

Both Sides of the Issue

Social Media and Mental Health

A Mini Teacher’s Guide for the Both Sides Pairing

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Contents

Objectives	2
Concepts & Key Terms	2
Discussion Questions	3
Activities	4
Activity 1: Common Ground Finder.....	4
Activity 2: Perspective Swap Debate.....	5
Activity 3: Venn Diagram Plus	5
Activity 4: Letter to a Legislator.....	8
Activity 5: Exit Ticket Reflection.....	10

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- paraphrase the central arguments presented in each video about social media's role in youth mental health.
- classify specific claims from both videos as supported by evidence, anecdote, or assumption.
- examine the assumptions about research, government, and parental authority that underlie each side's position.
- justify a personal position on whether young people should face age restrictions for social media, drawing on points raised by both speakers.

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.

Adolescence: the period of life between childhood and adulthood, generally considered to span the teenage years.

Age Verification: a system requiring users to confirm their age before accessing certain online services or content.

Anointed: a term used by economist Thomas Sowell to describe a class of intellectuals who view themselves as having superior moral and analytical insight and who seek to impose their solutions on society.

Causation: a relationship in which one event directly produces another, distinct from correlation, in which two events occur together without one necessarily causing the other.

Falsifiability: a principle of scientific reasoning holding that a claim must be testable and capable of being proven false in order to be considered scientifically valid.

Gen Z (Generation Z): the generation born roughly between 1997 and 2012, the first to grow up with smartphones and social media as routine parts of daily life.

Longitudinal Study: a research design that follows the same group of people over time to track changes and identify possible causes and effects.

Peer Review: the process by which academic research is evaluated by other experts in the field before publication.

Representative Sample: a group of research subjects chosen to reflect the broader population being studied; conclusions drawn from a non-representative sample may not apply to that population.

Self-Harm: intentional injury to one's own body, often used by researchers as one measurable indicator of psychological distress.

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.

1. What are the opposing ideas in these two videos?
2. In the Today video, Jonathan Haidt said he started noticing differences in his students in 2014 and 2015. To what did he attribute this change?
3. In the Reason video, Aaron Brown said: "...Thomas Sowell sketched out a pattern that many of the crusading movements of the 20th century have followed." What was that pattern?
4. Jonathan Haidt said: "We have overprotected our children in the real world...." What did he mean by this? Do you agree? Why/Why not?
5. Aaron Brown said: "Bad studies tend to be the most newsworthy, and the most policy-relevant." What did he mean by this?
6. In the Today video, Savannah Guthrie said: "You hand your phone to your kid...and you're taking away their childhood." What did she mean by this? Do you agree? Why/Why not?
7. Aaron Brown said that Jonathan Haidt cited 476 studies in his book. What were some of Brown's critiques of the studies?
8. Jonathan Haidt listed four "new norms." What were they?
9. Aaron Brown said: "In fact, I couldn't find any studies in Haidt's compendium that spent substantive time interviewing any depressed teenage girls or heavy social media users." Does this affect your opinion of Haidt's conclusions? Why/Why not?
10. Jonathan Haidt said that social media is "wildly inappropriate for kids." What makes it "wildly inappropriate"?
11. Aaron Brown mentioned a study which found that depression occurs before social media use and not the other way around. Why might that be the case?
12. Jonathan Haidt shared this quote from a Gen Z poet: "We know that it's poison, but we drink anyway." What does this mean?

13. Aaron Brown said: "[T]he purpose of social science research is not to confirm, but to challenge our knee-jerk assumptions, because reality is so complicated." Do you agree with his point of view? Why/Why not?
14. Jonathan Haidt said that the U.S. should have a minimum age requirement for social media, like Australia. Should the government enact laws that restrict the use of social media by young people? Why/Why not?
15. Aaron Brown said: "Even if we knew social media use caused depression, we wouldn't know the effect of policies that restrict social media use." What are some potential negative effects of such policies?
16. Do you use social media? If so, how old were you when you began using it? Was it appropriate for you to start using social media at that age? Why/Why not?
17. What positive experiences have you had on social media?
18. What negative experiences have you had on social media?
19. Did these two videos share any common ground? Were there any points on which they agreed? If so, what were they?
20. Should one of the arguments we heard carry more weight than the other? If so, which one? Why?
21. 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?
22. What else would you like to learn about this topic?

Activities

Activity 1: Common Ground Finder

Despite the strong disagreement between Jonathan Haidt and Aaron Brown, the two speakers actually share several positions. This activity asks students to set aside their initial reactions and locate the points where the videos agree. Distinguishing genuine agreement from manufactured opposition is a critical media-literacy skill.

Student Directions

- Working with a partner, review the two videos and your notes.
- Identify at least five places where Haidt and Brown agree, even if their proposed solutions differ. Look closely — some agreement is buried inside criticism. For example, Brown explicitly says Haidt has "some solid policy

proposals,” and both speakers acknowledge that something is happening with youth mental health.

- For each point of agreement, write a one-sentence summary in your own words and cite the moment in each video where the agreement appears.
- Then, in two or three sentences, answer this question: If both speakers agree on these points, why does the public debate about social media and mental health feel so polarized?

Activity 2: Perspective Swap Debate

Divide the class into two groups based on initial gut reaction — those who lean toward Haidt's call for restrictions and those who lean toward Brown's caution about bad science and policy overreach. Then swap them. Each group must build the strongest possible case for the position they did NOT initially hold. This activity forces students to engage with the opposing argument on its own terms rather than as a strawman.

Student Directions

- Begin with a quick poll: do you think the government should restrict young people's access to social media? Yes or no.
- You will be assigned to argue the side opposite to your initial position.
- With your group, build a five-minute opening argument that draws on specific claims, examples, and evidence from the video that supports your assigned side. You must reference the actual video content, not generic talking points.
- After the debate, write a brief reflection: Did arguing the other side change your view? What was the strongest point you had to defend, and why was it harder or easier than you expected?

Activity 3: Venn Diagram Plus

Students construct a four-region map of the debate. This activity reinforces the comprehension of each speaker's distinct contribution while simultaneously surfacing what the videos do NOT address — a frequently overlooked dimension of any policy debate. A blank Venn Diagram Plus structure is provided in the worksheet that follows this activity.

Student Directions

On the worksheet provided, fill in each region of the diagram:

- Left column (Haidt Only): Claims, evidence, or proposals unique to Jonathan Haidt's argument.

- Right column (Brown Only): Claims, evidence, or proposals unique to Aaron Brown's argument.
- Middle - Overlap (Both): Points where the two speakers genuinely agree.
- Outside the diagram (Neither Addressed): Important questions about social media and youth mental health that NEITHER video discusses. Examples might include effects on boys versus girls, differences across platforms, or the role of schools.
- After completing the diagram, write a paragraph identifying what surprised you most and why.

Name _____

Date _____

Class _____ Period _____

Teacher _____

Venn Diagram Plus: Social Media & Mental Health

Video 1 (Haidt)	BOTH agree	Video 2 (Brown)

What considerations did neither video address? _____

Activity 4: Letter to a Legislator

Jonathan Haidt is calling on the government to restrict youth social media use. Aaron Brown argues that government action based on flawed evidence is dangerous and may produce worse outcomes than the problem it claims to solve. In this activity, students write a letter to a state or federal legislator stating their own position and defending it using arguments and evidence from BOTH videos. A worksheet template follows on the next page. Strong letters will engage with the opposing view, not ignore it.

Student Directions

- Decide your position: should lawmakers pass legislation restricting youth access to social media (such as a minimum age law similar to Australia's)?
- Using the worksheet on the next page, draft a one-page letter to your state representative, U.S. senator, or member of Congress.
- Your letter **MUST** include: a clear statement of your position; at least one specific point from the Haidt video that supports your position OR that you must address; at least one specific point from the Brown video that supports your position OR that you must address; and a brief acknowledgment of the strongest objection to your view, with your response.
- Use respectful, professional language. Sign your letter.

Name _____

Date _____

Class _____ Period _____

Teacher _____

Letter to a Legislator: Social Media and Youth Mental Health

Use the structure below to draft your letter. Refer to specific points from BOTH videos.

My position (one sentence):

A specific point from the HAIDT video I am using:

A specific point from the BROWN video I am using:

The strongest objection to my view, and my response:

Closing line and signature:

Activity 5: Exit Ticket Reflection

Use this short structured write at the end of class to capture student takeaways and surface lingering questions. Collect the slips before students leave and use them to shape the next day's discussion or follow-up activity. This is an individual reflection, not a group activity.

Student Directions

- On a half-sheet of paper or index card, respond to the four prompts below in two or three sentences each. Hand in your slip before leaving class.
- In one sentence, state the strongest point made by Jonathan Haidt.
- In one sentence, state the strongest point made by Aaron Brown.
- Which speaker did you find more persuasive, and why? If you cannot decide, explain what additional information you would need to make up your mind.
- How might these two videos change — or not change — a decision you make this week about your own social media use? Be specific.