

Smartphones Have Devastated the Mental Health of Our Young People

by Thom S. Rainer

(Note: I am sharing four articles this month based on my upcoming book, *The Anxious Generation Goes to Church*. These articles focus specifically on the harm smartphones do to our young people. All data and statistics in these articles are supported in the book. In this second article, I summarize the devastation smartphones have inflicted on the mental health of our young people. My book will be released from Tyndale on August 19, 2025.)

When you hear that depression among teenage girls has increased by 145% and that suicide attempts have risen by 188%, it does more than catch your attention—it grips your soul. These aren't dry statistics. These are lives. Sons and daughters. Grandchildren. Students. Members of our churches.

What happened?

The answer, in part, is as close as your pocket. The smartphone.

In 2007, Apple introduced the first iPhone. By 2010, selfies were a thing. And by 2013, the smartphone was in the majority of American homes. Around that same time, we started seeing an alarming spike in mental health issues among adolescents—particularly girls.

That timeline is not incidental.

Jonathan Haidt, in his sobering book *The Anxious Generation*, calls it “the great rewiring of childhood.” I believe he's right. The very nature of growing up has changed. And the smartphone is a primary driver of that change.

Let's be clear: correlation does not always equal causation. But when rates of depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicide all began to rise dramatically after the

smartphone became mainstream, we are no longer dealing with coincidence—we are staring at causality in the face.

So what exactly are smartphones doing to our kids?

1. They're Creating a Crisis of Comparison

Teenagers today are constantly connected—but chronically lonely. Through apps like Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, they're bombarded with curated, filtered versions of other people's lives. They compare their unfiltered reality to everyone else's highlight reel. And they always come up short.

Self-worth has become a numbers game: How many likes? How many followers? How many views? The phone becomes a mirror—and the reflection is never good enough.

This cycle is especially harmful for young girls, who are developmentally more vulnerable to appearance-based comparison. The pressure to look perfect online leads to anxiety, body image issues, and a haunting sense of inadequacy.

2. They're Disrupting Sleep—and Health

Teenagers need sleep. A lot of it. But smartphones are stealing it.

The blue light emitted from screens suppresses melatonin, the hormone responsible for sleep. Add to that the dopamine-driven addiction of endless scrolling, and many teens are staying up well past midnight. They're wired, exhausted, and emotionally raw.

Sleep deprivation doesn't just make teens grumpy. It impairs memory, weakens emotional regulation, and fuels depression. It's hard to fight anxiety when your body and brain are running on empty.

3. They've Made Bullying Inescapable

Years ago, bullying ended when the school bell rang. Not anymore.

Today, a child can be harassed 24/7 through their smartphone. The insults don't stop when they get home. They follow them into their bedroom and into the night.

Cyberbullying is relentless, often anonymous, and deeply harmful. Victims are at a higher risk for depression, anxiety, and suicide. And parents are often unaware it's happening—until the damage is done.

Let's not sugarcoat this. The smartphone has turned many bedrooms into battlegrounds.

4. They've Contributed to a Youth Suicide Surge

It's one of the most tragic realities of our time: suicide rates among children and teens are rising.

Among girls ages 10–14, suicide increased by 167% from 2010 to 2020. Among boys, it rose by 91%.

Yes, some of this could be attributed to better reporting and a decrease in stigma. But that doesn't explain the rise in emergency room visits for self-harm—up 48% for boys and a staggering 188% for girls in that same decade.

Something real is happening. And something devastating.

5. They've Amplified Isolation

Despite their ability to “connect,” smartphones have made many young people feel more isolated than ever.

Real conversations have been replaced with emojis. Eye contact has been replaced with screen time. Teenagers are lonelier, more disconnected, and more anxious—even while being more “plugged in.”

Smartphones were supposed to unite us. But for many young people, they’ve become a prison with no walls and no curfew.

As a grandfather, I’m heartbroken. As a church leader, I’m burdened. And as a follower of Christ, I’m hopeful—but only if we act.

Parents, we cannot be passive. Pastors, we cannot be silent. Churches must step into this moment, not with condemnation, but with compassion and wisdom.

Let’s create smartphone-free zones. Let’s invite teenagers into real conversations, face-to-face community, and unfiltered love. Let’s preach the gospel to a generation whose screens have taught them they’re not enough—and remind them that in Christ, they are fully known and fully loved.

The mental health of our young people is at stake. And the church must not look away.

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