

BEYOND *the* PANIC

Screen Time, EdTech, AI,
and the Future of Education

Introduction

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with LUMEN

INTRODUCTION

A CONVENIENT VILLAIN

I first watched the video late at night, alone at my kitchen table. It was a recording of a neuroscientist testifying before the United States Senate, and the message was clean and confident: When technology enters education, learning goes down. He had studies. He had charts. He had the specific gravity that comes from speaking in front of cameras in a formal chamber. The video had been watched millions of times. I watched it twice.

What unsettled me wasn't the testimony itself. It was what happened next. Within days, I was hearing the same arguments in different voices: at school board meetings, in email threads, in the conversations parents have in parking lots after athletic events. The language was nearly identical, the certainty unchanged. The video had moved fast through the networks where parents talk to one another about schools. And in every room where those arguments landed, something was conspicuously absent: a response. Educators either did not know the research or knew the research well enough to push back and stayed quiet. I understood why. Educators live inside their communities. They coach their neighbors' children. They sit next

to parents at church, at the hardware store, at Little League. To stand up at a school board meeting and say, “I think the research is being misread” is not an abstract act. It risks something real, and so the arguments spread largely unanswered, not because they were correct, but because the people who knew better had reasons to stay quiet.

I didn’t want to stay quiet. I dug into the actual research, not the summaries and not the headlines, but the studies themselves. What I found was not a settled case. It was a complicated one, full of nuance that the clean narrative had discarded. I wrote an article first, trying to say what I thought educators needed to hear. Then I couldn’t stop because the question underneath the argument turned out to be the most important question in education: not whether to permit technology in schools, but what we are actually trying to build in a human life when we send children to learn. That is what this book is about.

We are living through a moral panic, and it is time to call it that. The term isn’t a rhetorical flourish. Sociologist Stanley Cohen coined it in 1972 to describe a specific, recognizable pattern: a group or behavior gets identified as a threat to a community’s core values, the concern spreads faster than the evidence can keep up with it, the people naming the threat gain authority and audience by naming it, and the response that follows is disproportionate to the actual danger.

Across the country, an industry of alarmism has taken root, fueled by parent advocacy groups, legislative coalitions, and a

wave of bestselling books that offer the same essential argument: Smartphones and screens are destroying a generation, and the only responsible response is to take them away. The movements have names. Phone Free Schools. ScreenStrong. Wait Until 8th. Away for the Day. The books have authors with credentials and publishers with marketing budgets. Jonathan Haidt's *The Anxious Generation* (2024) and Jared Cooney Horvath's *The Digital Delusion* have become defining texts for this moment, widely cited by school boards, referenced in legislative testimony, and passed around in parent group chats as if they settle the question.^{1, 2}

They do not settle it. They reopen an argument that history has already answered several times, and they do so by committing the same logical errors that have driven every technology panic before this one.

I want to say this directly to parents and educators holding this book: Your worry is right. Your instincts are right. Something real has changed between you and your children, and you are not imagining it. The grief underneath the panic is grief for real losses: the unsupervised afternoons, the neighborhoods that watched out for kids, the unhurried family time that nobody scheduled because nobody had to. Those losses happened. What this book will show you, study by study, story by story, is that phones did not cause them. It moved into a space that had already been emptied, and that the thing you want back cannot be confiscated into existence. It must be built. In Chapter 6, I will walk you through the actual research, not the headlines,

and you can judge the evidence yourself. Until then, I ask only this: Hold the worry, and loan me the verdict.

This book is going to be direct about that, but it is going to earn the right to be, with evidence you can check and stories you will recognize.

Start with what happened in 2012. Haidt identified this time as the “Great Rewiring,” and he blamed it all on EdTech, but there was much more occurring in the world. Around that time, the long aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis was still reshaping family stability. Academic pressure was intensifying as college admissions grew more competitive. Changes to state education department mandates forced major curricular shifts. Mental health awareness was rising, meaning distress that had previously gone unreported was suddenly being named and counted. Any one of those factors complicates the story. Then there is the “play-based childhood” Haidt mourns. His argument is that smartphones replaced unstructured outdoor play and that this substitution drove the crisis. But the collapse of unsupervised childhood did not begin when the App Store launched in 2008. It began in the 1980s and accelerated through the 1990s, as stranger-danger culture, helicopter parenting, and the legal and social risks attached to letting children roam freely reshaped how adults managed their children’s time. As a child of the ‘80s, I saw and felt this shift firsthand. By 2000, decades before most teenagers owned a smartphone, the physical range of a ten-year-old had already shrunk dramatically. What we lost wasn’t just unsupervised play. It was the conditions that produce belong-

ing without engineering it: the mixed-age pickup games, the neighborhood roaming, the low-stakes adult relationships that formed outside the family. By the time smartphones arrived, that vacancy had been open for twenty years. The phone didn't create it. It just moved in. We traded autonomy for surveillance long before the first iPhone existed, then handed kids a device that offered a small degree of freedom and the only private space left in their lives.

There is also a population the alarm movement consistently fails to account for: students for whom online spaces are not a distraction but a lifeline, including LGBTQ+ adolescents in unsupportive environments, neurodivergent students who struggle in unstructured hallways, and young people in rural communities who find their first genuine sense of belonging online. Removing devices does not restore a richer in-person life. It removes the only community they have. A blanket ban does not protect these students. It abandons them.

None of this should surprise anyone paying attention to history. In 1954, Dr. Fredric Wertham testified before a United States Senate subcommittee that comic books were producing juvenile delinquency. He had data, case studies, and compelling narratives. Congress held hearings and the Comics Code Authority was created. A generation earlier, experts thought radio was to blame for that generation's worries. In the 1970s, calculators were condemned because they were going to destroy mathematical thinking. Critics accused the internet of making students intellectually lazy. Socrates himself warned that writing would

“produce forgetfulness in the learners’ souls.” The pattern is a template, and we are inside the familiar panic loop again.^{5,6}

What if we have it backward?

What if technology and AI are the things that finally force us to become more human?

This book is not a dismissal of parental concern. The worry is real. Parents who sense that something has changed in their relationship with their children are not wrong to sense it. The conditions that made connection possible were already eroding before the first smartphone existed: longer work hours and commutes, over-scheduled childhoods, the disappearance of extended family proximity, and the elimination of unstructured time in which families once simply existed together. Certain design choices by social media companies—passive scrolling, social comparison, and sleep disruption from late-night use—deserve serious and targeted attention. We have been too busy with the broader panic to address the narrower, more tractable problems underneath it. The wrong diagnosis produces the wrong treatment, and we cannot afford to keep getting this wrong. When we respond to a multi-variable crisis with a single-variable explanation, we write policies that feel decisive and accomplish very little. When we strip technology from classrooms in the name of protecting learning, we remove tools that, used with intention, expand what learning can be. And when we tell educators, parents, and policymakers that the solution is removal and restriction, we relieve them of the harder work of figuring out what comes next.

I want you to feel the weight of it. Because I do. Because every educator I know does. Because every parent I know across politics, across geography, across faith, across class is sitting with some version of this uneasiness about the children in their care.

This is the panic, and the panic is not foolish. But the panic is asking the wrong question.

The panic asks: What will the technology take from us?

The real question is one almost no one is asking out loud: What does it mean to be human, to learn, and to grow with purpose when intelligence is no longer scarce?

Here is the argument, stated plainly, so you can decide whether to keep reading.

For all of human history, traditional intelligence—content knowledge and skills—has been a scarce thing. We have organized schools around scarcity. We have hired teachers to dispense it, built tests to measure it, sorted children by their capacity for it, written curricula to deliver it, and built whole economies on the assumption that those who held more of it would earn more, lead more, decide more.

That assumption is ending.

In your lifetime, in the lifetime of the children we are raising or teaching or trying to support, traditional intelligence such as computation, logic, knowledge recall, and language processing has become, for the first time in human history, abundant. It is on every phone. It speaks every language. It writes essays and

solves equations and diagnoses illness and drafts contracts and composes music and tutors algebra at one in the morning to a kid whose parents are asleep. It will keep getting better. It will not stop.

When the machines can do what only thinking could do before, what remains is uniquely human. These human intelligence skills such as empathy, emotional regulation, relational capacity, executive functioning, leadership, creativity, and problem-solving are the skills that machines lack the capacity for or can only simulate, not replicate. That is the part the panic voices are actually grieving, even when they cannot quite name it. The part schools were always supposed to develop and never quite did because we were too busy delivering content to children who did not need a delivery service. The part that was always the most important and the most undervalued and the most desperately needed: presence, judgment, empathy, meaning, and belonging.

The slow, generative work of one human being shaping another in the company of love and support. AI does not threaten this work. AI can reveal it, make it deeper, and allow us to scale it up.

The river of change is not going to stop because we built a dam. Every generation before us learned this the hard way. I want to know what it looks like to build a boat, a system designed to carry humanity in a highly technical world.

A note on terminology before we begin. When this book says AI, it means generative and agentic AI: systems that produce original text, images, code, and reasoning in response to human prompts and systems capable of pursuing goals across multiple steps with increasing autonomy. This is not the only form artificial intelligence has taken. Machine learning systems have quietly shaped what we see, buy, and read for decades through recommendation engines, spam filters, and pattern recognition tools. Those forms appear in this story where relevant, but the arrival of large language models, systems that don't just sort and predict but generate and reason, and what that shift means for learning and human development, are the central subjects of what follows.