town.

Tristan Harris

I think that's something that we can all hopefully get behind and maybe that's a centralizing point for how we at least get behind the issues of mental health and kids. Jon, thanks so much for coming on the podcast.

Jonathan Haidt

Oh, what a pleasure Tristan. It's been really fun sharing metaphors with you.

Tristan Harris

Listeners, before you go. One of the most common questions that we've been getting since people watched the film, "The Social Dilemma," is obviously, 'What can I do?' And many people who see the film or hear this interview will think to themselves, well, I'm just going to have my kid by themselves, delete their Instagram account or delete TikTok. But of course what's diabolical about these systems is that they prey on manipulating social exclusion. Because now that that one kid is not using TikTok, the rest of their friends still are. And the way that they do their homework or find out about sexual opportunities or gossip, or who's more famous or has higher status in school than the other person is still happening on TikTok. So one thing we're recommending to people is not just to delete your own Instagram or TikTok account, but to actually start a group migration, just like the birds migrate every year.

Tristan Harris

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Can we migrate as a group, as a school, as a set of families, as a set of friends off of one of these manipulative platforms. You can delete TikTok and when you make a dance or funny video, you can send it to people you love directly. Instead of using Snapchat, you can delete Snapchat and use text or WhatsApp instead. Instead of asking yourself and your kids, 'Do I like this app,?' you can ask, 'How does this app make me feel both during and after using it?' And these are really powerful conversations to have in your family. For more resources, you can go to our website at humanetech.com, where we have some material for youth, parents and educators.

Aza Raskin

Your Undivided Attention is produced by the Center for Humane Technology. Our executive producer is Dan Kedmey and our associate producer is Natalie Jones. Noor Al-Samarrai helped with the fact-checking. Original music and sound designed by Ryan and Hays Holladay, and a special thanks to the whole Center for Humane Technology team for making this podcast possible.

Tristan Harris

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