



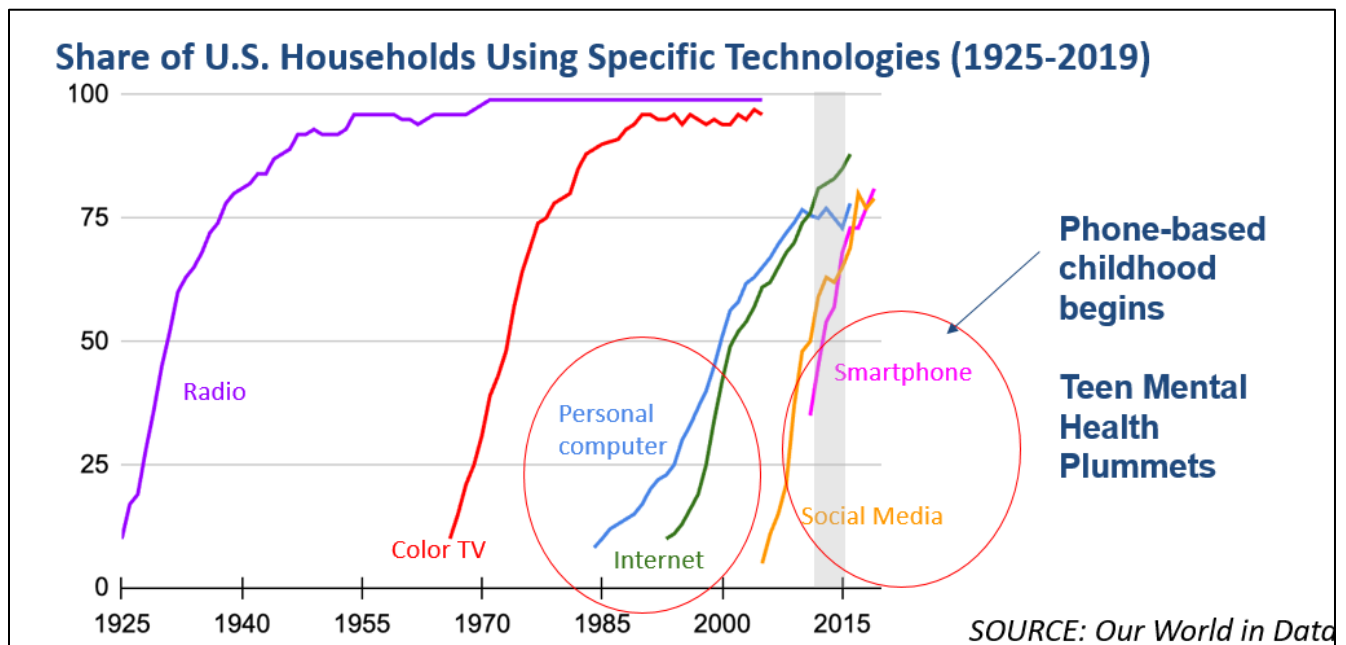
**Social Media and Cell Phones:
How They Harm Students and What Policymakers Can Do About It
December 2023**

*“We ended up overprotecting children in the real world while under-protecting them in the virtual world.”
– Jonathan Haidt, social psychologist and author*

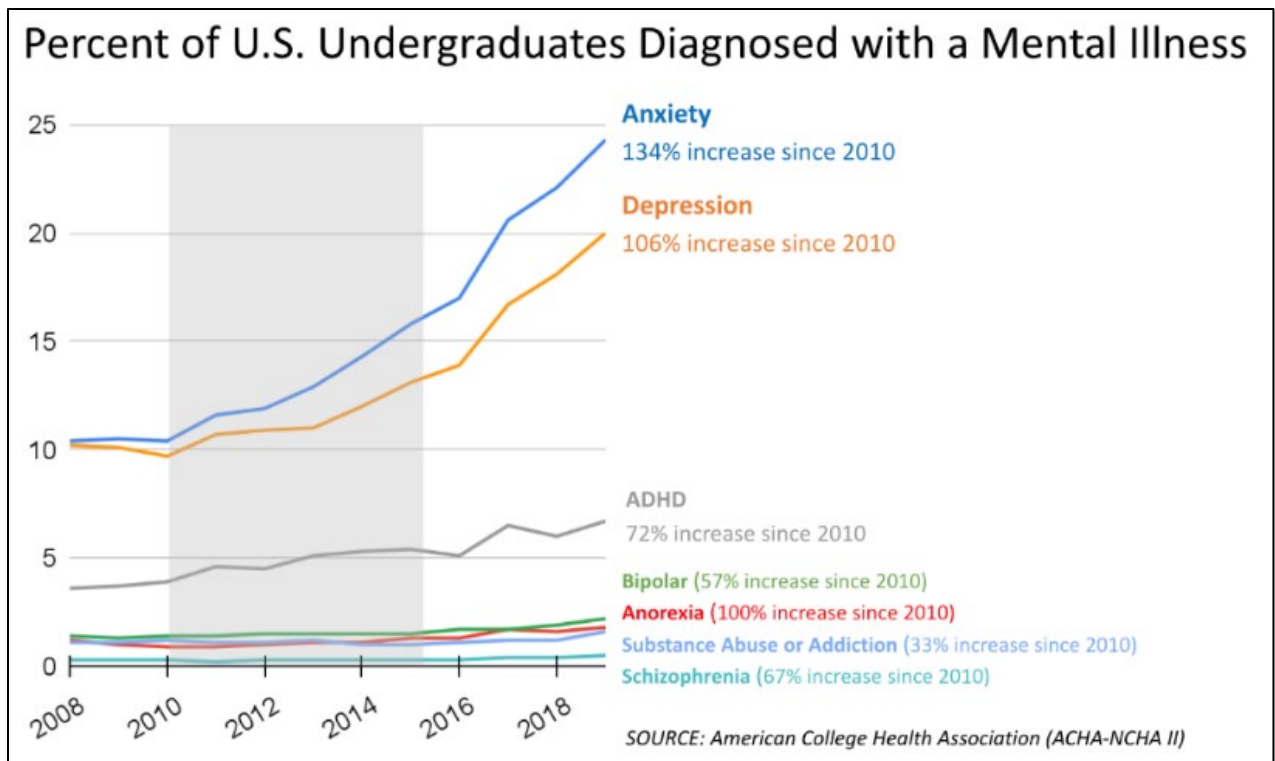
Rising Mental Health Crisis in Young People

In today’s hyper-connected era, a concerning trend is unfolding among children, teens, and young adults. **Unprecedented levels of anxiety, depression and self-harm are on the rise, while quality time with friends and adequate sleep are diminishing.**

[Research¹](#) traces these developments to the rise of the “phone-based childhood”: the years since 2010 when smartphones became ubiquitous, and **young people began accessing social media and online gaming earlier than ever before.** The pandemic exacerbated these challenges but did not initiate them.



¹ All charts are adapted from Jonathan Haidt’s keynote address at ExcelinEd’s 2023 National Summit (November 16, 2023). A recording of the address is available [here](#).

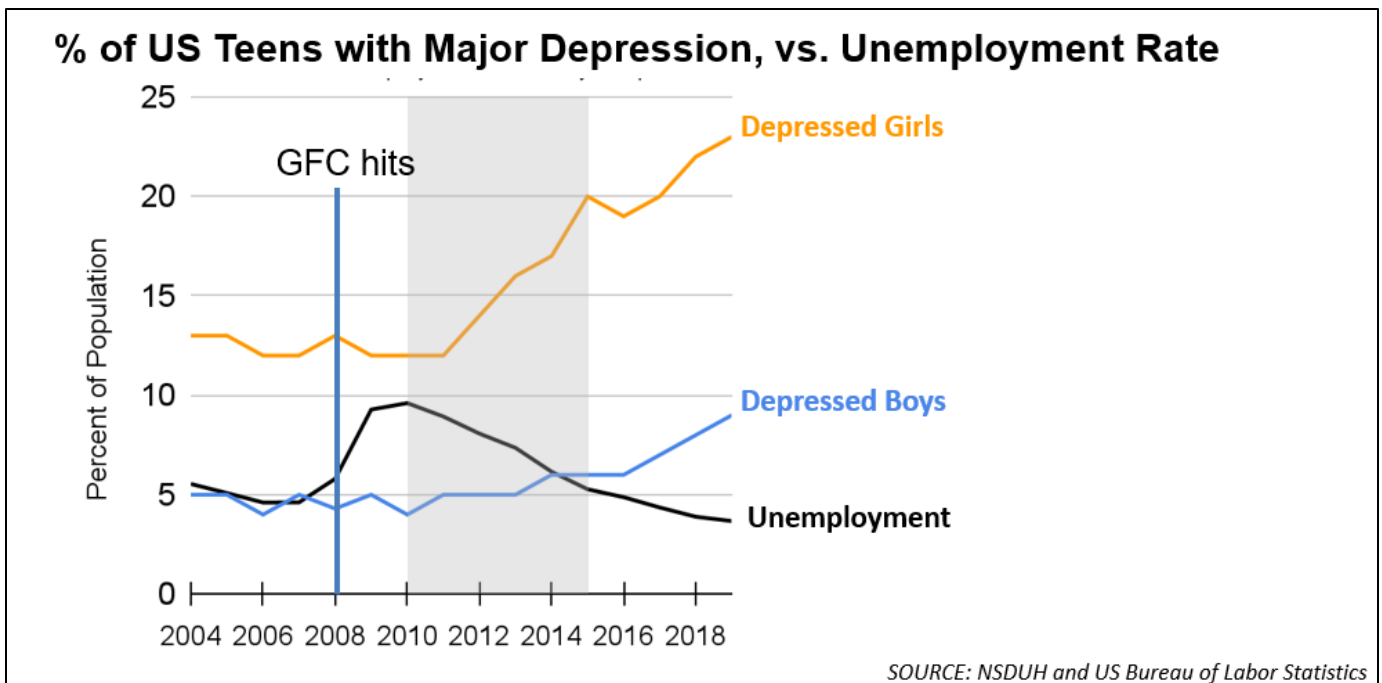


At the same time, adults have become more fearful of allowing children to experience reasonable risks in play and limited their growth in independent activities, like playing outside or walking to a friend’s house without supervision. These factors contribute to a learned helplessness that makes children [socially and physically fragile](#). **Policymakers and parents must address these issues to foster an environment that allows our youth to navigate real-world challenges and embrace the digital age responsibly.**

The Problem in Schools

Today’s students grapple with shorter attention spans, a consequence of the rapid-paced entertainment and constant input from social media and online games. This poses a significant challenge in the classroom and **hinders the development of focus and cognitive stamina crucial for academic success**. The intentional design of online platforms amplifies this issue; algorithms on popular social media sites are crafted to keep users endlessly scrolling, potentially leading to addictive behavior.

Beyond attention spans, cell phone use in schools introduces additional complications. The constant barrage of notifications disrupts the classroom environment, impacting student learning. Evidence from [both pre- and post-pandemic](#) suggests that the decline in NAEP scores since 2012 correlates with a rise in screen time for students. Group texts, meant for communication, can morph into platforms for relational aggression (bullying). **These negative effects hit girls the hardest, with nearly 1 out of 4 teenage girls experiencing major depression.**



Even well-intentioned parents can contribute to distractions. [Online gradebooks enable remote monitoring](#) of students' academic performance, fostering a culture of constant oversight. **This undermines students' ability to take ownership of their schoolwork**, as parental intervention can inadvertently contribute to a child's sense of personal incompetence. It is essential to strike a balance that allows for parental involvement without compromising students' developing autonomy in managing their academic responsibilities.

Solutions for States

1. **Prohibit Cell Phones During the School Day.** [Research from the UK](#) underscores the positive impact of schoolwide cell phone restrictions on academic outcomes, particularly benefiting the most at-risk students. [Florida](#) has led the way in prohibiting cell phone use during instructional time at the state level. Florida continues to seek ways to enhance its multi-pronged approach and is a state to watch for exemplar legislation.
2. **Support Districts in Implementing Cell Phone Restrictions.** Methods like phone lockers or [Yondr](#) pouches can provide safe storage for phones while preventing student access. Legislators in Georgia are considering a state grant fund to support school districts in purchasing these items so that all educators have the resources necessary to implement this policy.
3. **Raise the Age at Which Minors May Access Social Media and Require Parental Knowledge and Consent.** The strongest legislation to date on this issue comes from [Utah](#). [Other states](#) continue to file and pass legislation on this matter, and Members of Congress starting to contemplate laws requiring age verification and parental consent.
4. **Pass Reasonable Childhood Independence Laws.** These laws, popularized by the "[Let Grow](#)" movement, support parents in allowing their children opportunities to practice resilience without fear of criminal prosecution or social services investigations. These laws have passed with strong bipartisan support in Utah, Oklahoma, Texas, Colorado, Virginia, Illinois, and Connecticut.

Community-Led Interventions

As parents become more aware of the harms of social media and cell phones, they can band together to establish collective norms without waiting for government action.

- **Delay Smartphone Introduction.** One key step is for the parents at a school or within a social circle to make a pact to wait until high school to give their children a smartphone². The “[Wait until 8th](#)” movement is already taking off in some communities, with parents waiting until their students are at least in 8th grade or age 14 to give them smartphones. By collectively embracing this norm, the commonly heard plea of “all my friends have them!” loses its persuasive power. Practical alternatives, like basic call-only cell phones and watches, exist to facilitate communication without exposing children to the pitfalls of smartphones.
- **Parental Awareness and Monitoring of Online Activities.** In addition to delayed smartphone introduction, vigilant parental monitoring is crucial. Setting rules against access to social media before age 16 and staying informed about apps designed to conceal accounts behind innocuous icons, like calculators, helps safeguard children online. Some software even provides real-time monitoring, offering families an extra layer of control.
- **Community-Led Cell Phone Restrictions.** By working with local school board members, parents, teachers and administrators can craft and enforce policies that restrict cell phone access during instructional time, even before state-level actions. Having consistent parental support for teachers who implement these policies is vital.
- **Increased Time for Independent Play.** Parents and schools can join forces to promote non-screen playtime initiatives, such as longer recesses, keeping school playgrounds open before and after the school day. The Let Grow movement offers [more suggestions](#) as well.

By working together, we can all foster environments that prioritize child well-being and healthy development.

² Additional research and suggestions for solving the collective action problems that underlie efforts to reform social media are available from Jonathan Haidt and Zach Rausch at [Solving the Social Dilemma: Many Paths to Social Media Reform](#).