



Written by [Lenore Skenazy](#) on March 3, 2023

Adults Are the Reason Kids Are Addicted to Phones

What to do about all the young people on their phones, growing depressed, anxious... and worse?

Well, there's an ancient plaything kids have loved forever (literally). It keeps them occupied for hours and can probably hold its own against TikTok. It's called "the world."

If we liberate kids from all the time they're spending in cars, classes or on the couch, if we give them back some free time and free play, they'll have an alluring alternative to the screen. But without much chance to hang out with their friends in real life, unsupervised, the only place they can have fun and socialize freely is online.

That's bad. My colleague and Let Grow co-founder Jonathan Haidt has chilling graphs that show childhood mental health problems, and, I hate to write it, [suicide spiking since 2012](#) — the year the smartphone became ubiquitous, even in the hands of teens and tweens.

The only way to get kids off social media is to come up with an alternative that's even MORE fun. Fortunately, that's what play and exploration ARE... when kids get to do them.

It may feel like kids prefer the virtual world to the real one. But when [a 2010 survey by IKEA](#) asked them whether they prefer playing with friends or playing online, 89% chose playing with friends. And they were online when they took the survey! Playing outside was their favorite activity of all.

Playing is what all young mammals come preprogrammed to do. While I, too, am currently addicted to my phone, I of course didn't have one as a kid, which means that a lot of my free time was truly free — to ride my bike, play with friends, read, draw, spend time in the woods. Classic. It wasn't that interesting — except to me. Because without a wildly attention-grabbing movie theater/game device/popularity meter in my pocket, I had to engage with whatever else there was: friends, fun, nature, boredom.

But in the past generation or two, as children's free time and "[independent mobility](#)" (getting around on their own) have declined, kids have been in decline, too. This started happening long before the invention of the iPhone, but the iPhone sped everything up, and social media seems like the most corrosive part of that change. How to fight back?

No. 1: We have to start renormalizing kids out and about on their own. Otherwise, the only world left for them to explore is online. In keeping kids "safe" from strangers, traffic, and bullies, we've kept them UN-safe from anxiety, depression, and suicide.



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No. 2: We should also work to popularize programs like “[Wait Until 8th](#),” where parents jointly agree to wait till their kids reach 8th grade before giving them a phone.

No. 3: As for government controls, I am not opposed to a minimum age for kids to get on social media, just like I’m not opposed to a minimum age before they can drive a car or buy cigarettes.

The articles are coming thick and fast lately about [fancy schools](#) and [influential people](#) limiting social media one way or another — and everyone being grateful for it. (After an adjustment period.)

Kids are desperate to play and be together. If the only place we allow them to do that is online, that’s where they will go.

Give them back the real world — without adults constantly supervising, organizing, and “helping” — and you just may have to clang a cowbell to get them to come in for dinner.

Let freedom ring.

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