

Critical Thinking Assignment: Exploring the Impacts of Technology on Child Development

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The presence of phones in our lives has changed the plane of existence and interactions forever, becoming the unintended sidekick. In Haidt's article, "*End the Phone-Based Childhood Now*," he argues that the current environment is unsustainable and hostile to human development. He explains that evidence of soaring mental health disorders, loneliness, academic decline, and low meaning are on the rise due to phone use in the last decade.

Haidt cites various forms of evidence that something changed "Suddenly and horribly" beginning around 2010. US adolescent depression and anxiety rates have climbed exponentially (>50%) between 2010 and 2019, with a more alarming 131% rise in suicide among 10-14-year-old girls. When it comes to Loneliness and antisocial behavior, sharp increases began in 2012 and paralleled across many nations. This shift, as Haidt explains, is due to increased phone use throughout the decade and a growing portion of people's social lives happening online. When humans are not engaged in real-life interactions, they can experience alarming impairments in both social and cognitive aspects.

Similar evidence explained by Haidt includes various cognitive declines in children. US NAEP math and reading scores, along with some global data, have shown a reversal in long-term trends after 2012. Furthermore, Gen Z tends to date, work, and start families less than earlier generations, being considered harder to work with in labor settings. Surveys have also shown that younger generations are more shy, less ambitious, and feel meaningless in life. These patterns, experienced worldwide, begin to reveal underlying issues that may be caused by spending excessive time on a phone.

Haidt's argument involves a tipping point in technology beginning in 2010. He details that adolescents traded their flip phones for smarter devices and moved their lives onto a device developed for addiction and complacency. The biggest issue at hand for him is developmental deprivation, where phones have arrived to take over the job of strict parents. Play and real-life exploration were replaced by a sedentary, solitary, and online existence. Adding on, various mechanisms of harm include attention loss, addiction, loss of social skills, and chronic anxiety, all of which are detrimental to mental blossoming in humans.

The various solutions proposed by Haidt aim for a collective move to break traps, which will lead to substantial improvements. Beginning with no smartphone use before high school and no social media before age 16. This age limit allows for optimal development in key adolescent years without dealing with data harvesting and reputational anxiety. Haidt also argues for phones to be taken out of school, where true learning and bonding time can happen, as shown by evidence in schools with better attention and culture. Independence and free play must also be restored in young kids, where risk-taking and exploration lead to competence and reduced anxiety. The bottom line is that there is a vision for the future that can rewire adolescents' mental health problems, but it can only be accomplished with collective action from kids, parents, and educators.

This article provides a strong opinion on adolescent phone usage and believes that it is a main cause of social and cognitive health decline. Though there are a multitude of factors that can affect the prevalence of issues, many researchers and studies indicate a correlation between phone usage and the emergence of disorders such as anxiety and depression. In a meta-analysis report that compiled over 400 articles, there was evidence for the striking relationship between problematic social media use and poor mental health outcomes. In this study, a meta-regression showed moderate correlations between problematic social media use and depression ($r=0.273$, $P<.001$), anxiety ($r=0.348$, $P<.001$), and stress ($r=0.313$, $P<.001$) (Shannon et al., 2022)

Though the meta-analysis study demonstrated further evidence and connections between problematic phone usage and mental health, Haidt falls short in trying to answer this multifaceted and nuanced question. The presence of alternate variables such as nighttime use, passive use, apps used, and motives also play an important part in assessing mental health outcomes. Furthermore, there is still quite a need for further research that can highlight concrete results without limitations, and only then can a causal relationship be established. Ultimately, thousands of studies have shown strong resemblances and proof of cognitive decline, but the sheer number of variables that affect growing adolescents must be further analyzed.

As a child of the 21st century, I have had the privilege to experience revolutionary technological growth, more than any generation before. It is truly incredible how the mind has evolved in the current day, learning and maturing faster than ever. However, all the symptoms that Haidt speaks about in his article, I have experienced firsthand, and excessive technology use has been a primary factor. Beginning at the age of 10, I received my first smartphone, which handed me unrestricted access to the internet, without realizing I had embarked on a long and ongoing struggle with online addiction and mental health.

In my own experience, Isolation was the primary symptom of excessive screen use. I began to crave the short bursts of dopamine and attention that being on social media gave me. Thus, I no longer felt intrigued with my real-life interactions, and discourse with family and friends became almost nonexistent. As time went on, I began to fear these social interactions because of the lack of exposure, leading to an onset of anxiety symptoms and hopelessness due to isolation. Ultimately, the line between online and real life began to blur as I found myself finding refuge on social media and games, while dealing with academic decline and a lack of self-worth.

In conclusion, I believe that Haidt hit the nail on the head when it came to establishing a correlation between Phone use and its effects on developing minds. However, more research is required to prove causation and find innovative solutions. When it came to personal experience, Haidt highlighted some glaring connections that provided answers to my questions and developmental issues. All things considered, I think it is imperative that limits are placed on screen time, and that these free periods are replaced by more productive activities, because as my mom always says, “its cause of that damn phone.”

Reference

Shannon H, Bush K, Villeneuve P, Hellemans K, Guimond S. *Problematic Social Media Use in Adolescents and Young Adults: Systematic Review and Meta-analysis*. JMIR Ment Health 2022 ;9(4):e33450. URL: <https://mental.jmir.org/2022/4/e33450>. DOI: 10.2196/33450