



CAMBRIDGE

Strengthening digital awareness to support student wellbeing in school communities

Why does it matter and what can schools do?

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Planning and Insight

July 2026

Housekeeping

- Health and safety
- Fire safety
- Washrooms



Agenda

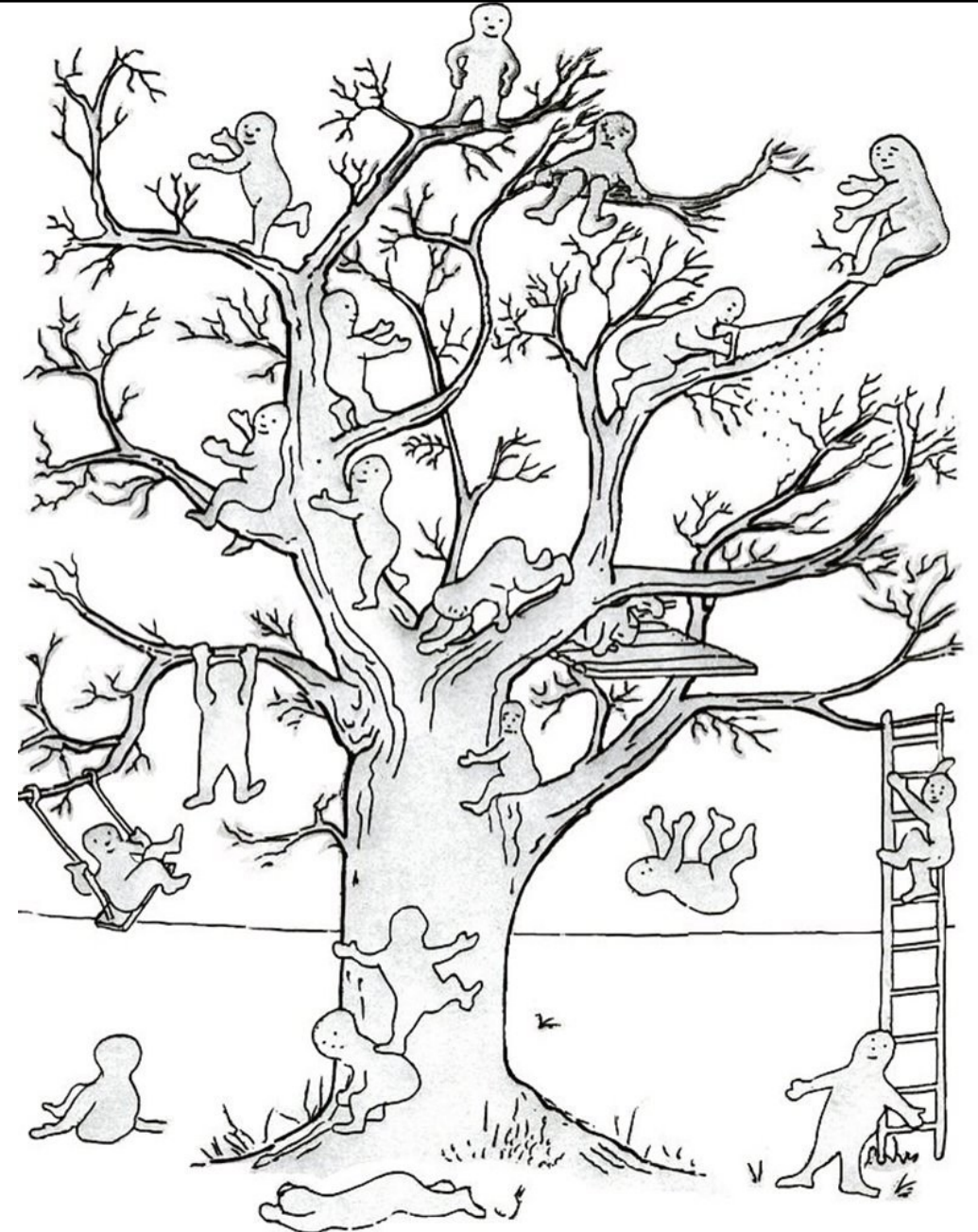
10 min	Presentation	Shared evidence base & why this matters for schools
10 min	Pair activity	Reflecting on lived school realities
15 min	Group task	Mapping evidence to classroom & school actions
15 min	Presentation	What works: whole-school approaches
10 min	Individual/pair	Commitment to action

Aims

- Understand key evidence behind current digital wellbeing concerns
- Reflect on what this looks like in your own school
- Translate research into classroom-level practice
- Identify classroom and whole-school actions that protect wellbeing

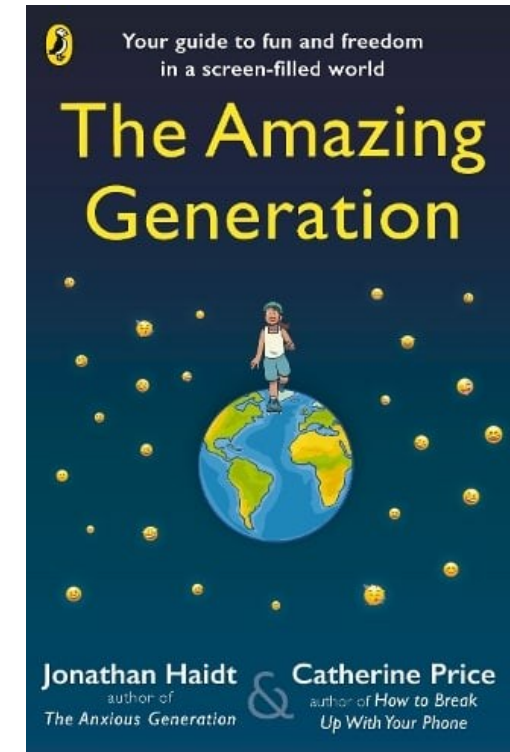
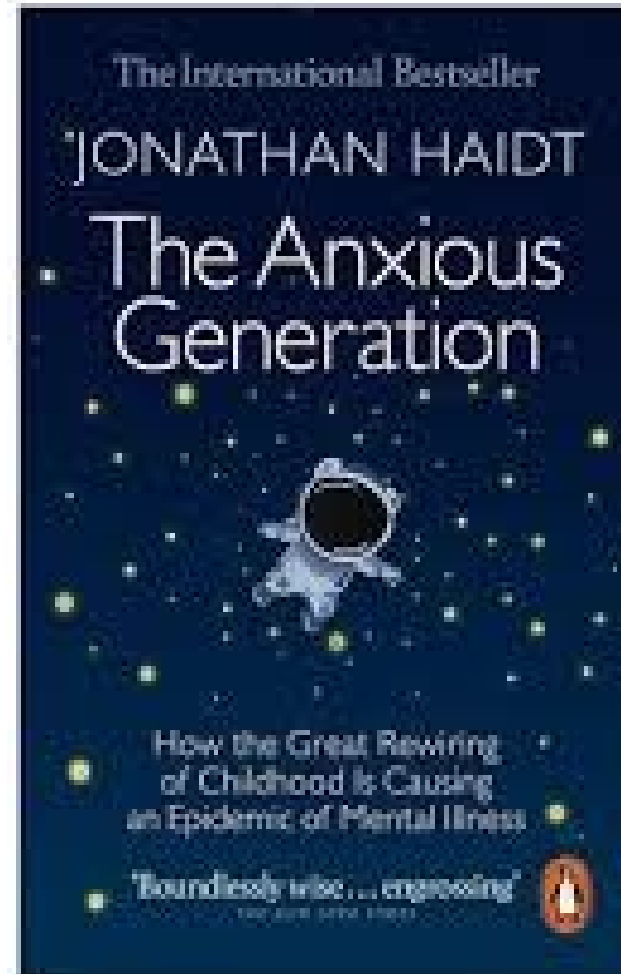
What has been your experience of social media today?

Zero/lots	Helpful / informative
By chance / by choice	Necessary
Overwhelmed	Connected
Annoyed by	Engaged
Unregulated	Creative
Mindless scrolling	Reflective
Confident	Responsible
Enjoyable	Irresponsible
Detoxing	Self-regulated
Distracted	Well-managed



Why digital wellbeing in schools?

'Gen Z became the first generation in history to go through puberty with a portal in their pockets that called them away from the people nearby and into an alternative universe that was exciting, addictive, unstable, and - as I will show - unsuitable for children and adolescence' Pg 6



What are the issues?

- Adolescence is a sensitive developmental window.
- Brain systems linked to emotion, reward, peer approval and impulse control are still developing.
- Algorithm-driven platforms amplify comparison, vigilance and emotional reactivity.
- The issue is not 'screens' but patterns of use.
- Sleep disruption, constant social comparison, loss of boredom, reduced in-person play.
- Less time outside.
- Girls and vulnerable learners disproportionately affected.

- Blakemore, S.-J., & Mills, K. L. (2014). Is adolescence a sensitive period for sociocultural processing? *Annual Review of Psychology*, 65, 187–207. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010213-115202>
- Haidt, J. (2024). *The anxious generation: How the great rewiring of childhood is causing an epidemic of mental illness*. Penguin Press.
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- Santos, R. M. S., Mendes, C. G., Bressani, G. Y. S., Ventura, S. A., Nogueira, Y. J. A., Miranda, D. M., & Romano-Silva, M. A. (2023). The associations between screen time and mental health in adolescents: A systematic review. *BMC Psychology*, 11(127). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-023-01166-7>
- Save the Children UK & Vodafone Foundation. (2025). *Click, scroll, connect – and balance: Children’s digital wellbeing in educational contexts across Europe*. <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net>
- United Kingdom House of Commons Education Committee. (2024). *Screen time: Impacts on education and wellbeing* (Fourth report of session 2023–24). <https://publications.parliament.uk>
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- Weinstein, E., & James, C. (2022). *Behind their screens: What teens are facing (and adults are missing)*. Blackstone Publishing.

How strong is the evidence?

What the research does show:

- Clear associations between digital patterns and:
 - sleep disruption
 - anxiety and low mood
 - attention difficulties.
- Adolescence is a sensitive developmental period.
- Platform design (not just 'screen time') matters.

What the research does NOT claim definitively:

- That all technology is harmful.
- That effects are the same for every child.
- That schools alone can solve this.



If we know this, what becomes a
reasonable responsibility for schools?

In pairs...

Discuss:

- Where do you see students using technology well?
- Where do you see warning signs?
 - Sleep?
 - Anxiety?
 - Attention?
 - Peer relationships?
- What concerns teachers and school leaders the most right now?



What are schools noticing?

Across contexts, schools report:

- rising anxiety and emotional dysregulation
- reduced attention and persistence
- sleep-deprived students
- increased peer conflict moving seamlessly between online and offline.



Why do schools matter? Schools...

normalise
expectations

structure
attention
and time

shape
relational
culture

are trusted
authorities
for families

From evidence to action

If this evidence is broadly right, what does
it mean for classrooms and whole-school
culture?

Evidence to action - Group task

In groups of 3 or 4

You will be given one evidence theme.

Discuss:

- What does this mean for classroom practice?
- What does this mean for whole-school decisions?

Be ready to share one **classroom action** and **one school-wide** implication.

Following 4 slides will be printed off

Evidence to action - Theme 1

Evidence theme 1: Sleep & constant connectivity

The evidence highlights:

- sleep disruption strongly linked to anxiety and low mood
- late-night device use impacts learning and behaviour
- adolescents struggle with self-regulation when boundaries are absent.

Evidence to action - Theme 2

Evidence theme 2: Attention & cognitive overload

The evidence highlights:

- sustained attention is declining
- multitasking impairs learning
- boredom is a developmental need, not a failure.

Evidence to action - Theme 3

Evidence theme 3: Social comparison & peer dynamics

The evidence highlights:

- adolescents are neurologically sensitive to peer evaluation
- online comparison intensifies self-criticism
- peer conflict now follows students everywhere.

Evidence to action - Theme 4

Evidence theme 4: Unequal impact

The evidence highlights:

- vulnerable students experience stronger positive *and* negative effects
- neurodivergent learners may struggle more with regulation
- digital harm often intersects with existing vulnerabilities.

Feedback - suggestions

Classroom-level actions:

- Explicit teaching about sleep, focus, and wellbeing.
- Planned device-free learning.
- Teaching self-regulation, not assuming it.
- Modelling healthy digital behaviour.

Whole school:

- Clear, consistent phone norms.
- Shared expectations for homework and communication.
- Digital wellbeing embedded in PSHE & safeguarding.
- Staff alignment (not individual discretion).
- Partnership framing with parents.

Case Study



"Safeguarding is of paramount importance and it does come at a cost," he said.

"And we've seen huge benefits in terms of students speaking with each other and attending clubs; it's made it all worthwhile."

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'We've seen huge benefits since banning mobiles'



DEBBIE TUBBY/BBC

Evie, 16, said it was nice not to have the distraction of a mobile phone during the school day

Katy Prickett and Debbie Tubby, at The Netherhall School

25 March 2026

A secondary school which banned smartphones has seen "huge benefits" for students both academically and socially, according to its head teacher.

Evie, 16, welcomed the ban, saying: "I definitely used to see a lot more people just on their phones in the middle of lessons and I think now it is more social and everyone's listening to the teachers and people concentrating."

Addressing counter points

- Isn't this just a moral panic about new technology?
- Correlation doesn't equal causation so how can we justify action?
- Many students benefit hugely from technology, do we ignore that?
- Isn't this the responsibility of parents rather than schools?

To conclude:

Digital wellbeing is not:

- a blanket ban without explanation or testing
- a one-off assembly
- a moral panic
- something only parents should manage



Digital wellbeing is:

- evidence informed
- relationship-centred
- culturally embedded
- revisited over time

We do not need certainty to act,
we need enough evidence to act
thoughtfully and proportionately.

Victoria Renfro paraphrasing Jonathan Haidt

Reflection & commitment

Individually:

- One belief I might need to challenge...

With a partner:

- One classroom practice I will consider
- One whole-school question I will take back



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Feedback



Cambridge Schools Conference, July 2026
Future-ready: preparing learners to thrive

Any questions?

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Thank you!

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