



# **Kids and Smartphones**

**Helping pastors address the problem**

**By John Benton**

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## **Introduction**

A smartphone is basically a mobile phone that can act like a computer. It has touchscreen access to the Internet and a system which can operate downloaded apps. In particular it gives the user access to social media – things like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok etc. – which have been extremely popular with young people in recent years. To be part of the popular crowd at school these days it is looked upon as essential that you have a smartphone.

The 2020 film “The Social Dilemma” is a docu-drama about the effect of smartphones. I think this was the first place I heard people who had helped invent smartphones say they would never allow their own children to have one – certainly not until they were grown-up. These people from Silicon Valley knew that these phones are not set up for the benefit of the user but in order to keep the user looking at the screen, flicking through the different options and so to harvest more and more data about the user which can then be sold on and used in other ways.

### **Pastors who care**

The use of smartphones among young people has coincided with an immense rise in mental illness among teenagers. Recently I was talking with a woman I don't know all that well, but she told me that her daughter, now in her 20s, had been through addiction to smartphones. During that time, she was self-harming. Having thankfully come through that phase the daughter now wonders what on earth made her think of doing such things.

And Christian families are not exempt from this. There are many parents in our churches who are at their wits end as they see their children being deeply influenced by all kinds of unhelpful ideas and yet as parents, they are not sure what they can do to help. These are issues which pastors who care for ‘the flock over which the Holy Spirit has made them overseers’, Acts 20.28, need to address in our day.

Times have moved on and it is no good bringing the same old sermon applications which were being made 30 years ago. The preacher needs to be scratching his congregation where they itch now, and the matter of children (or grandchildren) and smartphones is one of the most pressing concerns of our day. Yet in many churches nothing of any substance is being said about the problem.

### **Understanding what is happening**

But, of course, before we can teach what the Scriptures have to say on this matter, we must make sure we understand the problem. The best book I have found on the

subject is by New York professor Jonathan Haidt. Published in 2024. It is the book 'The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness'<sup>1</sup>.

If you can get hold of a copy and read it, I would highly recommend it. However, it is a large hardback book of nearly 400 pages, and I doubt if many busy pastors would have the time or energy to grapple with it. So, in this booklet I attempt to set the background and then to give a brief synopsis of Haidt's landmark book in order to make its contents accessible to 'pastors in a hurry'.

As you read about what the smartphone assumes about people and how it treats us, bear in mind your Biblical anthropology and what Scripture teaches about who human beings actually are. This will give you the key to understanding the pitfalls to which the smartphone generation is exposed and how this very pressing problem can be legitimately addressed from the Bible.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* by Jonathan Haidt, published by Allen Lane / Penguin Books 2024

## **Chapter 1: the surveillance abilities of smart phones**

In 1998 Google became an incorporated company with a laudable mission to liberate information and make it available worldwide.

But as people searched the web, they left their own digital fingerprints. For example, in addition to often used words, each Google search produces a wake of collateral data such as how the question is phrased, spelling, punctuation, dwell times, click patterns and location. To begin with this extra information was stored but ignored. It was a young Stanford University graduate, Amit Patel, who it seems, first saw that, using the statistical methods of behavioural science, this ‘accidental’ information could be put to use. He concluded that detailed stories about each user – thoughts, feelings, interests – could be constructed from the wake of every online transaction. This information could be sold to those offering products online. It helps to know your customers. Personal data was a commodity.

With this background smartphones become instruments which can be and are used for spying on their users and collecting data. Whether for good or ill we are under surveillance. Teenagers (and others) often forget this. When we use a smartphone, we do not just read it, it is reading us.

Let’s think about the ways in which this happens.

### **Outside**

It knows about us on the outside. For example, if we are using a map application to get somewhere then the smartphone will track our path and be aware of our destination. In other words, it knows our physical location. Therefore, it knows which shops and venues you frequent and therefore can guess which products you are interested in. It can, therefore, build up from this a detailed profile of your daily and weekly routines. It will know whether you are still at school or if you have started work. It will know whether you still live with mum and dad or whether you have a place of your own.

### **Inside**

But further smartphones can find out about us on the inside. They can build up a picture of us inwardly. This is much more sinister. By comparing your choices and the way you use your smartphone with a vast database concerning other people the artificial intelligence at the other end of the phone is able to paint a very accurate picture of your preferences and the kind of person you are. From there it has great ability to manipulate you and your ideas. Cookies which you allow on to your smartphone track your online activity.

With this happening, teenagers – exploring the world as they do while they are growing up – can find themselves being led to all kinds of unhelpful websites and influencers. Much of the recent rise in teenagers claiming to be ‘transgender’ seems to have been generated in this way. There are websites which commend such things as self-harm and even suicide. Niche online communities can draw in a teenager and turn them away from listening to their parents and so divide a family.

Most of us do not realise the extent to which our smart phones can penetrate the way we think.

### **The algorithm**

The main concern of the smart phone is not to educate and inform you or even to keep you in contact with friends through social media. It is easy to forget this. Its concern is to keep you watching the screen and making choices so that it can harvest more data about you. We may have one agenda but the algorithm controlling the smartphone’s response actually has a completely different one. When you ask a question of a smartphone it will lead you not to a general or balanced answer to your question but to the answer it thinks you want to hear or to see so as to keep you interested.

The apostle Paul tells us that in the last days ‘people will not endure sound teaching but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions and will turn away from listening to the truth,’ 2 Timothy 4.3, 4. In many ways the smartphone is a manifestation of this. It is the ultimate echo chamber that will tell you what you want to hear.

It is not just teenagers who need to remember this. Older, retired people need to remember this too. For example, the algorithm will eventually tell you what it thinks you want to hear about faith – that all religions are basically the same – the God of Christianity and Allah are just different names for the same deity – and that all paths lead to heaven. By contrast, Jesus said ‘I am the way and the truth and the life, no-one comes to the Father except by me’, John 14.6. Who are you going to believe?

In the film ‘The Social Dilemma’ which includes the scenario of teenagers getting drawn into extreme politics via the internet, it becomes clear, for example, that the smartphone will answer the same question differently according to what US state you are a resident of and its knowledge of the general political attitudes of that area of the country.

**Who is in control?**

The agenda is not about truly informing you or about keeping you in touch, but of keeping you watching the screen. If we want to avoid being manipulated it is good to turn the phone off as much as possible. Maybe things have gone so far that we can't live without smart phones, but we can make sure we do our best to be in control rather than being controlled.

The future possibilities as the technology advances are frightening. Artificial intelligence using the smart phone can pick up on behaviours which elude the user's own mind. Given enough data it can predict how a person will react to different situations. This ability easily slides over into seeking to modify and even control an individual's belief and behaviour as the relevant personalized stimuli are placed on the screen before them.

## **Chapter 2: changing the development of young people**

Human beings are different from other creatures. We would expect that as being made in the image of God, Genesis 1.27. One of the ways in which we are different is that there is something of a break in our physical development in childhood during which we acquire certain mental skills which we need for life. These skills are especially to do with handling relationships with others and being able to cope with taking risks.

But the story in brief is that something happened to parenting in the 1990s. Mums and dads became fearful and taken up with keeping the children safe. During those years we saw the development of health and safety restrictions and of playgrounds with no risks. There was less unsupervised play. Children did not meet with their friends so much to kick around together outside in the street. No one is completely sure why this happened. It is probably linked to the increased mobility of society and the breakup of local communities. There was a rise in the use of the term 'stranger danger'. It was likely also connected to the prevalence of an assumed atheism by society generally, Psalm 14.1. Such an outlook encourages people to think that there is only this life and therefore it must be looked after at all costs. Hence what might be termed 'Safetyism' took over the thinking of many loving parents.

Into the void left by lack of free play with other children stepped the smartphone. This kept children occupied while being safely at home. They were enjoying themselves and seemingly still in touch with their friends through social media. It seemed like the ideal solution. But without realising what was happening, by taking this step we were changing the age-old way in which children were made to develop.

### **The great rewiring**

Jonathan Haidt calls this the great rewiring of childhood. We moved from play-based childhood development in the real world to a digitalised, phone-based childhood rooted in the virtual world. In fact, we overprotected children in the real world with our 'Safetyism' but left them totally under-protected in the digital world of smartphones. Within a few clicks children could be looking at a commendation of self-harm, pornography or worse. And it seems this move in the surroundings / environment in which children develop is a large contributory factor in the mental fragility and instability we are now seeing in the rising generation.

During childhood human beings grow two essential ways of thinking. Haidt calls these the 'discover mode' and the 'defend mode'. We need to be curious, which

might entail risk, but we also need to learn how to keep ourselves safe. We learn these two things by experience. Haidt seeks to explain them through the theory of evolution, whereas Christians would see this as part of the way God made us – with the potential to become mentally mature. The Bible recognises the difference between childish thinking and adult ways, e.g., 1 Corinthians 13.11.

Remember, as we saw in the previous chapter, that smartphones are designed to keep the user watching the screen. Children fall as easy prey to this online entrapment. Thus, the old play-based childhood has been largely abandoned in favour of immense amounts of time spent on a smartphone.

### **Discover mode**

Overprotection and the use of the smartphone hinders the development of both the discover and defend modes of thinking. Children lose the positives which are learned in a play-based childhood.

In free play we learn to take risks without an adult interfering. Yes, we may fall off a swing and scrape our knees, but we will know better next time. We are learning. We learn to manage risks. We find our own way. We learn what we can do and what we can't do. And this, overall, builds confidence in coping with life in the real world. 'I can do this'.

Also, in free play we learn how to navigate relationships with others. Made in the image of God we are meant to be relational beings. Each of the Persons of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit matter individually, but at the same time they are in total unity as one God forever. Just so, we in God's image matter as individuals but are meant to be in community and relationship with others. As children playing with other children, we learn to get on with each other or if we fall out we learn how to say 'sorry' and move on. Falling out is limited to the few friends present and can soon be put to rights. We are discovering 'give and take' and what is required in relating to other people. And this is necessary to become a balanced, well-rounded, stable human being. We have learned about real life. But many modern children have moved out of this normal way of development in favour of the 'safety' of the smartphone.

### **Defend mode**

Actually, an almost continual smartphone experience robs children of learning the defend mode of thinking too.

For all the car chases and cartoon violence they may watch on a smartphone screen, those who watch are in no physical danger whatsoever. There is no risk involved. In

the end whatever happens on the screen can just be switched off. So, there is no real experience of risk and therefore no learning of risk management. The outcome which builds confidence, 'This is risky, but I can cope with it – I know what to do' never occurs. There is no positive input when it comes to the 'defend mode' way of thinking. No wonder then that we are seeing the rise of an anxious generation.

Further, when it comes to relationships, smartphones turn out to have, potentially at least, an extremely negative effect. I will let Jonathan Haidt explain.

Beginning by speaking about real world relationships between youngsters he says: 'Mistakes are low-cost and can be rectified in real time. Moreover, there are clear embodied signals of this rectification such as an apology with an appropriate facial expression. A smile, a pat on the back, or a handshake shows everyone that it's okay, both parties are ready to move on and continue playing, both are developing their skills of relationship repair. In contrast, as young people move their social relationships online, those relationships become disembodied, asynchronous, and sometimes disposable. Even the small mistakes can bring heavy costs in a viral world where content can live forever, and everyone can see it. Mistakes can be met with intense criticism by multiple individuals with whom one has no underlying bond. Apologies are often mocked, and any signal of reacceptance can be mixed or vague. Instead of gaining experience of social mastery, a child is often left with a sense of social incompetence, loss of status, and anxiety about future social interactions.'<sup>2</sup>

The term 'social media' is often a misnomer. It can actually turn out to be very anti-social. Again, we see how the use of smartphones can make young people very anxious.

### **Big tech**

At the beginning of his book Haidt likens what we have done to children in giving them smartphones to sending them to the planet Mars to grow up there with no previous research as to what effect it might have on them. There is no protection from dangerous radiation from the sun and gravity on Mars has a power of only 38% of that of earth to name but two things. We would never dream of exposing children, unprotected, to such a life. And yet we have done something very similar to that in putting smartphones into their hands. Haidt is very blunt about the big tech companies that invented and developed these devices:

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid* pages 81, 82

'Many parents were relieved to find that a smartphone or tablet would keep your child happily engaged and quiet for hours. But is this safe? Nobody knew, but because everyone else was doing it, everyone just assumed that it must be okay.'

'Yet the companies had done little or no research on the mental health effects of their products on children and adolescents, and they shared no data with researchers studying the health effects. When faced with growing evidence that their products were harming young people, they mostly engaged in denial, obfuscation, and public relations campaigns. Companies that strive to maximise engagement by using psychological tricks to keep young people clicking were the worst offenders. They hooked children during vulnerable developmental stages, while their brains were rapidly rewiring in response to incoming stimulation. This included social media companies, which inflicted their greatest damage on girls, and video game companies and pornography sites which sank their hooks deepest into boys.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid* page 3

## Chapter 3: the damage that can be caused

Inculcating new behaviour in someone has often been likened to the wearing smooth of a new pathway in the brain. The more we tread the path the smoother it becomes, the more familiar we are with it and the more we tend to use it. So, we readily think that way and behave accordingly.

How much time do young people spend on their smartphones? Researchers asking that question directly to youngsters usually come up with a figure of 7 to 8 hours a day. However, the suspicion is that youngsters often under report their online activity. It is frequently more likely in total to be as much as 16 hours. That would add up to 112 hours a week, especially as teenagers become addicted.

Spending all this time on screens means that other activities which used to fill that time, decrease. What are the things which screen time deprives young people of, and how much does that matter? That is our main agenda for this chapter.

In his book Jonathan Haidt names four foundational harms which are linked to the prevalence of a phone-dominated childhood. These are social deprivation, sleep deprivation, attention fragmentation and addiction. Let's look first of all, at each of these.

### **Social deprivation**

In Scripture we are told 'It is not good for man to be alone,' Genesis 2.18. This word is given in the context of male-female marriage, but it signals more generally that human beings are meant to be social creatures. Lack of contact with others like us is 'not good.' We thrive in loving community, John 13.34. But when we are isolated from others we wilt as people. We deprive ourselves and bring harm to ourselves psychologically.

According to research the daily average time that people in the 15 – 24 age range spent in the presence of their friends in 2010 was over 2 hours. By 2019 (before Covid restrictions had come into play) that amount of time had been halved. This of course, correlates with the time at which smartphones were becoming more and more popular among younger people. The time spent with others was being replaced by time looking at the screen on the phone.

In his book Haidt comments as follows: 'Of course, teens at the time might not have thought they were losing their friends; they thought they were just moving their friendship from real life to Instagram, Snapchat and online video games. Isn't that

just as good? No. As Jean Twenge<sup>4</sup> has shown, teens who spend more time using social media are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety and other disorders, while teens who spend more time with groups of young people (such as playing team sports or participating in religious communities) have better mental health.<sup>5</sup>

Young people need face-to-face contact. Children require embodied physical play. We are flesh and blood, and Jesus became flesh and blood too John 1.14. He did not make himself known by sending a video recording of himself. We need real life interaction. The healthiest play is outside and includes occasional risk taking. That is how God made us to be – not alone – and that is how we grow and thrive. To move away from that is to invite trouble.

Some people think that the very presence of a smartphone tends even to undermine the value of face-to-face meet ups with others. People feel devalued in the presence of a smartphone.

This is because they know that if the phone buzzes or ‘tings’ then conversation with them will be dropped while attention is paid to whatever the phone is alerting the other person to. It could be a call from someone or just some kind of news update about something or other. But they are made to feel that they don’t matter as much as whatever is on the smartphone. They take second place to the device.

Foundational harm is being done to young people and this is part of it. We are seeing the rise in mental health problems among this age group.

### **Sleep deprivation**

During the teenaged years a smartphone invites young people to miss out on sleep. As the brain is still developing in these years actually more hours of sleep are required but now young people are ending up with less. Alone in their bedrooms at night, boys find themselves involved in an online video game or in pornography which they can’t put down. Girls find themselves embroiled in social media. Hours are wasted.

Yet those teenaged years are the years when young people should benefit from sleeping longer. That’s why, traditionally, teenagers have found it harder to get up in the mornings and get to school. Pre-teens need 9 hours a night and teenagers need at least 8 hours.

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<sup>4</sup> Professor of psychology at San Diego State University

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid* page 131

Less sleep not only makes it harder for young people to pay attention at school (with subsequent poor grades), but it can also bring about health problems like obesity, heart disorders, trouble fighting infections and depression. A mixture of continual tiredness and depression frequently leads a young person to feel that they will never be good enough to make the grade and to give up on life. They just want to shut themselves away.

Instead of teenagers who used to take on Saturday jobs to earn themselves a little extra pocket money we now hear stories of young people who simply want to stay at home and who find it too difficult to hold down any kind of regular job. We have a whole generational mental health crisis.

Perhaps to lay this all at the door of smartphones is going too far, but certainly they seem to have contributed to the general decline in the mental health of young people. But whatever the main root cause, we now have a cohort of youngsters in our society who prefer the online, virtual world to what they meet in real life. A phone-based childhood has not served them well.

### **Attention fragmentation**

The great breakthroughs in human knowledge have usually come about not by accident but through concentrated thinking. In fact, to get anything important done we have to stay on track and give the problem our undivided attention.

This is the case in business, science, sports, family life or anything that matters. To keep taking the slip roads from the motorway means you never arrive at your destination. And smartphones provide plenty of slip roads – we call them notifications. To lose the ability to concentrate and to keep on track and think something through is a terrible blow to a human being. The ‘scatter brain’ is rarely successful in life.

For many years there has been a discussion going on about how watching too much tv can shorten our span of attention. The scene on the screen changes every few seconds and our brains get used to that and follow suit. Now it seems that certain aspects of smartphone use are likely to make things worse.

Smartphones provide ‘alerts’ about all kinds of things. News apps bring ‘breaking news’ about everything from world politics to sports. Social media apps will break in to relate the latest love interest of this celebrity and that one. According to Haidt, the average teenager with a smartphone will receive some kind of ‘notification’ on

their device around once every 5 minutes<sup>6</sup>. This is a recipe for inculcating lack of concentration.

And at this point it is worth bearing in mind two things. *First*, many young people take their smartphones with them to school and have them switched on during lessons. How is that going to aid their studies? *Second*, remember what we saw in chapter 1. A smartphone has, through artificial intelligence, the ability to predict with great accuracy what will most interest the user and so draw them back to the screen. It can therefore select notifications which are most likely to grab the user's attention and distract them from whatever else they were trying to think about.

The smartphone has the potential to grow a generation of young people who can't think straight. It may be extremely entertaining, but to steal a phrase from a revered author, we may well be 'amusing ourselves to death'<sup>7</sup>.

### **Addiction**

People, young or old, are vulnerable to becoming enslaved to certain actions or habits. This is well-known in such cases as gambling or drinking alcohol. We call this an addiction.

In the human brain there is something called dopamine which is released when an action is followed by a good outcome. It makes us feel pleasure. But it is not something that satisfies us but rather leaves us wanting, as in 'that was nice. I want more of that please!' Harnessing what dopamine does for us it is possible to become addicted to social media, pornography and video games provided by a smartphone.

The terrible truth is that such things happen by design. The creators of these apps use every psychological trick in their tool kit to do their best to 'hook' users. And so it happens that sometimes teenagers find that they just can't put their devices down – they simply feel they must keep playing that video game or keep exploring the next page of what they are looking at on the screen. No loving parent I know would want to open the door to their child becoming addicted to drugs or to gambling. We would hate to see our children enslaved in such a way. Yet by giving them a smartphone we are exposing children to the possibility of another form of captivity – for their brain to be taken prisoner by an app.

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<sup>6</sup> *op. cit.* page 126

<sup>7</sup> *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, by Neil Postman, published 1985

Jonathan Haidt writes: ‘We know that Facebook intentionally hooked teens using behaviourist techniques thanks to the Facebook Files – the trove of documents and screenshots of presentations brought out by the whistle-blower Frances Haugen in 2021. In one chilling section, a trio of Facebook employees give a presentation titled “The Power of Identities...”...which delves into neuroscience, and shows the maturation of the brain during puberty.’ The stated purpose of this presentation is to ‘To support Facebook...in engaging younger users’<sup>8</sup>. It is clear from this material that the presenters were not seeking to protect young people from the possibilities of getting addicted but rather it seems to pursue the reverse – engaging them in a way from which they would find it extremely difficult to turn away.

To find oneself enslaved mentally like this is not something that is going to help young people to flourish nor will it help their mental health.

These then are the four foundational harms to which young people are exposed once they own a smartphone: social deprivation, sleep deprivation, attention fragmentation and addiction.

### **Harmful content**

Though these are foundational harms, we also need to consider the fact that although much healthy and helpful content can be found on the internet accessible through a smartphone, there is also much content which promotes pernicious ideas.

Often those who hold these ideas form an online community where the contributors express and encourage their way of thinking. These can range from various kinds of religious extremism and ‘radical’ political stances which promote violence against others right through to websites which encourage self-harm and even suicide.

One example is what has become known as ‘incel’ culture. ‘Incel’ stands for ‘involuntary celibate’. This refers to people who (casting aside Christian teaching on marriage and sexual intercourse) think it is their right in life to have sex with others but for various reasons (for example being shy) can’t find a sexual partner. On some social media platforms this outlook has taken a particularly nasty turn, encouraging men to blame women for their lack of relationships and sexual opportunities. This approach can even try to justify rape and violence against women. Schoolboys and young men can be easily exposed to this kind of thinking and sadly it can begin to make sense to them. Once something ‘makes sense’ it is not long until males begin

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid* page 133

to be guided by such ideas in their actions. This is a tragedy both for women and for society generally.

But, of course, this is only one example of content which is damaging to society. There are many more that could have been cited. Against this background of harm, the Australian government has decided to try to bring in laws which would effectively keep young people under the age of 16 from using social media.

## **Chapter 4: what churches and parents can do**

Weaning young people away from too much dependence on screens and smartphones is not going to be an easy task – yet that is what obviously needs to happen.

Such is the stimulation and excitement that these devices can provide, and such is the peer group pressure surrounding them for young people that anyone who counsels their restriction is bound to be looked upon as a killjoy and a spoil sport. If you want to provoke an argument with your teenager these days perhaps the quickest way to do it is to suggest that they cut down the amount of time they spend on their smartphone.

Both parents and church have a part to play in trying to rescue the smartphone generation. But keep in mind the main goal. If what we have seen about childhood development is correct, then what young people require is not simply less screen time in the virtual world but more risk taking and face-to-face interaction with others in the real world. So, this is not simply a negative message – ‘Thou shalt not look at screens’ – it is a positive message – ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour...’ Real life, flesh and blood friends are to be embraced, given time and welcomed into our lives. This is the way to escape the clutches of big tech companies who do not see the well-being of youngsters as a priority.

### **Churches**

Pastor, the first thing the church can do to help families caught in the web of the smartphone epidemic is for you to preach on this subject. It needs to be named and ‘called out’ into the open – brought under the light of God’s word. Explain what is going on. Explain that God made us to be at home in the reality of his creation not in the virtual world of screens and apps with its potential to manipulate us. Explain that we are made in God’s image to be social beings and that interacting with others via texts and screens is not a viable substitute. We need to live life face-to-face, Numbers 12.8; 2 John v12; 3 John v14. Explain that we must not be led into a new Gnosticism in which we hide away in a virtual world while despising flesh and blood reality. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, John 1.14. Explain that our value as human beings doesn’t depend on the amount of ‘likes’ we get on Facebook but rather on the fact that God loves us and that while we were still sinners Christ died for us, Romans 5.8.

The second thing churches can do is to provide support for parents grappling with this problem of smartphone over-use among their children. Indeed, in any church with a good cross-section of ages there are likely to be multiple parents facing or

about to face this problem and worried about the effect that continual watching screens is likely to have on their children. They might decide that their children will not have smartphones. But that is likely to entail a struggle. It would probably be beneficial all round to get those parents together under some caring pastoral oversight for them to share their concerns and pray together. They need to be told they are not bad parents because they have reservations about smartphones. They need to feel that they are not facing this alone, but others are alongside them with whom they can talk honestly without feeling condemned if they have allowed their child to have a smartphone. As we have already indicated, it is unlikely that there will be any quick fix here. The path is likely to be long and difficult and the more support parents can get in this the better. In many ways a church provides the perfect environment for such support.

The third thing churches can do is to provide young people with opportunities to meet up. It was noteworthy that in the research of Jean Twenge mentioned by Jonathan Haidt in his book, that teenagers who participated in religious communities registered better mental health. Church and its associated young people's groups can be where young people make friends and lasting relationships (of the real embodied kind) to their mutual benefit. In a church group there is not the rivalry and competitiveness of school or social media. Hopefully there is the acceptance of everyone on the same footing which flows from the gospel. Young people can relax and know that they are okay. It is, of course, the job of the leaders to try to make sure that such an atmosphere exists in the church young people's work.

## **Parents**

Remember the main target we must keep our eyes on is not just less screen time but increasing the child's experience of reality – indeed of God's creation. In a sense we are after re-introducing youngsters to real life, so they learn for themselves how to negotiate its ups and downs.

Against this background Jonathan Haidt makes seven suggestions for parents. These are particularly aimed at youngsters between the ages of 6 to 13, but it doesn't take much imagination to readjust them to suit other age groups.

1. Practice letting your kids out of your sight without them having a way to reach you. This is striking a blow against a parent's own tendency to Safetyism. While you are cooking a meal, for example, send the child with a friend to the local shop to buy some more garlic or whatever. This kind of practice will help the parent be prepared to give the child more independence and that it works. Hence you will not feel under so much

pressure to give them a phone so that they can always be in touch. You will know they can do fine without one.

2. Encourage sleepovers and don't micromanage them. However, if a friend brings a phone with them, it will be best to hold on to it, otherwise you will find you are hosting a phone-based sleepover. A sleepover is all about being together and learning to get along together in the real world.
3. Encourage walking to school together in a group. With this in mind it is best, if possible, to live in the catchment area and for your child to attend the local school. If you live too far from the school for them to walk, then 'drive to five' – in other words drive them to within 5 minutes walking distance from school. Walking into school together with others is a great way of promoting a sense of responsibility and independence.
4. After school is for free play. Don't try to organise every waking minute which your child has. Find ways in which your child can just hang out safely with friends. Or simply encourage them to learn to entertain themselves (minus phone) without being bored. This is how children learn to use their own imagination instead of continually being fed the stuff that, for example, video game designers have cooked up. Get the child to value those 'sacred' moments of being alone with the ability to think for themselves.
5. Go camping. Living for a few days together in a tent brings the family closer together and can be a lot of fun. It is more 'free range'. The usual daily schedule is set aside. The great outdoors beckons children to come and see what is there and try it out. On campsites there will be other kids to run around with and get to know. If you don't like camping, there are plenty of posh and comfortable country cottages that can be hired.
6. Find a children's camp which does not allow phones and is not dominated by an attitude of Safetyism. Many summer (church) camps allow children the opportunity to be away from the internet for a couple of weeks without any digital devices. In such an environment the people who are physically present don't have to compete with the virtual presence of the cool dudes of social media. Real relationships with people who are there in person become much more important.
7. Try to form child-friendly neighbourhoods. It just takes another family to join you and for the children to begin to play together outside. Be upfront

about no smartphones. The key is regularity and keeping going. Kids will usually come if they know other kids are going to be there. Parents may need to be part of a rota to sit outside and keep an eye on things. To take up and run with such an idea provides an ideal opportunity for church parents to begin a wholesome and safe after-school club for kids.

Parents will experience anxiety in getting such things going, but remember you are getting your child back into the age-old ways in which children have developed into stable, able to cope adults. At present the phone-based childhood is not only not working but blighting the lives of many young people.

### **Spirituality**

Although Jonathan Haidt calls himself an atheist (I think you almost have to these days if you hold any kind of academic position), interestingly he includes in his book a whole section on what he calls 'spirituality'. He sees this as necessary for the well-being of human beings.

I thought it would be helpful to close this little booklet by quoting a few sentences from his summary of what he says on this subject.

'When people see morally beautiful actions they feel as if they have been lifted up – elevated in a vertical dimension that can be labelled divinity. When people see morally repulsive actions they feel as if they have been pulled downward or degraded.'

'A phone-based life generally pulls people downward. It changes the way we think, feel, judge and relate to others. It is incompatible with many of the behaviours that religious and spiritual communities practice, some of which have been shown to improve happiness, well-being, trust and group cohesion, ...'

'There is a "God-shaped hole" in every human heart<sup>9</sup>. Or at least many people feel a yearning for meaning, connection and spiritual elevation. A phone-based life often fills that hole with trivial and degrading content. The ancients advised us to be more deliberate in what we exposed ourselves to.'<sup>10</sup>

As Christians we believe that "God-shaped hole" is what that phrase says it is. This anxious generation, shaped by smartphones and social media not only need to be rescued from slavery to their screens, they need to come to know their God and Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

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<sup>9</sup> Haidt tries to explain this phenomenon away in purely secular terms

<sup>10</sup> *Op cit.* pages 216 - 218

*Come to me, all you who labour and are heavy laden,  
and I will give you rest.*

*Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me,  
for I am gentle and lowly in heart  
and you will find rest for your souls.*

*For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*

Matthew 11.28-30