The Anxious Generation

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

By Jonathan Haidt

Community Book Study Discussion Questions

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Intro and Part 1

Setting the table:

Welcome and Introductions

What are some of the things you hope to gain from the book study?

What are some things that concern you or give you pause about this book study?

Ground Rules:

- Make sure that everyone has an opportunity to share
- Try to stay free of personal judgement.
- Hold people's vulnerability with care.
- Listen to understand rather than being understood
- Anything else?

Intro and Part 1:

Large group question: *What do you think about the author's use of Mars as a metaphor for entering the virtual world?*

Break Out Session:

Part 1 gives a lot of data concerning the effects of smart phones, social media, and the virtual world. *Was there anything that was particularly surprising or that stood out about the data? Have you seen these patterns in our own community?*

Large Group Sharing: *What did you hear in your small groups?*

Ending Activity: *What are our community inquiries/community curiosities? Just capturing, not homework.*

Part 2

Welcome

Part 1 Recap: The author starts the book comparing kids entering the virtual world to sending kids to Mars – it's a whole new world. He gave helpful clear definitions of the "real world" and the "virtual world". He gave data showing the correlation between the introduction of smartphones and social media with rising depression and anxiety in young people. He focuses on the time between 2010 and 2015.

Part 2:

Large group question: Free play is defined in the book as "activity that is freely chosen and directed by the participants and undertaken for its own sake, not consciously pursued to achieve ends that are distinct from the activity itself." (pg. 52) The 1959 United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Child named play as a basic human right saying, "The child shall have full opportunity for play and recreation, which should be directed to the same purposes as education." (pg. 53) *How does our society view the idea of play as a whole? Is it important? Is it seen as a right?*

Break Out Session:

- What Children need to do in childhood - The author says that one problem with a phone-based childhood is that it replaces the hours children would otherwise spend playing in the real world: "Children are, in a sense, deprived of childhood." *Do you agree about this for children? What exactly are kids missing out on? You can name things that resonated from the book and/or your own observations.*
- The author describes a significant change in parenting starting in the 1990s with a rise of "safetyism." He says that Gen Z was raised in "a world in which adults, schools, and other institutions worked together to teach children that the world is dangerous, and to prevent them from experiencing the risks, conflicts, and thrills that their experience-expectant brains needed to overcome anxiety and set their default mental stat to discover mode." (p 88) *Do you agree with the author's analysis? How do we know when children are overprotected? Who decides?*
- Before the rise of "safetyism", the author talks about communal parenting described by Furedi, "Across cultures and throughout history, mothers and fathers have acted on the assumption that if their children got into trouble, other adults – often strangers – would help out."(p 86) In 1990, the author says there was a "breakdown of adult solidarity." *How is communal parenting perceived today?*
- The author talks about the loss of rites of passage that were once assumed experiences in adolescents. He says, "As overprotection and safetyism intensified in

the 1990s, young people began engaging less in some of the major activities traditionally associated with teen development, activities that often required a car and permission to be out of the house, unsupervised." *What rites of passages still seem to be assumed experiences in our society? Which ones are less prevalent? What do you think about the author's proposed rites of passage found on p 107-109.*

Large Group Sharing: *What did you hear in your small groups?*

Ending Activity: *What are our community inquiries/community curiosities?*

Extra questions to go deeper:

- *Have you ever thought of play as learning to navigate the cost of entering and exiting relationships?* (pg. 53)
- Attunement (pg. 56-57) – *Are there events in our society that encourage synchronous movement? Are there natural healthy places for attunement in our world today?*
- Conformity bias & Prestige bias (pg. 59) – *What are the marks of prestige that are healthy in a society?*
- Expectant Brain and Sensitive Periods (pg. 64) –*What are the aspects of culture that are healthy for kids? Are there more shared values in the real world? If so, what are they?*

Part 3

Welcome

Part 2 Recap: Part 2 talked about the changes in our society and community starting in the 1990s that affected childhood. Children need play to learn how to be in relationships and communities. However, play has been diminished through the rise of "safetyism", the breakdown or communal parenting, and experience blockers (like smartphones). There are fewer natural rites of passage that encourage children's independence and transition to adulthood.

Today we talk about Part 2 – Enter the virtual world....

Large group question: (Discuss Chapter 5) Much of the information given in Chapter 5 probably feels a bit familiar. Many of us have already heard about and even experienced the 4 Foundation Harms:

- Social Deprivation (p 122)
- Sleep Deprivation – (p 125)
- Attention (p127-128) and Executive Function (p 129)
- Addiction

What surprised you about this chapter? Or what particularly struck you as an "aha" moment?

Break Out Session: Chapter 6 & 7

The author lays out two very different ways that social media and the virtual world affect boys and girls.

Look at each chapter. What resonates? What surprises you? What gives you pause or causes you to push back?

Large Group Sharing: *What did you hear in your small groups?*

The author talks about the idea of anomie and rootlessness. The chart on p 195 is very striking with over 20% of boys and girls saying that life is meaningless. "Boys and girls have taken different paths through the Great Rewiring, yet somehow, they have ended up in the same pit, where many are drowning in anomie and despair. It is very difficult to construct a meaningful life on one's own, drifting through multiple disembodied networks. Like Johann Hari's godson, their consciousness ends up "broken into smaller, disconnected fragments." Human children and human bodies need to be rooted in human communities. Children must grow up on Earth before we can send them to Mars." (p. 195)

Chapter 8, the author offers some ideas on how we find meaning and rootedness in our lives.

How did this chapter land on you? What stood out? Was there anything that gave you pause or made you push back?

Ending Activity: *What are our community inquiries/community curiosities? Just capturing, not homework.*

Extra questions to go deeper:

- Opportunity cost – Are there benefits to social media? *How do these benefits affect the cost of the virtual world described by the author? Do you agree with his analysis that access to social media and the virtual world is too costly?*
- Anomie (Normlessness) p 195 - Post-modernity is marked by diversity, skepticism, and innovation. Post-modernity was a reaction against norms. There are no absolutes. Have we gone too far? Do we need norms? If so, how do we decide what they are?

Part 4

Welcome

Part 3 Recap: The author talked about the 4 foundational harms to young people (and all of us) due to social media and the virtual world. He talked specifically about how boys and girls have been affected differently. He also gave spiritual practices as a way to reclaim "what is real" and support human flourishing rather than degradation.

Today, we come to the end of the book, where the author gives tangible clear steps for moving forward. What can we do?

Large Group question: The author says, "Social scientists have long studied traps where each individual does what she thinks is best for herself (such as overfishing in a local pond), even though, when everyone makes the same choice, it leads to a bad outcome for all (the pond stops producing any fish). If the group could coordinate (such as by setting a limit on how many fish each resident can take), the long-term outcome would be far more fish for everyone. These traps are called *collective action problems.*" (p 222)

How have you seen the collection action problem play out in our community?

Small Group Sharing: The author gives suggestions regarding what can be done by three groups of people to improve our current situation: Governments and tech companies (Ch. 10), schools (Ch. 11), and parents (Ch. 12). *Look at the suggestions the author provides. What seems farfetched and why? What seems feasible and why? Record your thoughts on the charts provided to share with the large group.*

Large group: *What did you hear in your groups?*

Ending Activity: *Gather any final curiosity questions.*

Part 4 – Small Group Recording Sheets

The author gives suggestions regarding what can be done by three groups of people to improve our current situation: Governments and tech companies (Ch. 10), schools (Ch. 11), and parents (Ch. 12).

Look at the suggestions the author provides.
What seems farfetched and why? What seems feasible and why?
Record your thoughts on the charts provided to share with the large group.

<u>Farfetched</u>	<u>Feasibility</u>