

Both Sides of the Issue

Phones and Mental Health

stosselintheclassroom.org

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Objectives

Students will be able to:

- outline the opposing arguments Jonathan Haidt and Chris Ferguson make about smart phones and youth mental health.
- interpret how each speaker uses historical comparisons, or the rejection of them, to support his case.
- differentiate between the evidence each side cites about smart phone use and teen well-being.
- defend a position on school smart phone bans using specific claims drawn from both videos.

Concepts & Key Terms

The following terms appear across both videos in this pairing. Understanding them will help students follow the arguments and engage in discussion.

The Anxious Generation: Jonathan Haidt's 2024 book arguing that smart phones and social media have rewired childhood and triggered an epidemic of teen mental illness. Chris Ferguson served as a pre-publication reviewer and advised Haidt not to publish it.

Collective Action Problem: a situation in which individuals would benefit from cooperating but fail to do so because each person's incentives run against cooperation. Haidt argues that parents face this problem when deciding whether to give a child a smart phone.

Gen Z: the generation born roughly from 1996 onward — the first, in Haidt's argument, to enter puberty with smart phones and social media already in their hands.

Kids Online Safety Act: a proposed federal bill that would require online platforms to limit certain design features and content considered harmful to minors. Haidt supports its passage.

Moral Panic: widespread, often exaggerated, public concern that a new behavior, group, or technology poses a grave social threat. Chris Ferguson argues that alarm over smart phones fits this pattern, such as earlier panics over comic books, rock music, and video games.

Phone-Based Childhood: Haidt's term for the childhood experience that he says replaced play-based childhood after smart phones, front-facing cameras, and high-speed internet became common between 2010 and 2015.

Play-Based Childhood: Haidt's term for the historical pattern in which children developed primarily through unstructured, often outdoor, social play with peers.

Puberty: the period of physical and psychological development when a person reaches sexual maturity. Haidt argues this is the developmental window in which smart phone use is most harmful.

Smart Phone: a handheld device that combines phone calls and text messaging with full internet access, apps, cameras, and social media — distinct, in Haidt's framing, from an earlier flip phone.

Unintended Consequences: outcomes of a policy or action that were not planned and may undermine its goals. Ferguson argues that school smart phone bans can produce such outcomes, such as suspensions that cause real harm to students.

Yondr Pouch: a locking fabric pouch some schools use to hold student cell phones during the school day so that students cannot access them until dismissal.

Discussion Questions

The questions below will help students achieve a better understanding of the arguments made on either side of a contentious topic. Because these questions often touch upon statements made briefly in the videos, we recommend reading the questions before watching each video. Students are encouraged to take notes during the videos, and it may be helpful for students to break into groups, each taking responsibility for only a few questions, before coming together for discussion.

Analysis Questions:

1. What are the opposing ideas in these two videos?
2. In the WGN video, Jonathan Haidt discussed the idea of a "play-based childhood." What does that term mean? Is a "play-based childhood" significantly different from modern childhoods? If so, how?
3. John Stossel said adults "always worry about new things." What are some "new things" of the past that caused moral panics? Were the concerns justified? Why/Why not?
4. Jonathan Haidt said that "there's not as much laughter as there used to be." What did he mean by this?
5. In the Stossel video, Chris Ferguson said he advised Jonathan Haidt not to publish *The Anxious Generation*. Why?
6. The anchor in the WGN video asked Jonathan Haidt if government intervention is the only way to solve this issue. Would government intervention be helpful? Why/Why not?
7. Chris Ferguson said that kids today are less violent and less likely to use drugs or smoke cigarettes. Does that surprise you? Why/Why not?

8. Jonathan Haidt said: "The trick is to realize that a smart phone is not the same as a phone." What did he mean by this?
9. John Stossel cited a study that found that in Europe, suicide rates dropped as cell phone usage increased. Does that debunk the idea that smart phones cause mental health issues? Why/Why not?
10. According to Jonathan Haidt, what distinguished Gen Z's experience with phones from the prior generation's experience?
11. Chris Ferguson said: "We look for the bad news and only attribute the bad news to something like social media or smart phones, and we don't attribute any of the good news." What did he mean by this?
12. Jonathan Haidt said that "most kids are spending five hours a day just on social media, seven-to-nine hours a day on other things on the phone." Were you surprised to hear that? Why/Why not? How does it compare to your own phone usage?
13. Chris Ferguson said that smart phone bans in schools could do more harm than good. What did he give as an example? What are other unintended consequences that could result from smart phone bans?
14. Do you have a smart phone? If so, how old were you when you got it? Has it affected your mental health? If so, how?
15. What are some of the advantages of having a smart phone?
16. What are some of the disadvantages of having a smart phone?
17. Has your school banned smart phone use? If so, what have the results been? If not, what do you think the results would be if it did?
18. Did these two videos share any common ground? Were there any points on which they agreed? If so, what were they?
19. Should one of the arguments we heard carry more weight than the other? If so, which one? Why?
20. Did you have an opinion on this topic before watching these videos? If so, what was it? Has your opinion changed? If so, how? What did you learn from these videos that affects your views on this topic?
21. What else would you like to learn about this topic?
22. For more on this topic, see *Both Sides*: "[Social Media and Mental Health](#)".

Activities

Activity 1: Evidence Mapping

Students will chart the specific evidence — statistics, studies, examples, and anecdotes — that each speaker uses to support his position. This helps students separate claims from evidence and judge which side's case rests on firmer ground.

Distribute the Evidence Mapping worksheet on the next page. Have students watch both videos and fill in at least three pieces of evidence per speaker, using exact details wherever possible (such as Haidt's figure of five to nine hours per day on phones, or Ferguson's reference to the *Lancet* study on European suicide rates). After completion, pair students and ask them to rank the evidence they recorded from strongest to weakest. Close with a whole-class discussion: Which pieces of evidence held up under scrutiny, and which ones turned out to be anecdotes or assertions rather than data?

Name _____

Date _____

Class _____ Period _____

Teacher _____

Evidence Mapping: Phones and Mental Health

Directions: For each speaker, list at least three pieces of evidence he uses to support his position. Be specific — record the statistic, study, example, or observation, not just the claim it is meant to prove.

JONATHAN HAIDT (WGN video) — evidence that phones harm youth mental health:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

CHRIS FERGUSON (Stossel video) — evidence that the alarm is overblown:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Which piece of evidence did you find strongest, and why?

Activity 2: Fact vs. Opinion Sort

This activity builds the habit of distinguishing verifiable claims from interpretations. Because each side weaves factual claims into persuasive framing, students must learn to separate what can be checked from what is a point of view.

Below is a list of twelve statements drawn from the two videos. Have students read each statement and label it F (fact — a specific, checkable claim), O (opinion — a judgment, interpretation, or prediction), or M (mixed — contains both). Then, for each item marked F, students should briefly note how they would verify it. Discuss as a class: Which speaker made more claims that were clearly checkable? Which claims turned out to be opinions disguised as facts?

1. "Most kids are spending five hours a day just on social media, seven-to-nine hours a day on other things on the phone." (Haidt)
2. "The human child kind of vanished between 2010 and 2015." (Haidt)
3. Ferguson was, at Haidt's request, a pre-publication reviewer of *The Anxious Generation*.
4. "In the court of public opinion, he's winning, you're losing." (Stossel, to Ferguson)
5. "Kids today are less violent. They smoke less. They use drugs less." (Ferguson)
6. "We're probably in the midst of another moral panic." (Ferguson)
7. A *Lancet* article referenced in the Stossel video states that in Europe, suicide rates dropped as cell phone use increased.
8. "Schools need to be the central hub." (Haidt)
9. "A lot of schools suspend kids for cellphone use, and that can cause real harm." (Ferguson)
10. At least eleven states have moved to ban or restrict cell phone use in public school classrooms.
11. "Phones are experience blockers and relationship blockers." (Haidt)
12. "Give it fifteen years. Of course we'll be panicking about something else." (Ferguson)

Activity 3: Stakeholder Analysis

Students will identify who gains and who loses under each speaker's proposed approach. This sharpens the lesson that every policy — whether it is a ban, a warning label, or doing nothing — produces winners, losers, and trade-offs.

Divide the class into small groups. Assign each group a single stakeholder from the list below. Each group must fill out a two-column chart showing how that stakeholder would likely fare under Haidt's approach (school phone bans, minimum-age laws for social media, more real-world free play) and under Ferguson's approach (skepticism of bans, preference for leaving phone decisions to families). Groups then share their findings with the class.

Stakeholders:

1. a tenth-grade student who uses a smart phone primarily for group chats with friends
2. a parent of a seven-year-old who is worried about what her child sees online
3. a high-school teacher struggling to hold student attention during class
4. a principal deciding whether to adopt Yondr pouches school-wide
5. a social media company that sells ads targeted to teenagers
6. a state legislator considering a bill to set a minimum age for social media accounts
7. a psychologist who studies adolescent mental health

Close with a whole-class discussion: Which stakeholder group appears to benefit most under each approach? Which group absorbs the cost? Did any stakeholder come out better under both approaches? Worse under both?

Activity 4: Policy Proposal

This activity asks students to move past critique and build something. Students will draft a school-level smart phone policy that incorporates at least one insight from each speaker. The exercise forces genuine engagement with both videos, because a one-sided proposal will not satisfy the assignment.

Each student (or pair) drafts a one-page policy proposal for a hypothetical high school. The proposal must include: (a) a clear rule, or set of rules, about student smart phone use during the school day; (b) at least one idea drawn from Haidt's argument about phones, attention, and youth mental health; (c) at least one idea drawn from Ferguson's argument about unintended consequences and moral panics; (d) a plan for how the policy will be evaluated after one year, including what evidence would persuade the school to change course. Students present their proposals in a mock school-board meeting, and the class votes on which proposal best balances the two perspectives.

Activity 5: Letter to a Legislator

After hearing both sides, students will write a one-page letter to a state or federal legislator arguing for or against a specific proposed law related to youth and smart phones. The assignment trains students to take a position from an informed place rather than a reflexive one.

Each student chooses one real or plausible policy proposal, such as the Kids Online Safety Act, a state bill requiring schools to adopt bell-to-bell phone bans, or a minimum-age law for social media accounts. The letter must: state the student's position in a clear opening sentence; cite at least one piece of evidence from Haidt's video; cite at least one piece of evidence from Ferguson's video; anticipate and respond to the strongest objection the opposing side would raise; close with a specific ask, such as "Please vote yes" or "Please vote no." Collect the letters and, if practical, help students actually mail or email them.