'Apply these rules for a happier family and healthier kids'
Jonathan Haidt, bestselling author of *The Anxious Generation*

10 RULES FOR RAISING KIDS IN A HIGH-TECH WORLD

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
DR JEAN M TWENGE

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10 RULES FOR RAISING KIDS IN A HIGH-TECH WORLD

How Parents Can Stop Smartphones, Social Media, and Gaming from Taking Over Their Children's Lives

DR JEAN M TWENGE

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For Kate, Navy Corpsman and Class of '29,
who made me the parent of an adult

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INTRODUCTION: THE NEED FOR RULES

When Dany Elachi's daughter, Aalia, was 10, she told him she was the only one in her class without a smartphone, and that if she didn't get one she'd be left out. "After a few weeks of persistent pleading, we handed young Aalia her first smartphone," Dany says. "She suddenly wasn't playing with her younger siblings as much. Novels were promptly cast aside. She wasn't around to help with dinner anymore. She danced less, laughed less. She was quieter, our home was quieter. Within a matter of weeks, the screen wedded to her palm had literally transformed her childhood."

Parents are not the only ones noticing how smartphones and social media have changed childhood. Teens know it, too. Kate Romalewski also got her first smartphone at age 10. "I spent hours finding the perfect photos to post on Instagram, analyzing selfies of my prepubescent face for imperfections," she recalled at 17. "I was a ball of anxiety. I remember looking in the mirror and wishing I was somebody else. I hated social media and recognized how awful it made me feel, but I could not put it down." Sixteen-year-old Luke Martin said,

"Social media is built around FOMO [fear of missing out], so I felt like I couldn't get off it . . . it was a downward spiral." He eventually decided to swap his smartphone for a "dumbphone" with only calling, texting, and maps.

For the past two decades, I've traveled the country giving talks on generational differences to college faculty, military leaders, and corporate managers. After my book *iGen* was published in 2017, I started giving talks to parent groups as well. Before long, though, the questions from these different audiences started to blur together. No matter what the group, a version of one question always came up in the first few minutes of the Q&A: *What should I do about my kids and their technology use?*

I'm the parent of three. I know where that question comes from: love—and desperation.

Parents are drowning. So are kids. Younger and younger kids are using social media. Virtually every teen has a smartphone, and many can't put it down. Some kids would play video games every waking hour if they could.

It often feels like the whole world is conspiring to keep our kids tethered to tech—and that's because it is. Social media companies have poured billions of dollars into making their products as addictive as possible, especially for kids and teens. Smartphones are convenient and ubiquitous, and answering a friend's text right away seems mandatory. School laptops are great for doing homework, but also great for watching videos and telling Mom or Dad you're doing homework when you're not.

These new technologies are barely regulated. Children 12 and under are not supposed to have social media accounts, but they can simply lie about their birth year to sign up. When states

have passed laws requiring age verification, tech companies have immediately sued to keep the laws from going into effect. Kids and teens can just click on a button labeled "I am 18 or older—Enter" to access pornography websites. For the foreseeable future, keeping kids safe online is up to parents.

That's a daunting job, but not an impossible one. Every parent instinctively knows there's something more they could be or should be doing—that's why they are asking these questions at my events, and seeking answers online and in books. Unfortunately, much of what's out there is vague. It says rules are going to differ based on the kid or the family. It says you should teach your kids "digital literacy," whatever that means. It says limits should depend on what kids are doing online, even though that can change by the minute. It says we should talk to kids about why they shouldn't spend too much time on their phones—and then expect them to put down their phone at bedtime and stop spending so much time on social media.

As any parent of teens will tell you, this doesn't work. We need something that does.

That's where this book comes in, with 10 concrete rules about how to manage kids and the technology that surrounds them—and all of us. These are not anti-tech rules. They are rules that make sure kids are ready before we give them phones, social media, and free rein online. They're rules that ensure technology doesn't take over our children's lives. The rules are:

Rule 1: You're in charge

Rule 2: No electronic devices in the bedroom overnight

Rule 3: No social media until age 16—or later

Rule 4: First phones should be basic phones

Rule 5: Give the first smartphone with the driver's license

Rule 6: Use parental controls

Rule 7: Create no-phone zones

Rule 8: Give your kids real-world freedom

Rule 9: Beware the laptop—and the gaming console, and the tablet, and . . .

Rule 10: Advocate for no phones during the school day

When my kids were young, someone said to me, "Remember: You're not raising children. You're raising adults." I have thought about that nearly every day since. Parenting means thinking long-term about what our kids need for their mental health, growth, and development, not just what they want short-term to amuse themselves or fit in with their friends. It's about setting kids up for success today *and* tomorrow. It's about creating a firewall for kids against anxiety, attention issues, and constant insecurity. It's about crafting habits and values in families that wire kids' brains for resilience, success, and contentment. In today's tech-saturated world, having rules around devices is one of the best ways to do that.

THE REASONS

Why is it so important to set rules around devices? Some parents have seen the effects of devices on their children firsthand and don't need to see the research before putting rules

in place. Others want to know what the research says. I'll share a brief overview of what we know about the effects of growing up in our technology-infused age. The Notes section at the end of the book includes the sources if you'd like to learn more.

I first became interested in kids and tech when my own children were very young, years before they or their peers had smartphones or social media. It all started with some strange research results.

At that point, in the early 2010s, I had already spent more than two decades researching generational differences, analyzing large surveys of American teens done every year since the 1970s. I got used to seeing trends that would build gradually over a decade or two.

Then sudden spikes started to appear, especially in mental health and happiness. Beginning around 2012, more teens started to say they felt lonely and left out. More started to say they felt like they couldn't do anything right, or that their lives didn't feel useful—classic symptoms of depression. Teens' happiness and satisfaction with life declined. This happened eight years *before* COVID (for example, see Figure 0.1 on the following page).

At first, I had no idea what might be causing these abrupt changes. The economy was on an upswing, and it was difficult to think of an event around 2012 that kept building from there. But then I realized it: Teen depression spiked right as smartphones and social media were becoming popular. Smartphone ownership in the U.S. first reached 50% at the end of 2012; 2012 was also the year Facebook bought Instagram. In 2009, less than half of teens used social media every day,

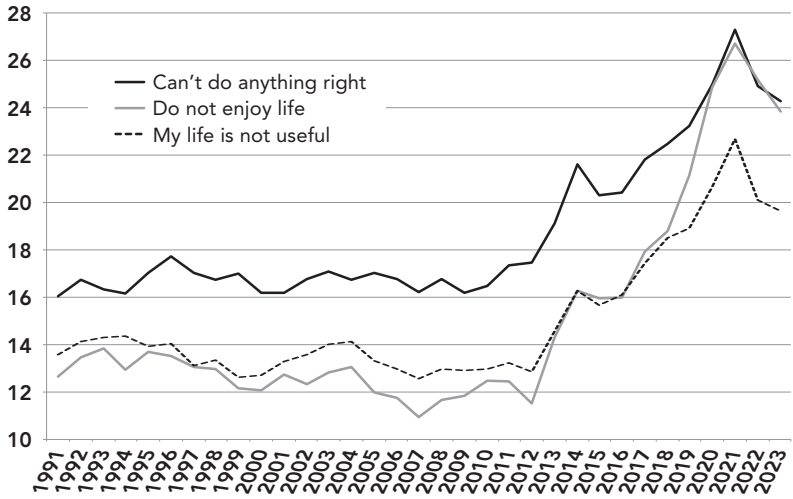

Figure 0.1: Symptoms of depression, U.S. teens, 1991–2023

Source: Monitoring the Future survey of 8th, 10th, and 12th graders
Note: The 2020 data were collected in February and early March before pandemic lockdowns.

mostly on a computer. By 2017, 85% did, usually on their own phones, anytime, anywhere.

Plus, time on devices was replacing in-person socializing—teens weren't going to the movies, hanging out with friends, or going to parties as much as previous generations (for example, see Figure 0.2 on the following page). Teens' social lives went from mostly in-person to mostly online.

Teens also weren't sleeping as much. The number who were sleeping more than seven hours a night declined sharply right around 2012 (see Figure 0.3 on the following page). Teens need about nine hours of sleep a night, so seven hours is a pretty low bar. Less than half of 12th graders were regularly getting this much sleep after 2014, and by 2020 less than half of 10th graders were. Devices were interfering with kids' sleep, and sleep deprivation is a well-established cause of depression and unhappiness.

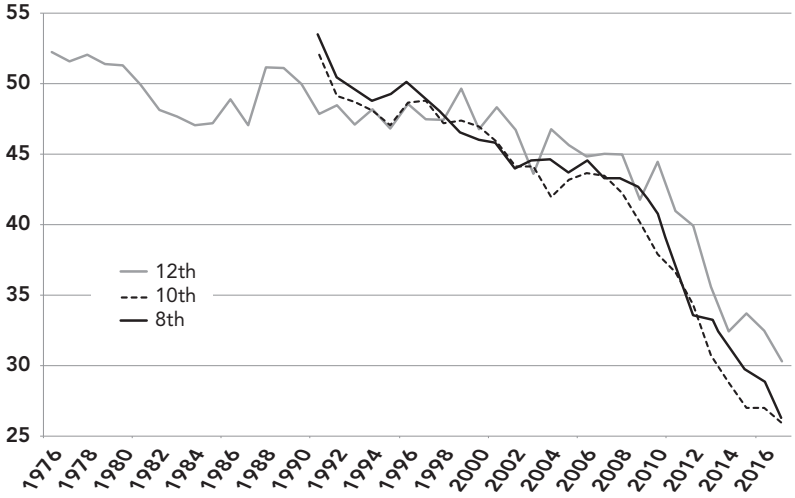

Figure 0.2: Percent of U.S. teens who get together with their friends almost every day, 1976–2017

Source: Monitoring the Future survey of 8th, 10th, and 12th graders

Note: The wording of this item changed after 2018, so only data up to 2017 is shown here.

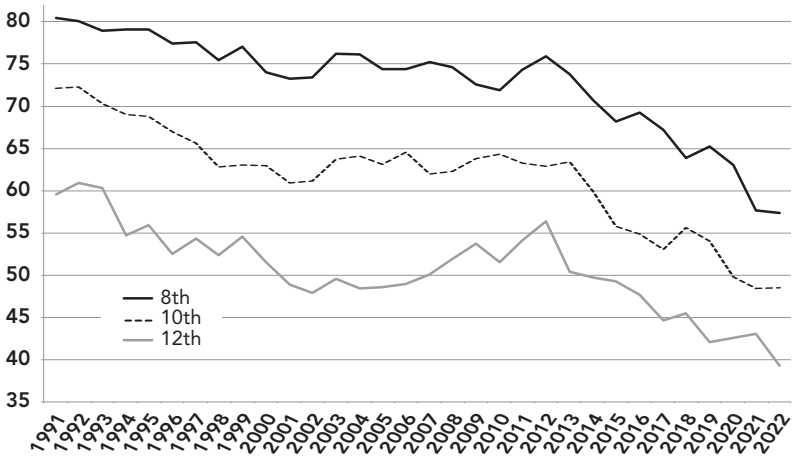

Figure 0.3: Percent of U.S. teens who get at least seven hours of sleep on most nights, 1976–2023

Source: Monitoring the Future survey of 8th, 10th, and 12th graders

In my 2017 book, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*, I theorized that depression rose because teens were spending more time online, less time with friends in person, and less time sleeping—a terrible formula for mental health. An excerpt of *iGen* in *The Atlantic*, headlined "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?," went viral.

Since then, the popularity and impact of these new technologies has only grown. Half of teens said they were online "almost constantly" by 2022. By 2023, according to Gallup, the average American teen spent almost five hours a day using social media. Rates of clinical-level depression among teens doubled by 2019. Depression increased further during the COVID-19 pandemic, but those upticks paled in comparison to the surge that started in the early 2010s (see Figure 0.4 on the following page).

The number of teens with mental health issues also increased internationally. Around the world, more teens said they felt lonely at school starting around 2012—the same pattern as in the U.S. In Europe and English-speaking countries, rates of anxiety and depression also spiked among teens after 2012.

The trends weren't limited to symptoms; they also appeared in worrisome behaviors linked to mental health issues. The number of 10- to 14-year-old girls admitted to the emergency room for self-harm in the U.S. quintupled between 2009 and 2022. Most tragic of all, twice as many 10- to 14-year-olds took their own lives via suicide. Every time I see these statistics, I think about the parents who are desperately trying to stop their 11-year-old daughter from harming herself again

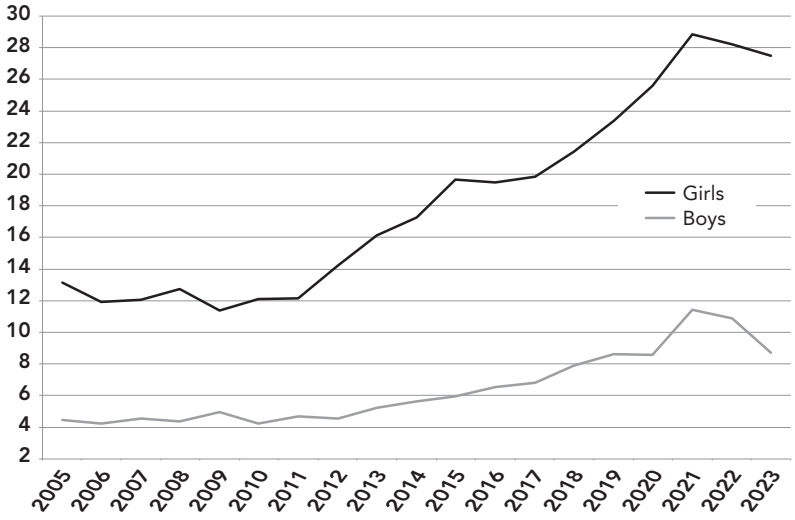

Figure 0.4: Rates of clinical-level depression, U.S. 12- to 17-year-olds, 2005–2023

Source: National Survey on Drug Use and Health

Note: Depression rates are the percentage suffering from a major depressive episode in the last year. This is a screening study taking a cross-section of the whole population, not just those who seek treatment. Thus the increases cannot be due to more willingness to seek help or to overdiagnosis.

and the devastated families missing beloved children. The numbers are staggering, and they aren't just numbers.

These trends show what's happened in the generation as a whole. But is there a link between more device use and more depression among individual teens? There is. In one of the best-designed studies, girls who were heavy users of social media were three times as likely to be depressed as nonusers (see Figure 0.5 on the following page). Boys who were heavy users were twice as likely to be depressed.

Across dozens of studies, teens who are heavy users of screen media (electronic games, the internet, online videos, and social media) are between 30% and 200% more likely to

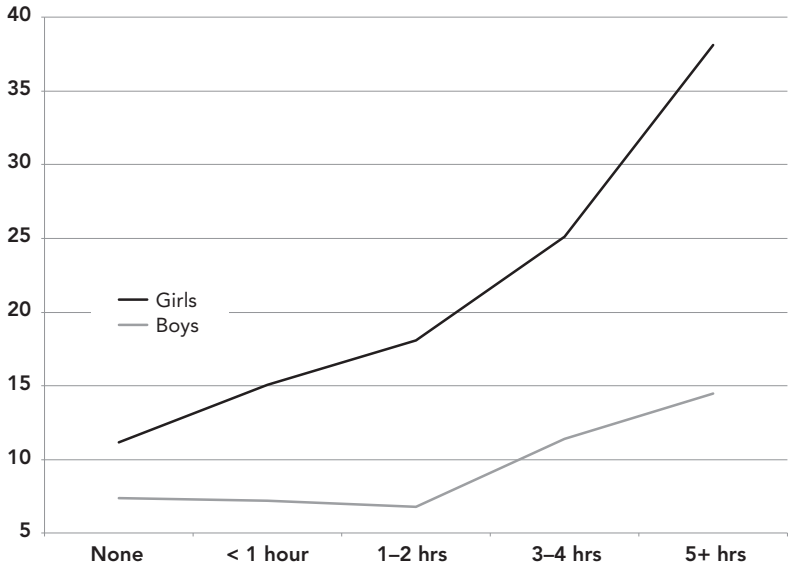

Figure 0.5: Social media use and depression, UK teens

Source: Kelly et al. (2019), Millennium Cohort Study

be depressed or unhappy than their peers who are on screens less often. Sometimes the link is larger for social media and internet time than for gaming and videos, but the association is nearly always there.

When people cut back on social media for a few weeks, they end up happier and less depressed compared to those who keep using social media as they always have. A study of Danish families found that after two weeks with minimal access to screens, kids and teens were less angry and less depressed compared to a control group who did not change their screen use. These studies are experiments (also known as randomized controlled trials), the gold standard in science for showing causation because people are randomly assigned to either cut back on social media time or not, which equalizes extraneous

factors. These studies mean social media causes depression, not just that the two are linked. In June 2024, the U.S. Surgeon General called for warning labels to be placed on social media to make parents aware of their potential harm to teens' mental health.

The stories behind the statistics are harrowing. When Alexis Spence was 11, she opened an Instagram account on her iPad without her parents knowing. As Alexis consumed more and more "thinspiration" content, she began starving herself. By 15, she had developed a severe eating disorder and spent time in a residential treatment center as she battled anorexia and suicidal thoughts. Alexis survived, but still struggles with mental health issues and was not able to leave home for college.

A blackmailer posing as a teen girl talked a 15-year-old Utah boy into sending nude pictures of himself on Snapchat. The user threatened to send screenshots of the images to his friends and family unless he paid $200. He was so devastated he took his own life.

Selena Rodriquez opened an Instagram account when she was 10 and before long was using it at all hours of the day and night. When she wasn't on Instagram, she was on Snapchat. Several adult men asked her to send nude pictures and videos of herself. Selena was eventually hospitalized for depression and self-harm. At the age of 11, she died by suicide.

These stories involve severe outcomes that won't happen to most kids. But these tragedies are the tip of the iceberg, with many more kids experiencing less extreme but still concerning outcomes after using social media heavily, including lack of sleep, depression, body image issues, cyberbullying, and

obsessive use. Nevertheless, social media use by children and teens is virtually unregulated. Age isn't verified, and parental permission is not required. Social media companies say they try to take down negative content, but cyberbullying, pornography, sexual exploitation, references to drugs, and other dangers persist. According to Snapchat's own research, one in four 13- to 15-year-olds have been asked to share explicit pictures of themselves, and about the same number have received such images.

WHY RULES?

Until social media is regulated more, it's up to parents to protect their kids. As former Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy put it, "There is no seatbelt for parents to click, no helmet to snap in place, no assurance that trusted experts have investigated and ensured that these platforms are safe for our kids. There are just parents and their children, trying to figure it out on their own, pitted against some of the best product engineers and most well-resourced companies in the world." Until laws change or social norms shift, parents are the first and sometimes the only line of defense against devices taking over their children's lives.

The impacts of tech go far beyond mental health. With kids and teens spending less time with their friends in person, their social skills are suffering. Kids are inside on their devices instead of outside in the real world, robbing them of experiences with independence and decision-making. Parents and children spend less time together, interfering with family bonding. Teens are distracted at school by their phones, can't

concentrate on their homework, and arrive at college unable to focus long enough to read a few pages in a textbook. Children are exposed to sexual content and are contacted by unknown adults online long before they are ready.

With so little regulation and so much peer pressure for kids to not be "the only one" who doesn't have a smartphone or social media, parents are struggling. These issues are cropping up earlier and earlier, with elementary school kids now using TikTok and sporting their own smartphones. It seems like technology is everywhere, always sinking its claws into our kids.

But that doesn't mean we should give up. It *is* possible to protect kids from the worst aspects of today's intrusive and immersive technology. You just need a few rules—not halfway or squishy rules, not "let's talk to kids about good digital citizenship" rules, not "it depends" rules, but concrete rules for how to stem the digital tide and keep our kids healthy and happy. Best of all, these are not Luddite "no-tech-ever" mandates. Instead, these suggestions are designed to help your kids participate in the modern tech world but not be overwhelmed by it at a young age.

The rules are all based on research, and the implementation is based on my experiences with my own kids and what I've learned from talking to thousands of parents, teachers, and kids during visits to schools over the last eight years. I'll share both the successes (to pass on what works) and the mistakes (so you won't make the same ones). In each chapter, I'll give the reasons behind the rule and specific advice on how to follow it. There's also a section on common obstacles and pushbacks, so you know how to work around issues as they crop up and counter arguments your kids or others might make.