The Case for Phone-Free Schools

The research is clear: Smartphones undermine attention, learning, relationships, and belonging.

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This post is cross-posted at The Atlantic (here), with one section cut: the section urging parents to give "dumb phones" (or "basic phones") as first phones, until high school. It is otherwise identical.

I'm pleased to announce that my next book has been listed on the website of Penguin Press, with the title: The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness. It is available for pre-order now, and will be released in March of 2024. So now I really need to finish writing it.

In May 2019, I was invited to give a lecture at my old high school in Scarsdale, New York. Before the talk, I met with the principal and his top administrators. I heard that the school, like most high schools in America, was struggling with a large and recent increase in mental illness among its students. The primary diagnoses were depression and anxiety disorders, including increasing rates of self-harm; girls were particularly vulnerable. I was told that the mental- health problems were already baked in when students arrived for ninth grade. Coming out of middle school, many students were already anxious and depressed. Many were also already addicted to their phones.

Ten months later, I was invited to give a talk at Scarsdale Middle School. There, too, I

To the teachers and administrators I spoke with, this wasn't merely a coincidence. They saw clear links between rising phone addiction and declining mental health, to say nothing of declining academic performance. A common theme in my conversations with them was: *We all hate the phones.* Keeping students off of them during class was a constant struggle. Getting students' attention was harder because they seemed permanently distracted and congenitally distractible. Drama, conflict, bullying, and scandal played out continually during the school day on platforms to which the staff had no access. I asked why they couldn't just ban phones during school hours. They said too many parents would be upset if they could not reach their children during the school day.

A lot has changed since 2019. The case for phone-free schools is much stronger now. As Zach Rausch and I have documented here at the After Babel Substack, evidence of an international epidemic of mental illness, which started around 2012, has continued to accumulate. So, too, has evidence that it was caused in part by social media and the sudden move to smartphones in the early 2010s. Many parents now see the addiction and distraction these devices cause in their own children; most of us have heard harrowing stories of self-harming behavior and suicide attempts among our friends' children. Two weeks ago, the United States Surgeon General issued an advisory warning that social media can carry "a profound risk of harm to the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents."

We now also have more precedents: many more examples of schools that have gone entirely phone-free during the school day. So the time is right for parents and educators to ask: *Should we make the school day phone-free? Would that reduce rates of depression, anxiety, and self-harm? Would it improve educational outcomes?* I believe that the answer to all of these questions is yes.

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What Phones Do to Kids in School

Think about how hard it is for you to stay on task and sustain a train of thought while working on your computer. Email, texts, and alerts of all kinds continually present you

with opportunities to do something easier and more fun than what you're doing now. If you are over age 25, you have a fully mature frontal cortex to help you resist temptation and maintain focus, and yet you probably still have difficulties doing so. Now imagine a phone in a child's pocket, buzzing every few minutes with an invitation to do something other than pay attention. There's no mature frontal cortex to help them stay on task.

Whatever rules a school may have in place against it, many studies have established that students check their phone a lot during class, and that they receive and send texts if they can get away with it. Their focus is often and easily derailed by interruptions from their devices. One study from 2016 found that 97 percent of college students said that they sometimes use their phones during class for non-educational purposes. Nearly 60 percent of students said that they spend more than 10 percent of class time on their phones, mostly texting. Many studies show that students who use their phones during class learn less and get lower grades.

You might be thinking that these are correlational findings; maybe the smarter students are just better able to resist temptation? Perhaps, but experiments using random assignment likewise show that using or just seeing a phone or receiving an alert causes students to underperform.

For example, consider this study, aptly titled "Brain Drain: The Mere Presence of One's Own Smartphone Reduces Available Cognitive Capacity." The students involved in the study came into a lab and took tests that are commonly used to measure memory capacity and intelligence. They were randomly assigned to one of three groups, given the following instructions: (1) Put your phone on your desk, (2) leave it in your pocket or bag, or (3) leave it out in another room. None of these conditions involve active phone use—just the potential distraction of knowing your phone is there, with texts and social-media posts waiting. The results were clear: The closer the phone was to students' awareness, the worse they performed on the tests. Even just having a phone in one's pocket sapped students' abilities.

The problem is not just transient distraction, though any distraction in the classroom will impede learning. Heavy phone or social-media use may also have a cumulative, enduring, and deleterious effect on adolescents' abilities to focus and apply themselves. Nearly half of American teens say that they are online "almost constantly," and such

continuous administration of small pleasures can produce sustained changes in the brain's reward system, including a reduction of dopamine receptors. This shifts users' general mood toward irritability and anxiety when separated from their phones, and it reduces their ability to focus. That may be one reason why heavy phone users have lower GPAs. As the neuroscientists Jaan Aru and Dmitri Rozgonjuk put it in a recent review of the literature: "Smartphone use can be disruptively habitual, with the main detrimental consequence being an inability to exert prolonged mental effort."

But smartphones don't just pull students away from schoolwork; they pull them away from one another, too.

One way that phones have hurt our relationships is through "phubbing" (a contraction of "*phone snubbing*"), when a person breaks away from a conversation to look at their screen. Research shows that it interferes with the intimacy and perceived quality of social interactions. People who are more addicted to their phones are, unsurprisingly, the biggest phubbers, which may explain why people who are the heaviest users of phones and/or social media are also the most depressed and lonely.

Once some students start phubbing others, then the others feel pressure to pull out their own phones, and in a flash, the culture of the entire school has changed. Jean Twenge and I analyzed the international PISA data set (part of an ongoing study on education) and found a global increase in loneliness at school beginning after 2012 (See Figure 1).

Lonely at School

The share of students reporting high levels of loneliness at school has increased sharply since the early 2010s.

0
2000   2003   2006   2009   2012   2015   2018

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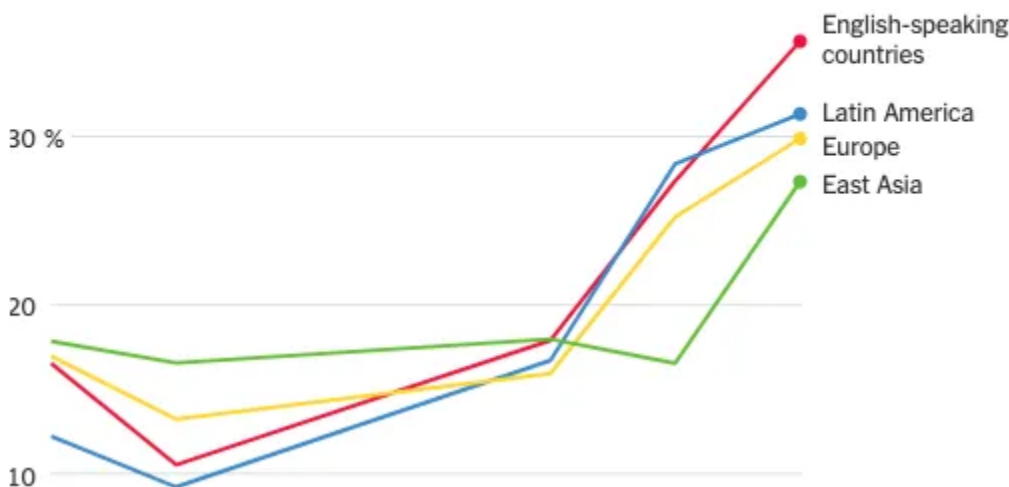
By The New York Times | Note: English-speaking countries include Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, United Kingdom, United States. Source: "Worldwide increases in adolescent loneliness" by Jean M. Twenge, Jonathan Haidt, et al.

Figure 1. Percent of students in each of four cultural groupings that scored above a cutoff indicating high levels on the average of 6 items in the PISA study that asked about loneliness and friendship at school. From Twenge, Haidt, Blake, McAllister, Lemon, & Le Roy (2021). Graph reprinted from The New York Times.

Students around the world became less likely to agree with items such as "I feel like I belong at school," and more likely to agree with items such as "I feel lonely at school." That's roughly when teens went from mostly using flip phones to mostly using smartphones. It's also when Instagram caught fire with girls and young women globally, following its acquisition by Facebook. If we must pick a date for the start of selfie culture and its poisonous levels of visual social comparison, I'd say it's 2012.

If you have any doubt that phones in school stunt social connections, just talk to students about what happens at lunch time. My undergraduate students at NYU tell me that it is often difficult to have real conversations, because most of their fellow students keep their phones on the table and frequently break away to check or respond to notifications. A 2018 study by the social psychologists Ryan Dwyer, Kostadin Kushlev, and Elizabeth Dunn tested my students' intuition. They invited hundreds of college students and community members to share meals at a restaurant, with family or friends. They randomly assigned participants in each small group to either put their phones on the table, or to put them away. The results? "When phones were present (vs. absent), participants felt more distracted, which reduced how much they enjoyed spending time with their friends/family."

I've been studying and writing about the effects of smartphones and social media on

teens' behavior, development, and mental health for six years now. To help organize the existing research on these topics, while I write my next book, I've created a series of open-source Google documents, which I've curated with Rausch, my lead researcher. We recently created a phone-free schools collaborative review doc, cataloging the studies I've noted in this article and many more.

Consider the words of the MIT professor Sherry Turkle in her book *Reclaiming Conversation*: Because of our phones, she writes, "we are forever elsewhere." If we want children to be present, learn well, make friends, and feel like they belong at school, we should keep smartphones and social media out of the school day for as long as possible.

What Does Going Phone-Free Mean?

According the National Center for Education Statistics, as of 2020, "cellphone bans were in place in 77% of U.S. schools." But this high number seems to refer to a very low bar: It includes any school that tells students they should not use their phones while in class — unless the use is related to class. That's not really a ban; it's more of an unenforceable wish. Such a policy guarantees struggle between teachers and students, and it means that there are always kids looking at phones hidden in their laps or books, especially in the classes where the teacher has grown exhausted by the never-ending game of phone policing. As long as *some* kids are posting and texting during the school day, that raises the pressure on *everyone else* to check their phones during the school day. Nobody wants to be the last person to know the thing that everyone else is texting about.

Other countries are ahead of the U.S. on phone policy. France banned the use of mobile phones on school grounds through grade nine in 2018 (though the law allows students to keep their phones in their bags or pockets, so students still use their phones stealthily). In New South Wales, Australia, the use of mobile phones has been banned in elementary schools and will soon be banned in high schools, although schools can decide how to implement the bans.

Some schools in the U.S. have now taken similarly uncompromising stances on phones. For example, the author Mark Oppenheimer wrote earlier this year in *The Atlantic* about St. Andrew's, a small boarding school in Delaware that allows students to use their phones only when in their dorm rooms, not when anywhere else on campus—a move

that some students initially resisted, but now has widespread student support.

More American schools—arguably all schools—should make themselves into genuinely phone-free zones. How would that look, in practice? I think it's helpful to think of phone restrictions on a scale from 1 to 5, as follows:

> **Level 1:** Students can take their phones out during class, but only to use them for class purposes.
>
> **Level 2:** Students can hold onto their phones but are not supposed to take them out of their pockets or backpacks at all during class time.
>
> **Level 3:** Phone caddies in classrooms: Students put their phones into a wall pocket or storage unit at the start of each class, and then pick them up at the end of that class.

These three levels seem to be the ones most commonly employed by American schools today. I believe that the first two are nearly useless. Many students do not have the impulse control to stop themselves from checking their phone during class time if the phone is within reach. One teacher at Scarsdale High School told me that even when a ban on using phones during class is enforced, some students will say that they need to use the bathroom in order to check their phones.

Phone caddies are a little better for learning, because they get the phone out of the students's pocket, but their effect on school social life may be worse: A likely result of the practice could be that *all times between classes* will be dominated by kids looking down silently at their phones, getting the fix they were denied for 50 minutes during class. When they do talk with friends, they'll give those friends only a fraction of their full attention.

So let's move on:

> **Level 4:** Lockable pouches (such as those made by Yondr). Students are required to put their phone into their own personal pouch when they arrive at school, which is then locked with a magnetic pin (like the anti-theft tags used in clothing stores). Students keep the pouch with them but cannot unlock it until the end of the school day, when they are given access to a magnetic unlocking device.

> **Level 5:** Phone lockers. Students lock their phones into a secure unit with many small compartments when they arrive at school. They keep their key and get access to the phone lockers again only when they leave school.

Both of these practices put any student seen using a phone during the school day in clear violation of policy. They are the only two policies that can create phone-free schools. They are the policies most likely to produce substantial educational, social, and mental-health benefits, because they are the only approaches that give students six or seven hours a day of time away from their phone.

Lockable pouches are low-cost and easy-to-implement. However, I have heard from some students that their classmates (aided by YouTube videos) find ways to open their pouches and use their phones whenever they think no adult is watching. (A Yondr employee told me that the company is working to improve its pouch lock, and also said that schools should do regular pouch checks, which would reveal the damage from the most common methods of illicit unlocking.)

Phone lockers may be more complicated to put in place, logistically—especially at larger schools. But they are the most reliable way to separate students from their phones for the duration of the school day and would therefore deliver the greatest benefits.

A school that goes phone-free would still have to figure out what to do about laptops, tablets, and computers in the classroom. Students would surely use any internet-connected device to send and receive texts, and to reach their social-media accounts. Last year, I banned all screens—even laptops for taking notes—from all of my undergraduate and MBA classes, and at the end of each semester, students strongly agreed that this improved the class for them. But even absent a laptop ban, these larger devices are more easily managed, and are not as likely as smartphones to disrupt social interactions outside of class.

Those who oppose phone bans raise a number of objections. Smartphones can be useful teaching tools, for instance, and may make it easier for some teachers to create engaging lesson plans. That's true, but any increase in engagement during a lesson may be offset by students following off-ramps during the same lesson. When we add in the costs to all other teachers and the loss of social connection between classes, it's hard to

see how the marginal benefit of a phone-based lesson outweighs the costs of a phone-focused student body.

A more common argument comes from parents, many of whom are afraid that something might go wrong at school, and want to ensure that they can reach their children at all times. These fears are understandable, but are also part of the causes of Gen Z's mental-health problems. In his book "*Paranoid Parenting*," the sociologist Frank Furedi describes how a new style of protective parenting swept through British and American society in the 1990s, in response to the perception that risks to children were rising. When parents believe that everything is risky and they can't trust other adults to protect their children, they take a more defensive approach to parenting. They try to protect their children from all risks, even when that deprives their children of valuable experiences of independence.

But today's parents, who grew up during a period when crime rates were much higher than they are now, generally have fond memories of walking or biking to school with other kids, or just having time away from parental supervision to hang out with friends. I believe that children and teens would benefit developmentally if they were to go six or seven hours each day out of contact with their parents.

What about school shootings? I'm the father of two high-school students, and of course I would want to connect with my children in such a nightmare scenario. But would a school where every student has a smartphone be safer than one in which only the adults had smartphones? Ken Trump, the president of National School Safety and Security Services, cautions that cellphone use during emergencies can actually *increase* safety risks. "During a lockdown, students should be listening to the adults in the school who are giving life-saving instructions," Trump explains. "Phones can distract from that. Silence can also be key, so you also don't want that phone noise attracting attention." In addition, it seems to me that 300 parents rushing to the school in 300 cars would probably make things more difficult for first responders.

How Parents Can Amplify the Benefits

Communication is generally a good thing. When cell phones became common in the 1990s, Millennial teens adopted them with gusto. These phones are now referred to as

"flip phones" or as "dumb phones," because they lacked an internet browser or internet-enabled apps. We might also call them "communication phones," because they were designed to help people communicate with other people. And that's what Millennials used them for: to call and text their friends, often about how and when to get together in person. When the Millennials were teens, their mental health was fine—slightly better than that of Gen X, before them, and much better than Gen Z, after them (as Twenge reports in her new book Generations). Dumb phones are helpful, not harmful.

Smartphones are very different. They can be used for communication, but they have a thousand other applications, many of which are carefully designed to attract and keep a child's attention. I believe it is unwise and unnecessary to give children smartphones as their first phones.

Americans generally give children their own phones in late elementary and early middle school, and for good reasons: we want to be able to reach our children to arrange activities, and we want them to be able to reach us if something goes wrong. So let's give our kids dumb phones or dumb watches! They do just what you want, and don't do the things you most fear (providing 24-hour access to addictive social media, and video gaming, and more). My wife and I gave our daughter a Gizmo Watch when she turned 9. She could call only three numbers with it, and we (the 3 family members) could call her. It was the perfect communication device for a girl who was now walking to school, running errands, and meeting up with a friend in a nearby park. And it enabled my daughter to have *more* experiences than we would have permitted her without the watch.

You can find a list of dumb phones and watches here, at the website for Wait Until 8th. That's a group that helps parents in each school come together and sign a pledge that they will not give their child a smartphone until 8th grade. I strongly support the organization's central idea: to help parents work together so that their children will not be the "only one" who doesn't have a smartphone. I would only suggest that the goal be "wait until 9th." Middle schools usually run from 6th to 8th grade, so it would be a mess if all 8th graders have smartphones and the younger kids don't. I think it's better to keep smartphones entirely out of the lives of children until high school.

If most parents would delay giving their child a smartphone until high school, providing

only dumb phones until then, it would amplify the benefits of locking up phones in K-8 schools. It would mean that when a middle school lets out and kids are reunited with their phones, most of them would use those phones to *call or text their friends and family*, rather than devoting the next hour to scrolling through Instagram posts.

As the teen mental-health crisis rolls on and rates of depression, anxiety, and self-harm continue to rise, we are not helpless. It would be great if social- media platforms enforced their own minimum age of 13 to open accounts, but all signs indicate that they won't unless compelled by Congress. It would be great if Congress would compel them, and in fact several bills are being considered right now toward that end. It would be better still if the minimum age for using social media were raised to at least 16. The solutions to this crisis are wide-ranging, and some may need to involve the federal government.

But parents, teachers, and school administrators can take meaningful action, too, this year. Parents who have not yet given their children a smartphone can resolve to provide only dumb phones until high school, and they can coordinate with the parents of their children's friends, making that choice easier for all families involved. Schools that are using the lower levels of phone restriction can resolve to move up to lockable pouches or phone lockers, and many schools could implement these changes by September. My hope as a researcher is that a farsighted governor or school-district superintendent will implement these changes experimentally, by randomly assigning some middle schools to implement these changes as soon as possible, and other schools to do so a year later. That way we could gain high-quality experimental evidence as to whether phone-free schools really confer the benefits I have predicted based on the research.

"It helped me a lot," one student at San Mateo High School in California told NBC News after her school started using lockable pouches. "Before, I would usually just like curl over in the side of my desk, and, like, check my phone and text everyone. But now there's no other thing for us to look at or do except for talk to our teacher or pay attention."

All children deserve schools that will help them learn, cultivate deep friendships, and develop into mentally healthy young adults. All children deserve phone-free schools.

Notes after initial publication:

- Yondr alerted me that they have upgraded the security of their pouches, see here for a story about a school in Pittsburgh using the improved version.

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Alan Clarke   Jun 6, 2023

Jon, I work at a school which has focused on eliminating phones and done a great job of it. The problem now is that all the things that students were doing on their phones they are now able to do on their laptops. The next frontier in this battle is getting laptops out of classrooms; they are destroying students' ability to write and think.

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Yuri Bezmenov ✓ How To Subvert Subversion with ...   Jun 6, 2023

Brilliant as always, Jonathan. It is telling that many Silicon Valley executives send their kids to phone free schools, while they engineer products more addictive than cigarettes. Parents need to take more responsibility because they control purchasing decisions and model behavior. I am shocked by how many toddlers are dependent on screens because their parents are too exhausted to coax them through meals, diaper changes, etc.

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