Supporting Teenagers and Young People in Managing the Online and Offline World

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Foreword

Before I start, I feel it is necessary to include what some might term a 'trigger-warning': the first half of this essay is, I realise having written it, fairly gloomy. I thought about rewriting parts of it to change the tone, but in the end I have decided against it. Particularly when it comes to social media, I think we owe it to ourselves to be very clear about the harmful impact that this new technology has had on teenagers, and on society, in the almost two decades since it first emerged. This is not a universal experience, of course. Nothing ever is. Just as social media has had an adverse impact on some children and their families, others have sailed through relatively unscathed. I would contend, however, that most users have experienced some negative effects (often significant) while purely positive experiences are rare. So while there is justifiable cause for gloom, I also want to reassure you that the second half of the essay moves towards causes for optimism. In particular I will explore how proactive strategies - ranging from regulatory measures to community-led efforts - are beginning to make a difference, and will also consider ways in which we as adults can provide effective support and guidance to young people. So please do bear with me; my hope is that by setting out a clear understanding of the serious problems we have faced, and continue to face, the ways in which we can best support our children will sit in their proper context, and be the more understandable for it.

An 'Anxious Generation'?

In the Spring of 2024 a book was published which not only caught the imagination of the public, but which also seemed to capture the zeitgeist of growing concern around the impact of social media on teenagers and young people. The book was called The Anxious Generation, by psychologist Jonathan Haidt, and before we go any further it is worth outlining the key arguments contained within it: in many ways they provide a neat summary of the challenges and issues facing young people – and their parents – in today's world.

Haidt begins by presenting data that indicates a sharp increase in anxiety, depression and self-harm among teenagers from around 2010, and suggests that this coincides exactly with the widespread adoption of smartphones. He then moves on to present a two-pronged argument to explain this more fully. First, Haidt argues that children have had their 'offline' lives regulated too tightly; that the unstructured play through which children learn resilience has become increasingly removed from their lives by parents and educators who have become overprotective in their desire to remove risk from children's lives. The second strand of Haidt's overall theme is that at the same time as we have become overprotective of children's offline world, we have effectively left them almost completely unprotected in their online lives. The immense resources of major technology companies, combined with a delayed response from parents and educators, means that children have been exposed to what Haidt refers to as 'foundational harms': social deprivation, sleep deprivation, attention fragmentation and addiction. In short, The Anxious Generation makes a very clear argument that unfettered social media and smartphone use, coupled with a culture of 'safetyism' in the real world, is increasingly leaving teenagers and young people ill-equipped to develop resilience, navigate challenges and maintain their mental wellbeing in an increasingly digital world.

It is important to note that Haidt's arguments have not been without criticism. For example Candice Odgers, writing in *Nature*, argued that in associating the rise in teenage mental health

problems with smartphones Haidt was confusing causation for correlation, and further accused him of 'fear mongering' and distracting from the 'real causes' of youth mental health struggles. Other criticism, for example from David Wallace-Wells writing in *The New York Times*, was that Haidt was over-simplifying a hugely complex and nuanced issue. Nonetheless, the arguments made by Haidt clearly resonated with many, and his book not only found itself atop many bestseller lists but also became the subject of conversations in school common rooms, at playground gates and at dinner parties. You don't need to be a social psychologist to see the impact—often stark, sometimes worrying—that phones have on teens and young adults. Haidt's arguments, whether oversimplified or not, certainly resonated with me both as a parent and as someone who has spent the past decade-and-a-half working with, and supporting children and teenagers.

Social media: the reality

I want to state clearly here that I am no Luddite, and I will explore the beneficial aspects of online life and the internet later in this essay. There is, however, no doubt in my mind that unrestricted access to the internet, to smartphones, and to social media in particular, has the potential to be hugely harmful. In some respects the key word here is 'unrestricted' for, as we shall see, so much of the solution, if such a thing exists, is based around the twin concepts of boundaries and moderation. I shall return to those themes shortly. It is, however, worth dwelling a little on what social media is, and why it exists. At their heart, social media companies are businesses and, like any other business, they exist to make money. What is different about these companies is the way in which they make money. Here is not the place to examine this in any great detail, but in essence social media companies make money through two methods. Firstly, by collecting vast reams of data on the individuals that use them which can then be sold or monetised (or both) and, secondly, by hooking users so that they use the sites and apps as much and as regularly as possible, which in turn drives advertising revenue. In recent years, I have observed that if one were a talented psychologist, the way to transform one's skills into a lucrative career is no longer working in private healthcare but in technology companies. Such companies pay huge amounts of money to teams of highly skilled psychologists and other experts to make sure that their apps, or their algorithms, or their games, are as addictive as possible.

This all sounds very dystopian, but it is important that we are under no illusions as to the challenge we face as a society and, equally as important, the challenge our children face when they begin to engage in an online world. Put simply, while it might be frustrating to watch one's child engage in multiple hours of screen time, or observe them become increasingly glued to their phone, we simply cannot blame them for it. Social media platforms and games are designed to exploit human psychology to maximise user engagement. For example, they employ features such as variable rewards (likes, notifications, and comments, for instance) that trigger dopamine release in the brain's reward pathways, reinforcing the desire to continue using the platform; a mechanism similar to how addictive substances affect the brain. Additionally, the endless stream of content, 'infinite scrolling' and personalized algorithms keep users engaged by providing continuous, unpredictable rewards, making it challenging to disengage.

In this context it is unsurprising that by almost any metric, the extent to which teenagers and young people have been consumed by smartphone and social media use has increased to a staggering degree. A recent study by Ofcom found that 99% of children spend time online, with nine in ten owning a mobile phone by the age of 11. Additionally, 93% of UK teenagers aged 12-15 use social media regularly, with 42% admitting to checking their accounts multiple times an hour.

The same survey found that three-quarters of social media users aged between eight and 17 have their own account or profile on at least one major platform and, despite the fact that most social media platforms set a minimum age requirement of 13, around six in ten children aged 8 to 12 are still signed up with their own profiles.

Cause for optimism?

Ok, enough with the gloom. In fact, there are reasons for optimism. The very existence of this debate in itself is significant: five years ago, let alone ten, these issues were neither widely discussed nor fully understood. Yet the source of optimism is not just that they are being debated, but that these debates are reflective of a world which has now caught onto the dangers and problems associated with unrestricted internet and social media use, especially as posed to teenagers. In his book, Haidt argues that one key strand of tackling these concerns is the role of central governments, and we are already starting to see countries such as Australia, Germany and France impose increasingly strident regulation on tech and social media companies. Even here in the UK the Online Safety Act is now in its implementation phase, with social media companies currently having to undertake assessments as to how they will better protect children from online harm. While there is still much debate as to how effective such action will be, and indeed about whether governments have taken the right approach, on a fundamental level this activity does represent a step-change in terms of the state's involvement and monitoring of social media and tech companies.

If 'top-down' intervention is one reason for cautious optimism, so too is the growth of 'ground-up' movements. Groups such as 'Smartphone Free Childhood' have had significant success not just in achieving mainstream media attention, but also in educating large numbers of parents about the dangers of unfettered smartphone use. As a result, it seems likely that today's pre-teens will receive smartphones later than those just a few years older, partly because parents now feel more confident that their child won't be the 'only one' facing the perceived social exclusion of being without one. More and more schools are making their campuses 'phone-free' environments and, further, it is clear that phone companies are responding to this trend. The emergence of so-called 'dumb phones' is the best example of this. Dumb phones offer very limited functionality (generally just calling and texting), thereby allowing parents to benefit from the sense of safety and security that comes from being able to contact their child, and be contacted, yet without the additional problems that come from also giving them access to the internet and social media. The separation of the concept of a 'phone' and a 'smartphone' is an important development that it is easy to overlook, yet which I sense will be of real significance in allowing parents to frame conversations with their children: "we can appreciate that when you start senior school there are good reasons for you to have a phone, but you won't need a smartphone until you are older" is a conversation that parents will arguably find easier now than would have been the case five years ago.

The role of parents

If it is clear that one of the most significant ways we can support children is by restricting their access to social media until an age when they are better able to manage it, it is also becoming apparent that parents do have a significant role to play in helping their children as they begin to navigate and manage their online activity. There is no single way in which this can be done, but if there is one point to take away from this essay, it is of the importance of keeping open communication with your children on these issues. Engaging in regular discussions with your

teenager about their online activities helps foster trust and openness, encouraging them to share both positive and negative experiences. Also helpful can be the act of collaboratively establishing rules regarding screen time and appropriate online behaviour (such as designating tech-free times during meals or before bedtime), which in turn can promote better sleep and more in-person interactions. It is also important to discuss the need for safeguarding personal information, ensuring children understand privacy settings on different platforms and the risks of oversharing. Encouraging critical thinking about the content they consume and share, as well as discussing the difference between online personas and reality, is also important, and can help them navigate social comparisons and mitigate potential negative impacts on self-esteem.

As much as these steps can be hugely supportive for a child navigating online lives, we must also accept that nothing we do can completely remove risk, and as such parents should also ensure that they are alert to signs that a child may have been exposed to harmful online content or behaviour. Be attentive to any changes in your child's behaviour, such as withdrawal, anxiety, or disrupted sleep, as these may indicate they have encountered disturbing content online. If they come across upsetting material, provide a safe and supportive space for them to express their feelings, reassuring them that it is okay to talk about what they have seen. Encourage them to use reporting mechanisms on platforms to flag inappropriate or harmful content, and make them aware of services like the UK Safer Internet Centre's "Report Harmful Content" tool, or the CEOP button which is found on many websites. If their well-being is significantly affected, seeking support from professionals or organizations such as Young Minds or the NSPCC can provide additional guidance and reassurance. Links to all of these services can be found at the end of this essay.

Something else that has become increasingly clear is the importance of having clear boundaries and restrictions in relation to online activity and social media use. To a degree, the specifics of these boundaries do not matter; they simply need to exist. A recent report by the Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology explored this in more detail, and found that, among other things, restricting social media use led to significant reductions in depression and perceived loneliness among participants, as well as producing beneficial effects on attention spans and the ability to focus at school. There is plenty of advice available online as to exactly how parents can place appropriate boundaries, but one common suggestion is to draw up a 'contract', to which all of the family agree to abide (adults included!). This can cover aspects such as phone-free areas of the house, appropriate amounts of time to spend on screens, and parents having access to social media logins (something that can be adapted as children get older).

Two closing thoughts

There are two final points which it is vital to keep in mind in our talk of restrictions and boundaries. The first is that we must remember why we are doing this, and the answer is not solely that unrestricted access to the internet, and to social media can be harmful (although this is important). We must also remember that we are trying to free-up time and space for children to be children; to spend time with their friends, to play outside, to engage in sports or other hobbies, to be silly, and to learn about the world by experiencing it. This is, of course, the second key argument made by Haidt in his book. Therefore it is crucial that all involved – children and adults alike – understand why boundaries in the online world are so important. Not just to promote online safety, but also to promote offline life. It is so easy to look at our children and wonder where the little toddler went, and to marvel at how grown-up they appear. We must, though, remember that they are still young, and as their parents one of the best things we can do for them is to give them the time and space to enjoy acting as children.

The second point of which we must not lose sight is that there are a great many benefits to online activity, and to social media: provided it is used with appropriate boundaries. Social media undoubtedly enables teenagers to maintain and strengthen relationships with friends and family members, regardless of geographical barriers, and can also provide important avenues for self-expression and identity formation. Additionally, online communities offer support networks where young people can discuss challenges and seek advice, fostering a sense of belonging and understanding. More broadly, the internet is a vast resource for educational and skill development, enabling teenagers to access information, tutorials and courses that supplement traditional learning. It also provides a creative outlet for young people to express themselves through blogs, videos, art and music, and this type of creative engagement can boost self-esteem and provide a sense of accomplishment. It is essential that we therefore retain perspective when we consider the internet, and social media. If we fail to recognise the undoubted benefits that it can bring, we not only risk denying these advantages to our children, but also run the risk of being seen by our children simply as dinosaurs who do not understand the world they live in, and that is no basis for constructive and positive conversation.

Conclusion

It is consideration of the above which informs how we approach these key issues at Blundell's. Perhaps most obviously this can be seen in our recent move towards a phone-free campus (which came alongside our BYOD policy), along with placing more restrictions on internet access during the school day. We recognise that technology can offer many benefits and advantages, and we want to ensure pupils retain access to these. However, we are also now clear that unbridled access to the internet can not only distract from academic study in a learning environment, but can also bring many of the harms and dangers outlined in this essay. This understanding also informs our approach to software management and network monitoring, and also our significant investment in powerful Wi-Fi: our view is that we want our Wi-Fi network to be as strong as possible so that pupils want to use it, but which in turn will allow us to have much better control over what they access, and when. The other major area in which this understanding informs our school practice is in PSHE, where education about online safety is not only underpinned by the latest research and understanding, but is also constantly evolving to make sure that the education we offer to pupils in this area is accurate, relevant, and effective.

In the final analysis, while the benefits of online engagement and technology are significant, so too are the inherent problems and dangers. We must provide clear boundaries for our children, so as to move away from the concept of unrestricted time online, and of unfettered access to all the internet has to offer. Any such boundaries do not need to be fixed and can change and develop as your child gets older. However, ultimately the goal is to encourage a balance between screen time and offline activity. Encouraging teenagers to participate in physical exercise, face-to-face interaction and hobbies outside the digital realm is not only an important (and easy-to-understand) rationale for limiting online time, but will also contribute to a child's development in a significant manner. Keeping an open and transparent dialogue with your child will allow you to navigate the journey together, and enable you to support them in harnessing the positive aspects of the digital world, while mitigating the potential drawbacks and undoubted harms that exist online.

At Blundell's, we recognise the profound influence social media has on young people, both positive and negative. That's why we are committed to proactive, evolving strategies that equip our pupils with the tools to navigate the digital world safely and thoughtfully. Through education, clear policies, and a strong partnership with parents, we strive to ensure that our pupils develop

not only resilience but also a balanced, healthy relationship with technology: one that empowers rather than diminishes them.

Useful Links:

NSPCC: Keeping Children Safe Online

https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/

UK Safer Internet Centre: Parents and Carers

https://saferinternet.org.uk/guide-and-resource/parents-and-carers

Parents Protect: Internet Safety

https://www.parentsprotect.co.uk/internet-safety.htm

Childline: Staying Safe Online

https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/bullying-abuse-safety/online-mobile-safety/staying-safe-online/

Young Minds

https://www.youngminds.org.uk/

CEOP (Child Protection and Online Protection (a branch of the UK Police)

https://www.ceop.police.uk/safety-centre/