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119th Year
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Jonathan Haidt
Thomas Cooley Professor of Ethical Leadership
NYU Stern School of Business

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Moderator: Thasunda Brown Duckett
President and Chief Executive Officer
TIAA

Introduction

Chair Robert K. Steel

Welcome to the 847th meeting, 847th meeting of The Economic Club of New York. My name is Bob Steel. I'm a Partner and Vice Chair at Perella Weinberg Partners and also very honored to be the Chairman of your Club. It's great to have you all here today. But before we get started, let me extend a warm welcome to the students that are joining us virtually from NYU Stern School of Business, which Dr. Haidt can recognize, and also the members of the 2026 Class of Fellows. As you may remember, this is a select group of diverse, next-generation business leaders who are joining.

The Economic Club of New York is proud to stand as the nation's leading nonpartisan platform for discussions on economic, social, and political matters. For more than 100 years, the Club has hosted over 1,000 preeminent speakers contributing to a great tradition of excellence.

Today we continue that tradition by welcoming our distinguished guest, Jon Haidt. Jon is a social psychologist at New York University's Stern School of Business. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. Jon's research examines the intuitive foundations of morality, how morality varies across cultural and political divisions. He's the author of *The Happiness Hypothesis* in 2006. More recently, the *New York Times*

bestsellers, *The Righteous Mind*, and *The Coddling of the American Mind*. And he's given four TED Talks and been named the Time 100 Health Leader.

Since 2018, Jon has been studying the contributions and the impact of social media to the decline of teen mental health and the rise of political dysfunction. His most recent work includes the *New York Times* number one bestseller, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, and *The Amazing Generation: Your Guide to Fun and Freedom in a Screen-Filled World in 2025*.

Today our format will be, I think, a very successful one, moderated by Club Trustee Thasunda Brown Duckett. Thasunda is the President and CEO of TIAA, and we're grateful to her for serving as the moderator today. They'll join the stage now and there will be an opportunity for questions from the audience. The program will conclude at 1:00 sharp, and then we'll enjoy lunch. And just a reminder that this discussion is on the record as there is media in the room and online. So now let me welcome Jon and Thasunda to the stage. Thank you very, very much.

Conversation with Jon Haidt

THASUNDA BROWN DUCKETT: I hope you all are ready because this is going to be an amazing conversation, and thank you so much for joining us. I want to start with the

big picture through the lens of the greatest destruction of human capital. Can you set the stage?

JON HAIDT: Sure. First, let me just say that as a professor I'm so pleased to meet you and to know that my retirement money is in good hands.

THASUNDA BROWN DUCKETT: It is. It absolutely is.

JON HAIDT: And second, to hear that this is a nonpartisan group that's looking at policy, how refreshing that is in our country these days. And there are a lot of policy implications here, so I'm really excited to be here, so thank you.

Thasunda is referring to a phrase I use, we were talking for a few minutes beforehand, and I was saying normally when I give a talk, most people want, they're there as parents and they're worried about their kids, and we're talking about children, child-rearing, mental health, flourishing. But I thought for this audience it would be better to, we'll do that, but also put it a little in economic terms of human capital. And what I think is happening is I think one of the, probably the greatest, or it's hard to, I think it's one of the greatest destructions of human capital in human history. And the only that was ever done just sort of accidentally, not even thinking about it.

The Bhopal Tragedy, according to Wikipedia, that was the biggest industrial accident in history, 15,000 to 20,000 people died and half a million were injured. What we're talking about here is a change in technology, a change in childhood from the childhood the way we have always lived, physical movement and play, to one that's largely on screens and just swiping and not very social.

So what we're talking about is something that may be affecting the majority of all children. And if we're talking about the majority of all children, at least in the developed countries, wherever kids are being raised with touch screens, those touch screens have the same effect and families all over the world have the same fights. And parents are struggling to get the kids off, but then again, the parents also gave it because, boy, does it work well to keep the kid quiet. All over the world people have discovered that. And so we're all stuck in the same terrible dynamic. And the mothers of the world, in particular, really felt it and were so, well, they didn't know what to do.

But just to close up this piece of the argument, I think what we're seeing is obviously big declines in mental health, actually big increases in internalizing disorders especially, anxiety and depression. There is a global, I'll say it's not exactly global all the way, but most of the developed world, young people are getting less happy. Not older people, but young people are. And that's especially in English-speaking countries, but it actually is happening across the developed world. So we have, in terms of human capital, we have

more mental illness, less happiness and flourishing, decreasing social skills, decreasing ability to pay attention, distractibility, attention fragmentation, and oh, and addiction. Depending on how you count it, anywhere from 3 to 10% of all young people are now suffering from digital addictions.

So when we start throwing around numbers like 3%, 10%, 20%, 50%, we're talking billions of people. Billions of people have their human capital reduced. And most of these people are still quite young. I've been looking at older Gen Z because that's where we have the data, they went through puberty on Instagram. But teens today or younger teens and below that, they went through puberty on TikTok and we don't know what that does. We're just getting the first studies a year ago. I'm seeing the first studies, and it looks really bad.

So, okay, that's as dark as I'm going to get because I'm basically saying I think we have, humanity has, not shot itself in the foot, we've allowed a few companies to develop a business model that is predatory, incredibly destructive of human development, and leading to literally billions of victims with tens of thousands of deaths. We can talk about deaths in a different....there are a number of ways that kids die on social media. But that's the scale of what we're talking about.

THASUNDA BROWN DUCKETT: Okay, we have the frame. But I do want to double-

click on this a little bit. You know, in *The Anxious Generation*, you described the shift from play-based childhood to a phone-based childhood. And this change was between 2010 and 2012 that made such a profound turning point for young people. Can you talk a little bit about that? Because that gets to some of the origins of the manifestation of this destruction that you talked about.

Jon Haidt: So I always like to start with the fact that we are mammals. Mammals have large brains, a lot of sociability, and evolution's trick is that mammal babies play. You know, if you've ever had a puppy or a kitten, play, play, play. They've got to do that. It is a biological imperative to play or you won't wire up your brain. And kids used to play all the way into the '90s, and really into the early 20th century, kids used to play a lot.

But two things happened. One is that we, in America, and all the Anglo countries, we freaked out about child abduction and sexual abuse in the 80s and 90s so we don't let our kids out anymore. We think they'll be kidnapped if we ever let them out of our sight. So we overprotected them in the real world. Therefore, they don't get the sort of adventurous, independent play. Because it's independent play, no supervision, that's when they grow, because that's when they have to work it out for themselves. What are we going to do? You broke the rules. No, I didn't. And then everyone comes around and they adjudicate it.

This is where the skills of democracy are born, not when you're being supervised. You don't learn any democratic skills when there's a teacher or coach over you. And if you're over 35, you almost certainly had a play-based childhood. You probably remember going out with your friends when you were nine, ten, even seven or eight. That all came to a screeching halt in the 90s and early 2000s. We stopped letting them out.

But mental health didn't collapse then because what they did was they then got on computers. And the early computers were okay. Steve Jobs called it a bicycle for the mind and kids learned to program. So we thought, okay, they're not outside. They're all sitting on their computers but maybe they'll start companies or something. Like maybe it's okay. And the early internet wasn't so bad. It was actually an amazing place.

But once the business models of the attention economy came into being, and it begins with Facebook, and it really intensifies in the early 2010s, Facebook and everyone else perfects the model. The iPhone comes out in 2007. Teens don't have one. Even in 2010 they don't have one. They still have flip phones. In 2010, you get the first front-facing camera. In 2010, Instagram is founded. 2012 is the pivotal year in which Facebook buys Instagram, huge publicity. All the girls go on Instagram. And that's the exact year, the exact year that you see the increases in girls' depression and anxiety. It was flat before then. That's the exact year.

So this incredible change happened. Before 2010, kids still made a lot of eye contact and they still shared laughter. By 2015, everyone is doing this. And that's what I call the great rewiring of childhood. And does it have neurological effects? It has to. That's what puberty is about. Puberty is about changing the brain from the child form to the adult form guided by what you're repeatedly doing. And if you're a forest-dwelling culture that goes hunting, you're going to be incredibly good at all the signals and picking up everything you need to be a hunter. Or if you're out playing and making up games, and my dad played kick-the-can in the streets in Brooklyn in the 30s, like that's what they did. So that's a different kind of brain setting up. And if you went through puberty on TikTok or Instagram, that's a different kind of brain set up. So that's where I think we are.

THASUNDA BROWN DUCKETT: So I want to talk about evidence through your lens. What evidence convinced you that smartphones and social media were contributing to the rise of anxiety, the rise of depression, the loneliness among adolescents? What's the evidence that you would really point to that's leading to all these negative outcomes?

JON HAIDT: So this all emerged, this whole debate emerged when Jean Twenge noticed that all of a sudden – she's been tracking generational data – all of a sudden in 2012 all these bad numbers started going up. And she said that's also when kids got

smartphones. Okay, that's a correlation. It's a historical correlation. And so she really comes out with that in 2016, 2017 really. So for the last nine years that's been the argument. There are some researchers who think that there's no evidence of causality. It's just a correlation. Kids who are on seven hours a day of social media versus two hours a day are two or three times worse off, but it's just a correlation. Maybe the anxious kids are seeking out help on social media. That's why they're on it all day long. Well, in the social sciences what we do for a living is tease apart correlation and causation. And there are a lot of ways to do that. So the most direct way is obviously experiments. We can never run the real experiment which is let's take a million kids with normal childhoods and randomly assign another million to grow up, you know, that's the true experiment. That would really tell us the effect size, because that's the claim about what happened.

Instead we have these little toy models, which is we recruit 300 college students randomly assigned. Half of them are going to reduce their social media for a week, half not. Let's see what happens. So that's going to get just a tiny, tiny bit of the effect size, but you'll get it. Almost every study that's done that has found that when you get off of social media, or you greatly reduce, for at least week, then you get, especially if you had depression...So experiments, but that's just one line of evidence. There's so many others. There are longitudinal studies. There are natural experiments.

And what I've really been focused on over the last year or two is let's get out of the debate, me and the other researchers, we're all fighting over these data sets. All we have is how many hours a day, how's your mental health? Like, let's fight over that. What we have instead is an explosion of evidence all around us which is the fact that the people who seem to be the victims, they say he did it. They say social media was harmful to their mental health. Thirty percent of girls say that social media harmed their own mental health.

So if the victims of an alleged crime are saying he did it to me, and if the witnesses, because this is what the parents, the teachers, and the therapists all say, they all see it happening. They have a good view of what's happening. They believe it. So if you got eyewitness testimony backing up the victim's report, and then you have texts from the alleged assailant saying, hey, let's go hurt kids today. And they say, haha, yes, let's do it. And then they say, but let's not call it addiction anymore. I'm sort of paraphrasing. I'm paraphrasing from all the documents that have come out from Meta.

So if you actually have text messages, emails, presentations brought up by Frances Haugen or in the process of discovery, you basically have confessions. We did it. We knew we were doing it, and then we did it harder. Those are the sorts of things that have convinced me that this is not just a correlation.

THASUNDA BROWN DUCKETT: So you talked about the 30% stat with young girls. How has social media affected the development of identity and self-esteem among teenagers, but I would also love your perspective of are girls and boys experiencing it differently? So can you talk a little bit about that.

JON HAIDT: So just very briefly about identity, you know, in traditional sociological or anthropological theory, identity is ascribed to you based on either your cast, your occupation, your role. Are you a mother, a father, a son, a daughter, a prince? So societies ascribe identities and rituals are there in part when people change identities. So that's the way it traditionally was. It's much more complicated in the United States in modern times. But part of what happened, and it happened on Tumblr, in 2013, there was an explosion of new ideas about how everyone should pick their own identity.

And it's very complicated and I don't understand it all, but I think that set up a lot of kids, especially girls – this was like more of a girl thing – it set up a lot of girls for constant vulnerability. And so while the girls were doing that, the boys were like making fun of them and developing sort of cruel ways of talking on like 4chan and these other sites where you get credit by being as outrageous and racist or antisemitic as possible. You'd even have Jewish kids making Jewish jokes just because everyone understands, oh, we're trying to outdo each other in outrageousness.

And some of those identities then become very explicitly White Supremacist, literally Nazi. So you've got, social media takes kids out of the human society within which they always made identity transitions guided not just by their parents but by the other adults. That's the way identity was always done. And instead we said, how about we're going to throw the girls into one blender and see if they can find something. We'll throw the boys into a different blender and let's just see what happens when they come out. And so I think it's been absolutely devastating to a really difficult and important part of adolescent development which is identity.

THASUNDA BROWN DUCKETT: I have a two-part question on this. So let's layer on social media and talk about AI. And how might AI-driven platforms intensify the challenges created by social media? And with the evidence that you talked about, the implications that you see with the brain, is it reversible? Can you unlearn these habits and be on a different vector?

JON HAIDT: Okay, so let's take those two separately. Let's start with AI because that's what we're all talking about, we're all thinking about. And if we look at, if we just look at the way we were tricked and fooled by the social media companies and all the evidence of the damage and all the evidence that they suppressed, and we focus just on, let's say damage to relationships, damage to mental health, and damage to attention, let's just look at those three. Those are three of the biggest.

What's AI doing? Relationships, social media devastated relationships by saying don't hang out with your best friend and share laughter and food. Just like each other's posts and post, and do that, and that's not very satisfying. But at least there was another person there. And now AI says, okay, now we're ready to just take away, you don't need that other person. Our chatbots are, they're much nicer. They're easier to deal with. Most of the companies, certainly Meta and X, explicitly say that their chatbots can talk sex with you.

So these, I think, are really inappropriate human companions for our children. They're inappropriate human companions for anyone I think. So we can expect that as kids have more and more relationships with AIs, and a lot of the boys have AI girlfriends, and girls are falling in love, and women are falling in love with the perfect romantic AI boyfriend, so as this is happening we see a pattern that we see a lot. Which is at first it feels good. This chatbot really is better than the girls that I dated or the men that I, whatever it is, like wow, there's no problems here. This is easy and fun and incredibly sexy. So at first it feels like there's a benefit.

But kids need to do hard things, and dating and falling in love are some of those hard things. And since they will never learn to do that, they're going to reach adulthood having no clue, no ability how to, how to find and keep a romantic partner or spouse. And so again human capital. Imagine if marriage plummets. It's already going way

down. Imagine if that intensifies, that marriage becomes very rare, child-rearing, childbearing becomes very rare. I mean, you know, to come back to human capital, if there aren't many humans, there ain't much capital. So I'm incredibly worried about AI. Oh, and that was just relationships.

I won't go on this long about attention and mental health except to say that every technology, Marshall McLuhan, I think he said every technology is also an amputation. We get a skill but we lose something. You get a calculator, you get an ability, but you lose the ability to do arithmetic in your head. Fine, we're willing to make that trade. But the one thing you don't want to transplant is your brain. You can't say, okay, you know, I've given away all these other parts of my body and I'm happy using, you know, GPS to locate, like I'm happy giving up navigating, but thinking, reasoning, making decisions for myself, like that's you.

And what we're already seeing is called cognitive off-loading, and in the last few months, I've seen it in myself. Like if I'm sitting at my computer and there's something I need to think about, I can say, like that way lies effort. This way, just type it in, oh, yeah, that's a good idea. So I'm already doing it, and I've only really been more heavily involved just in the last six months. I was using it very minimally before then. So the degree of cognitive off-loading that we're already seeing, and the students themselves already talk about, and that is a Code Red emergency for education, especially higher

ed. So, yes, I'm incredibly alarmed about AI, and that's why, this, I think, is a global emergency, and we have to act quickly. We don't have five or ten years to say let's wait and see what happens.

THASUNDA BROWN DUCKETT: So speaking of acting quickly, I want to pivot to a path forward, and I want to break it up in a few dimensions. First, policy. What are some of the things that you think could be effective policy that could make a good path forward or a good down payment in making sure that we don't have this destruction of human capital?

JON HAIDT: Sure. Thank you for that because that's, okay, let's get hopeful because there's a lot that we can actually do to change this. We had a transformation of childhood from play-based to phone-based, and there are policies we can do to bring it back. The first concept that has to be put on the table is the reason why we're having so much trouble unrolling it is because we're all stuck in a collective action trap.

You might say, well, I want my kid to go outside and play. Billy, go out and play. Don't come back until the streetlights come on. That's what my mother said to me. Great, mom, but nobody else is out there and the cops are going to arrest you for letting me out. So play is a collective action problem. We have to change it so that parents trust their kids and their neighbors or spaces in which kids can be unsupervised. So it's all

kinds of policies around that.

And then rolling back the phone-based childhood, it's not just the social media. It's all of the quick dopamine. Keep your eye on quick dopamine. TV's not so bad because it tells stories. Now it's flashy, there's some problems with it. But TV doesn't have a stimulus response reinforcement loop. You can raise the volume, you can lower the volume, and you can change the channel, but that's about it. But a touch screen is a Skinner box. A touch screen puts every child in a Skinner box where the person controlling the little button to give little reward pellets, it ain't you. It's Meta's algorithms or TikTok's algorithms. And so your kid is going to be reinforced like that, and that's social media, that's video games, that's gambling, that's porn, that's online shopping. Anything that has the quick dopamine feature, that's what you need to protect your kids from.

But if you take your kid off and he says, but, Mom, everyone else is betting on the games. You're a freshman in high school, what are you doing? No, there's ways, everyone's betting on the games. I'm left out. So it's a collective action trap. Every boy has to gamble and play video games. Video games are a lot of fun. They're a little different from social media. But it's quick dopamine. And the girls, of course, are deeply trapped because if they get off, then they're alone and people talk about them.

So that's the intro to policy. What I did in the book and what my movement has done,

actually Alexa Arnold is over there, she runs the movement to roll back the phone-based childhood, reclaim life in the real world. So what I propose in the book, what we're doing is four norms that have huge collective effects. The first is a norm of no smartphone before high school. Because every parent is like, I held out as long as I could, but what was the finish line? Nobody knows. High school. Get the stuff out of middle school.

Let's just all agree, okay, if we all agree, now there's a bright line, and now people know what to shoot for. It won't be perfect. But now most of us can say, okay, before high school you get a flip phone. Of course, you can text your friends, you can text me. But you don't need a super-computer and strange men talking to you all the time. So no smartphone before high school as a policy, not a law. Now in some European countries, they say, oh, let's ban it. No, we're not going to say it's illegal to give your kid an iPad.

So the second norm is no social media until 16. And I put that forth as a norm because I thought if we don't have a functioning government in this country, we have to just use norms. But I was wrong because we have 50 functioning states. Well, I don't know about 50, but most of them are pretty functional. And the states have been acting fantastically. They've been on this. The governors, because governors have to deliver real improvements for their people, so governors have been incredible. State legislators have been great. And so we are getting the age raised, although in the U.S. it's not

going to go through for a very long time. But, of course, many other countries are doing it. So that, it turns out, is much better as a law, and that's happening. Over a dozen countries have committed to raising the age to 16 or sometimes 15.

The third is phone-free schools, and that also is a smash success. The teachers love it. They say we hear laughter in the hallways again. Students are talking to each other. So there was just a big study that came out that they didn't find benefits on standardized tests, so that's true. It would have been great if they had found that a year or two of phone-free schools actually raises standardized test scores. We haven't found that yet. But it did raise well-being. By the second year they were actually feeling better, which is huge. They were using their phone less, which is huge. Teachers say they're paying attention more.

So phone-free schools is incredibly important because it's the one thing that is, I think, equity promoting. With all of these reforms, it's the rich, college-educated parents who are all over it. They're trying to protect their kids. And the single mother without a college degree and two jobs, she's giving each kid their own device when they're two, and that's their childhood. And so phone-free schools wipes it out for everyone. And it has, I believe we're going to find, I can't prove it yet, but I believe we're going to find it has more benefit for working class and low SES families than it does for rich families.

THASUNDA BROWN DUCKETT: That will be a positive step forward. I want to talk about the role of business. And through the lens of leadership, through the lens of this is our new workforce where we are dealing with, as leaders, disruption in every way, figuring out the new path forward for companies, where does the anxious generation fit in this in a way that makes sense for business leaders to understand everything you just said? But then also understand that the world is not going to wait for some of the things that we have to do as leaders. How do you bring all of this together in a way that can allow us to have a successful path forward?

JON HAIDT: Sure. So for those who were counting and have a little slot left, like what was the fourth one? Didn't he say there were four norms? The fourth norm was far more independence and free play in the real world. And that's letting kids out, things like that.

THASUNDA BROWN DUCKETT: Without having DFS come get you.

JON HAIDT: Yes, exactly. That's right. So what is the role of business? What is the situation in business? So I'm very fortunate that I teach in a wonderful business school, and I teach an MBA class. Now I just teach one course called Flourishing. And I teach an undergrad version, they're mostly sophomores, and I teach an MBA version, mostly in their late 20s. So it's been great because I can just ask the, now they're Gen Z, but they used to call it millennials, like, okay, you're supervising Gen Z. You hate it. You

have all these problems with Gen Z. What's your advice for Gen Z? And then the students are hungry to learn it.

And this is the really encouraging thing about Gen Z, they are not in denial. They are not defensive. And they want to get stronger; they want to grow. So left to their own devices, they're going to be multi-tasking at work. They're going to be on their phone while they're doing whatever work they're doing for you. They're going to have their attention fragmented. And many of them have mental health problems and will react very strongly to things that have been causing all kinds of chaos in companies over the last eight to ten years.

So what I'm hearing, and there was a headline from Davos two years ago about how whatever the topic, the discussion turns to how much we dislike working with Gen Z. That's at least what business leaders were saying. So this is not at all to blame Gen Z. This is to say we have a massive generational problem. These are our own kids. So what do you do?

The first is to understand that these kids have been really deprived of mentorship...sorry...

THASUNDA BROWN DUCKETT: You feel it. I mean I think we all are processing all of

this because it's real life. You're not speaking theoretically. You're not speaking historically. I think what makes you so important in this conversation, not here today, but just broadly, is that you're speaking real time. And it hurts when you really are seeing the impact and it doesn't seem like there's enough bumpers to get folks on the right path.

JON HAIDT: That's right. I feel like I'm looking at a cliff that children are falling over, and I'm saying we've got to stop this. So businesses have an enormous role to play. Okay, here's something I'm going to beg you all to do. Give all of your workers, but especially your young workers, a cognitively humane environment.

What I hear from my MBA students is, okay, we read Cal Newport's book, *Deep Work*. We know that productivity is time x focus. We know that our devices take away our time and destroy our focus. So we can't be productive. But we can't follow Cal Newport's advice because the company rule is you have to respond to everything within 15 minutes, in finance, in some parts of finance, 15 minutes. You can never turn off your notifications. On weekends, one said, on weekends it can be 30 minutes. So this is incredibly inhumane for a generation that has already had their attention fragmented. So I advise you all, well, read *The Anxious Generation*. Then read Cal Newport's *Deep Work*, or his newer work, and talk with your mid-level managers and your younger employees, how can we create a cognitively humane work place? This isn't like, oh, we

have to do it for mental health. This is, if you care about productivity, don't you want your people able to think? Or do you want them always just in a blender of distraction? So that's my beg of the business community. It's just inhumane what young workers have to go into in these knowledge industries, and especially finance.

THASUNDA BROWN DUCKETT: And how do you think about that, you know, one of the things that I think leaders, the reality, as people are living longer, you have five generations in the workforce. And so how do you make it all work together in a way that can take the goodness of each generation and could actually be a path forward because of the gift that we do have an opportunity to have multi-generations in the workforce tackling some of the toughest global problems of today?

JON HAIDT: That's right. And that's a great way to put it, five generations in the workforce. There's a feature of humanity that's incredibly important that we're in danger of losing, which is the inter-generational transmission of knowledge and culture. For as long as there's been culture, so, you know, a million, two million years, we don't really know, it always was passed from elders to the next generation. That's the way it works with modification and with new inventions.

And even when, those of us that are over 40, when we were growing up, we watched a lot of television. Not one show was made by other seven-year-olds. Not one. A lot of

them were made by people of my grandparents' generation. You know, we learned opera from watching Bugs Bunny, which was like a post-World War II era thing harkening back to the 19th century. And that's what we watched in the 70s. So there's always been inter-generational transmission of culture, which binds us together. We can get the same jokes. Like The Barber of Seville, like we at least know what the motif is.

And that all ended, I think, or actually, I don't want to over-dramatize it. That all shrunk dramatically between 2010 and 2015 because once everyone is hooked up to this – and this will expand to take every available moment from most kids – some are able to deal with it. But at least half are not able to deal with it, so this will take every available moment of consciousness. And very little of that is coming from more than a few weeks ago, very little of it is coming from the 20th century. Very little of it is coming from people over the age of 40. So they're just immersed in just lots of stuff, ephemera generated by other young people, that's not worth remembering. So the inter-generational transmission of knowledge is incredibly important.

And as I said, Gen Z, they have been deprived of mentorship, and with Covid, and they need it. And so the more you can get that sort of, you know, mentoring, counseling across the generations, and appeal to their desire to get stronger. This is not like a scolding, like you kids these days, you can't pay attention. This is like, I know that you want to do well here. I know that you want to learn. I know that you want to be

successful.

And so one thing that I talk about with my students is feedback. Because mid-level managers are very afraid to give negative feedback to the younger employees. They might have a mental health episode. They might freak out. They might ghost them. They might quit. But what has emerged from my Flourishing class is if you frame it as, okay, now, I'm your manager, and part of my job is to help you grow, to help you be successful.

So we can do feedback in one of two ways. Either I think be really gentle and couch it in all kinds of language and really try to protect your feelings, or I can tell you everything I think you're doing wrong as often as I see it. Which do you want?

THASUNDA BROWN DUCKETT: A little bit of both.

JON HAIDT: Well, okay, in my class they all pick the tough feedback. But the point is, because they're more likely than you think to take something as an attack. But if you frame it as I'm doing this, to help them, then they welcome it.

THASUNDA BROWN DUCKETT: It's the frame. One more question before I open it up to the audience. You said something earlier that I just wanted to build on especially if

you think about our country and 250 years. You said play provided us the skills of where democracy was born. And in an environment that is so polarizing and you talk about less play; how do we course correct so that we can ensure that the next 250 is even better than the first 250? How do we ensure through policy, through some of your tips, some of your insights, that the path forward is brighter than the path that we've come from?

JON HAIDT: So it starts with a diagnosis. And that's what I offered in *The Anxious Generation*. It's not just social media. It's not just the phones. It's childhood. We have to give kids back a human childhood with a lot of play and independence and a minimal amount of quick dopamine. So that's the diagnosis.

And then we need a bipartisan will to do it. And here's the amazing thing, we have it. There was an article in Politico, the last remaining bipartisan issue in America is phone-free schools. Totally Red/Blue, Red State governors, Blue State governors. Because everyone has kids, and so everyone sees it. So we've got to change childhood. We've got to do it together. And we're finding over and over again, and you see it in AI also, there's not really a big partisan split. People are feeling really afraid of what this is doing to them and to their kids.

So I think we do have the will. We have the diagnosis. And we have trouble with policy

at the national level but here the states have to be the laboratories of democracy because Congress ain't. So we're seeing all sorts of things happening in the states. They're trying a variety of things. Countries are innovating. So, you know, Australia was the first in. They started with very light enforcement because they were not enforcing it on the kids, they were enforcing on the companies. And now they're tightening it up. So now it's going to get better and better.

But we have to learn from each other's examples. We have to understand what was amazing about America. And, you know, Alexis de Tocqueville, when he traveled around in the 1830s, what amazed him was that when Americans needed, you know, we need a bridge over this river, we need a school, we need, you know, whatever we need, like okay, you know, I'll help. I'll do this. Okay, who's in charge? That's what he saw because we had this vast country and a small population.

Whereas he said in France, people just wait for the King to do it. Nobody would take initiative. And in Britain, they wait for the nobles to do it. Nobody would take initiative. But we take initiative. And you learn that on the playground. You learn that when, like, okay, what do you guys want to do today? You know, one person wants to do this. No, I want to do this. You have to work that out and that's democracy.

THASUNDA BROWN DUCKETT: I love that.

JON HAIDT: So we have to restore childhood. So I know you said this was the last thing we'll talk about, but I have to put this on because, yes, I get really dark because this problem is so enormous. But the amazing thing that's happened in the last two years is that things are changing because parents are rising up, legislators, red and blue, are rising up. I have never seen change happen this fast. Certainly not on a global level. We've never had so many countries passing new laws at the same time. So Team Humanity is fighting back. We are rising up, and it is bipartisan. And what was led initially by the mothers, they were the ones who really felt, they were the first ones in, but now it's everyone. And it's Gen Z.

And so that's what we're trying to do in the movement, the movement that Alexa is running, because we don't have ten years to, like, let's persuade people. No, we don't have ten years to do this. So we're trying to move as fast as we can. And we're finding open doors everywhere we go. We're finding people want to join us. So we're starting, so far we've just been based at NYU. NYU has been amazing for me. They've let me do all this. But we're starting a nonprofit, which is going to be able to be much more effective at changing norms and policies and behavior.

So if you're interested in this, if you're philanthropically inclined, I hope I can put that pitch out there, please talk to Alexa afterwards. Because we need everyone's help, and not just philanthropically, this is an amazingly connected room. If you have ins with

governors, with Congress people, please go talk to Alexa. This is an all-hands-on-deck moment.

THASUNDA BROWN DUCKETT: With that, let me open it up for a few questions. We have time. So there's mikes that are roving, and we'll start here.

QUESTION: Thank you. Great to hear everything that you're working on, and also just the amazing impact that you've had. I guess I have a two-part question. One part is you've described an enormous amount of negativity, and are there positive aspects to this? And in one regard in particular, you briefly mentioned kind of a change in how people think about their own identity. And, you know, one thing that strikes me about this generation, my kids are pretty much in this generation, is there's just an enormous amount of gender fluidity, and like there's different concepts of that than in prior generations. Is that something that, you know, is that good or bad? Do you attribute that at all to this phenomenon?

JON HAIDT: Well, there's a general progress in rights revolutions and every generation is more tolerant than the one before. And so I think, you know, the greater tolerance around LGBTQ, that would have happened because that was happening with everybody. It wasn't, you know, we got to gay marriage and had wide acceptance, not because the young people replaced it, but because everybody changed. So we were all

shifting in that direction. So I think this would have happened.

A lot of what I see happening is people assume that social media was responsible for something or without social media we couldn't have this. But if you take away social media, you take away the nastiest, most addictive, most manipulative engine, you still have the rest of the internet. And so one argument I really want to put to rest, because this is one that the social media companies push, social media is a lifeline for LGBTQ. What would they do without it? That's an argument that they push to try to push opposition on the left.

But the research shows very clearly, the people who are most harmed by social media are LGBTQ kids. Most likely to be sexually harassed, to be sexually stalked, sex ploited. And when LGBTQ kids in the 90s got the internet, that was a lifeline. Now they were not isolated. So most of the benefits that are ascribed to social media really are to the internet. And if we kept kids off of social media until 16, I don't think they'd lose a damn thing because there are so many other ways to do what they want to do, and most of those ways are healthier.

THASUNDA BROWN DUCKETT: Let's go in the back just to kind of zigzag...yes, go ahead.

QUESTION: I find it ironic that we're talking about inter-generational transmission as a positive since it's also attributable to so much negative. And I think one of the proofs that we accomplished a lot is wherever you travel, when you meet the young people, they don't seem all that different. Maybe less interesting to someone who is looking for cultural differences.

But they do, I mean we have succeeded in exposing young people to a multitude of ideas which is often not sitting with their own parents. So I think we have to give, of course it's at a cost and obviously the more ideas we have, the more complex everything is for all of us, and I don't think we should discourage our exposure to as many ideas as possible because we really don't know who has the better ideas.

JON HAIDT: So the internet exposes us to an infinite amount of stuff. And you can explore to your heart's content and people have found ways to do that. Social media is a variation on that where you lie back, you put in a feeding tube, and it stuffs stuff into you. And there's a kind of passivity and it's very much, actually it's almost identical to what happens to people who play slot machines. They get into a sort of a fish- or dead-eye zone. They're zoning out. So I don't consider that to be healthy. And again, if you take away social media and leave the rest of the internet, then all of your concerns, I think, are satisfied. I don't think hooking kids up to a predatory company's algorithm that they fine-tuned to keep that particular kid on, with this particular material, I just don't see

how there's any benefit to that.

THASUNDA BROWN DUCKETT: Let's go on this side. You in the back and then we'll make our way to the front.

QUESTION: Thank you. President Brown Duckett, thank you so much for moderating, and I really have enjoyed the way you moved the questions. Professor Haidt, my question is about play, and you've mentioned different levels of government, but I didn't hear you mention local government. In Washington, D.C. and in Baltimore when kids want to go out to play, they are being met with all kinds of policy restrictions, and I don't know what you think about that.

And the second part of my question is I also, well, I'm a Fellow at The Economic Club of New York, and I'm also a Member of the Ethics Committee at the University of Maryland Medical Center, the largest medical center in the state of Maryland. And when we think about data centers and the local government, where does ethics fall into this? There's a lot of push-back and President Brown Duckett mentioned AI, and I don't know if this angle where the push-back or at least the information and just the enthusiasm around or lack thereof of data centers could be an area where young people and ethics could fall into. Thank you.

JON HAIDT: So just briefly on the second question about AI, I am pleased to see that there is kind of an AI backlash happening now because we have to course correct. Our ideas about progress and technology from the 19th and 20th century, when it was amazing, it's different now. We have to really be rethinking it. So I am pleased. And data centers is one area where we're seeing the push-back. I don't have any interesting thoughts on the ethics but I'll just point to the fact that we are seeing a sea change in public attitudes about technology, which I think is hugely encouraging. Because two years ago it looked like we were just hurtling off a cliff and there was no way to get off the track.

Your question on play, that is a huge problem, and especially in the United States we have a couple of structural problems. So one is that we do have higher crime rates compared to, say, most European countries, although they're much lower than Latin America. I was in Brazil. They have this problem even more seriously, that they are afraid to let their kids out to play.

So I also co-founded an organization called Let Grow with a woman named Lenore Skenazy, who wrote a book called, *Free-Range Kids*, and we have some very simple programs. The simplest, it's so simple, it's called Play Club. All it is, is you get the school to keep the school playground open from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. and maybe open it for 45 minutes before classes start. Because parents do trust the kids to play on the

school playground. And it doesn't take, you need one person to sort of be nearby. You don't want to supervise it with a whistle, but nearby. So even in high crime areas or even in areas where parents are afraid to let the kids have the kind of childhood that they might have had, there are ways that you can find spaces.

Now, okay, so policy-wise, in America we are a car-based culture that does not design the world as if kids exist. We design all kinds of products you can buy and bring into your home, but we assume everyone in the world is driving a car for the most part. And it's really bad for kids. This is really expensive. The policy fix that I told you before, they cost like \$7. This one is, you know, billions to change our physical infrastructure around the country but we have to restore the ability of kids to walk, ride bicycles in their neighborhoods. We have to have third places where they can go that are not just home and school. And then we also have the problem of too many lawyers. I shouldn't say it that way. I should say we have the attitude that if anyone gets hurt anywhere, then someone can be sued, and that causes everyone who has any responsibility for kids to be super defensive.

I'm good friends with a man named Philip Howard, who you may know. He has an amazing TED Talk on how law is strangling society. We have to have an understanding that if playgrounds are run well, there will be some injuries. The optimal number is not zero, and we can't sue a school if there was one injury. Now, of course, if there's, you

know, if there's negligence, but if it's just normal play...So anyway, we need a sort of rethinking, and here we're going to need help from the legal community because everyone's afraid of being sued. And the ultimate victims of that are the kids who don't get to play.

THASUNDA BROWN DUCKETT: It sounds like you're saying play is expensive through the lens of legal, through the lens of sport, it's expensive now.

JON HAIDT: We made it expensive, yes.

THASUNDA BROWN DUCKETT: So there is this thing now that play costs a lot of money to really do it, unfortunately, to the point you raised. I think we have time for one or two more questions. I feel pressure trying to choose who, but I'll go with you and then the gentleman at the table.

QUESTION: Hi. Thank you so much. So I have young kids.

JON HAIDT: How old?

QUESTION: I have a three-year old and a ten-month old. And so my generation is very much the what can you do right away right now about phones in school and phones in

general. And I'm 36 years old, I've never seen a movement take off this quickly with this much acceptance of it. And so I'm curious, just, you know, from your perspective why do you think that it resonated so deeply with so many people across so many different socioeconomic lenses?

JON HAIDT: So normally when there's a problem and people are suffering, there's a movement building to fix it. And if the problem gets bad enough, people will do something. But we're in an unprecedented era, everything is changing as we change communication and technology. And so we got into a set of collective action problems that people didn't fully understand. And as long as we're in those collective action problems, it was like, you know, the companies, they could just keep turning up the heat and making it even worse and worse and worse, and we couldn't do anything about it.

And then when *The Anxious Generation* came out, and at the last minute I put in, I was just going to have a paragraph or two on collective action problems and go into a little bit of sociology and economics. But I decided to make it its own chapter, a short chapter, because we all have to understand collective action problems. And so I think the book clarified for everyone, ah, it's a collective action problem. But if we, you know, me and all the other mothers whose kids are at the same pickup time, you know, we go to each other's birthdays, like we all know each other, we're on a text thread. Let's go talk to the principal. Let's go get phone-free schools. And that happened.

I mean it was like the most amazing example of both bottom-up, grass roots, mothers organizing, and top-down, governors calling us up and saying what can we do?

Because everybody saw the problem but they didn't see the way out. And so once we laid out, here's the way out, or at least here's the beginning, here's the first four steps.

There's a lot more to go, but here's the first four steps, ooh, it was like, I never expected it to happen this fast.

Can I just give you, just two principles I want to give you as a mother of young kids?

And these aren't in the book, but I'll say them now. Slow dopamine and stories are good. Slow dopamine means don't give your kid anything where it's stimulus response reinforcement, but let them discover that. If they want to build a block tower, make a tree house, and it takes hours, and then they do it, that's dopamine, and that's great.

But don't let them play, I can't say don't let them play any video games, but be wary of the video games. No social media, no gambling, no YouTube, unless you say it has to be 30 minutes or longer. So when kids learn to pay attention to stories, that's good.

Humans have always raised their kids with stories. Our kids are not raised with stories. They're raised with little 15-second things of somebody getting kicked in the head.

THASUNDA BROWN DUCKETT: It's 12:55, and so I'm going to bring this to a close.

But there are some real themes that hopefully we can all walk through. One, this is a

bipartisan agenda. Two, play, play, play. Three, as leaders, there are things that we can do within our own companies to make this a better future and outcome. And lastly, under our watch, we will not allow the greatest destruction to be human capital. Thank you so very much.

JON HAIDT: Wow, we covered a lot.

CHAIR ROBERT K. STEEL: Great. Well, thank you both for your time today. It's been really informative and we're most appreciative. Let me just remind the Club members that we have, and you can see on the back of your program, a series of events coming that are quite exciting and some of which, we have someone coming from Meta to speak to us, and we have someone from Google coming to speak to us. So you can take your notes from today's questions and be well informed, and maybe, Jonathan, maybe you'd like to return to be in the front row to ask questions. I'm not sure that would fly.

But we also, as we close, want to take a second to thank those members of the Centennial Society who are here today and also not, but there are 450 members of our Club that have provided additional support so we can be funded, and we're excited about that. We also want to highlight, to that specifically, that we're celebrating the 250th Anniversary of our country on June 23rd. We'll be sending out more details for the

program for that. So stay tuned for that to be coming to you soon. So now let's close this part of our program. For those that were joining us online, thank you very much for being with us today. Have a wonderful afternoon. For those of you in the room, thank you for being here today and let's enjoy our lunch. Thank you everyone.