

**Good
INSIDE**

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**THE ANXIOUS
GENERATION**



5 STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS TO
Free the Anxious
Generation

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A Guide from Good Inside
and the Anxious Generation



5 Strategies for Parents to Free the Anxious Generation

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Here's what we know: Our kids are suffering from a mental health crisis. The shift from a “play-based childhood” to a “phone-based childhood” has led to social isolation, disrupted sleep, diminished focus, and expectations of instant gratification. At the same time, the rise in intensive parenting has created a harmful paradox: Kids have been overprotected offline and underprotected online, as Jonathan Haidt writes.

Something else we know: All is not lost. Parents can help turn these patterns around. If you feel confused or overwhelmed, you're not alone. You deserve support. And you've come to the right place.

Hi, I'm Dr. Becky Kennedy, clinical psychologist, #1 *NYT* bestselling author, and founder and CEO of parenting company Good Inside. Our mission at Good Inside is to give parents the knowledge and tools they need to raise resilient, confident children. That's exactly why we've partnered with Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Anxious Generation*, to create this guide of five simple, actionable steps you can take to see positive change—fast. By downloading this guide, you've already taken a big first step to getting there: You've moved from focusing only on the *problem* to putting effort toward a *solution*.

Ready to make the Anxious Generation a little less anxious? Let's jump in.

5 STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS TO FREE THE ANXIOUS GENERATION

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1. Know Your Job

WHY THIS MATTERS

Making The Anxious Generation less anxious relies on parents understanding our role as parents. We all want to do a “good job”... and yet, no one hands us a job description when we become parents. A clear job description = a clearer path to success.

Cue: Family Jobs. In every family, you and your kid have separate responsibilities:

- A parent's job is to **establish safety** by setting boundaries and validating emotions.
- A kid's job is to **develop emotional regulation skills** by experiencing and expressing their feelings (including reactions to our boundaries!).

Here's the key idea: You're allowed to set boundaries and your kid is allowed to have feelings about these boundaries. You can then validate their feelings, while holding your boundaries. Your boundaries don't dictate your kid's feelings and your kid's feelings don't dictate your boundaries. BOOM.

Now that you know your job, you'll be able to successfully navigate even the trickiest phone situations. That's because success means everyone doing their job—not everyone being pleased with the process or outcome. (Remember: resilience > happiness!)

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN DAY-TO-DAY LIFE?

Let's say your child wants to create a TikTok account. You check in with yourself and you believe your child isn't ready—in other words, you know your answer is “no.” You start to worry, imagining the protest, tears, and screams: “Ugh, my kid is going to be so upset with me!”



Then you remember Family Jobs. You tell yourself: “My job is to set a boundary and validate. My child's job is to react and express their feelings.” This might sound like:

“I know you want TikTok. I get it, really. My number one job is to keep you safe and right now safety means saying no.” (You might add that you're open to talking about it at a later date or that you have an age at which you'd be comfortable exploring this decision again.)

To be clear, your child will *not* say: “I get that. Thanks for being such a sturdy parent.” No way! Your child will... do their job. Your child will express their disappointment and frustration. Over time, as we tolerate tough feelings in our kids, they’ll start to learn how to tolerate those same feelings in themselves.

2. Strengthen Your Boundary Muscle

WHY THIS MATTERS

The Anxious Generation is a generation of kids desperate for boundaries. In fact, a lack of boundaries is one of the main contributors to today’s poor mental health outcomes.

When we don’t set boundaries, it’s as if we’re letting our kids take charge. As much as they might protest our decisions, the truth is they don’t want to be in charge, they know they shouldn’t be in charge, and they’re terrified that if they are in charge... no one will step in to help them when they’re struggling.

When we set boundaries, we’re essentially telling our kids: “I’m creating a safe container for you to learn, explore, and grow.” In fact, boundaries are one of the most powerful ways to show your child that you love them. You’re doing your job to keep them safe, so they can do their job of building emotional regulation skills.

So, how do you learn to set boundaries around screens? Here’s our counterintuitive advice for parents: Don’t begin with screens. If saying no to things like an extra cupcake, a new T-shirt, or a sleepover on a school night feels hard, then enforcing tech rules will feel nearly impossible. Instead, think of boundary-setting as a muscle: You have to strengthen it over time if you’re going to effectively flex it in high-stakes situations like smartphones, social media, video games, and more.

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN DAY-TO-DAY LIFE?

Start small with boundaries: Think about something where you frequently find yourself saying “no” to your kids. Maybe your kid always asks for a snack before dinner. So, before you start cooking, say:

“Hey, I’ve been thinking and we’re going to be doing snacks differently in our family: There will be no more snacks right before dinner, because your body gets full on snacks and it’s not getting all the good food it needs.”

The next day, if your kid pushes back, reinforce the boundary:

“I know you want a snack, and I know you can wait half an hour until dinner. That’s our new family rule. I get that you’re upset.”

The more frequently and more clearly you communicate your boundaries, the less often you’ll find yourself having to say “no”—because your guidelines are already established! And the more confident you’ll eventually feel when it comes to enforcing tech boundaries.

Once you’ve built up your boundary muscle, try it out with tech:

“In our family, we prioritize connecting around the dinner table, which is why we have phones in another room while we’re eating together.”

“Social media isn’t an option right now. I know that’s not what you want to hear, I know that this makes your life harder in some ways, and I know that we will get through this. I love you.”

3. Give Yourself Permission to Change Course

WHY THIS MATTERS

When it comes to phone, social media, app, and video game decisions, a critical question to ask is this: “Will I empower myself, at any point, to change my mind?” The digital world is always evolving, and so is this generation’s needs, behaviors, and mental health. Our boundaries will likely need to evolve, too.

Think of it this way: You’re on a flight to Los Angeles and the pilot notices a major change in weather conditions requiring an emergency landing in St. Louis. Can

you imagine if the pilot announced, “Hey, is it okay with everyone if we make an emergency landing? It’s okay, right?” or “Ugh, we probably need an emergency landing, but we already decided we are landing in LA, and so it just is what it is, nothing I can do... plus, the passengers would be so annoyed!” No way! A sturdy pilot would say, “My number one job is to keep you safe and right now, I’m seeing rough conditions and we need to change course. I know that’s inconvenient for all of you and I get that. Here’s what’s going to happen...”

Similarly, you need to give yourself permission to change screen time limits, take away a phone for a period of time, or remove apps or games you had previously approved—not out of spite or power, out of love and protection. You’re the parent. You’re the sturdy pilot.

Setting boundaries while staying connected to a child is the essence of “sturdy leadership”; this is the same model that’s effective in the workplace or on a sports team - a leader who can stay true to their principles and who cares about other people’s feelings without being taken over by them.

You can care about your kid’s feelings around these changes *and* you don’t need your kid’s approval, because—this idea should sound familiar by now!—*your job is to keep them safe, not happy.*

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN DAY-TO-DAY LIFE?

Before you hand over a device or set a boundary, remind yourself:

“I have the right to change these rules whenever I need to for my kid’s safety.”

Prepare your kid for flexibility, too:

“I want to remind you that just like anything else in life, this will be an ongoing conversation and boundaries might change. The version of a phone/game/app you’re getting today isn’t necessarily what it will look like in a few weeks or months or years.”

When it's time to change a boundary or rule, communicate it directly and honestly. For younger kids, you might say:

"We need to change some things about how we use screens in our family. I know this isn't fun to hear, and I know it's important to keep you safe."

For tweens and teens, you'll want to share more details:

"I've learned some new things about [specific app or behavior], and I'm going to change phone rules. I know this is frustrating and I know it's important for your safety. I get that this feels annoying to you and will take some time to get used to."

4. Competence is the Antidote to Anxiety

WHY THIS MATTERS

As Jonathan Haidt writes in *The Anxious Generation*, we are under protecting our kids online and overprotecting our kids in the real world. In other words: our kids need more protection online (hence our focus right here, in this guide, on boundaries!) *and* our kids need more freedom in the real world. After all, a key protective factor for kids - and a factor that counteracts anxiety - is feeling competent and capable. And competence is only developed as kids watch themselves navigate challenges, struggle, try things on their own, and eventually figure things out. In fact, when we "rescue" our kids by stepping in too fast and doing things for them that they can do for themselves, we end up building our child's anxiety and fragility, because our kids never experience themselves as capable of coping and getting through tricky experiences.

Think about it this way: the world is full of bumps and twists. If, during childhood, we are constantly "smoothing" over the road for our kid, then we actually make our kid *more fearful* of the natural ups and downs of life. Does this mean we should just release our kids into the wild without any oversight? Of course not. There's always a better answer than two extremes. It does mean we need to let

our kids figure things out, let our kids struggle, let our kids take manageable risks, let our kids have more freedom, and let our kids experience hard moments - because this is the only way our kids can discover their internal competence and capability. We want to prepare our kids for the road, not the road for our kids.

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN DAY-TO-DAY LIFE?

Right now, think about one thing you are doing for your child that you can empower them to do for themselves. This could be anything from clearing their plate every night to folding laundry to checking in when they arrive at a doctor's appointment to doing grocery shopping for the family to walking, on their own, to a friend's house.

It's completely normal if your first reaction is some discomfort - you might even think, "My kid is going to give me a hard time if I ask them to do that on their own" or you might feel nervous about giving your child more freedom. Here's what's important to know: our own discomfort is a sign we're doing something *new* - not something wrong. And so if you're thinking about allowing your child to develop more responsibility and capability, then it makes sense to feel uncomfortable - and it makes sense your child will feel uncomfortable too, which is why they'll push back.

How can you push past some of this discomfort? Well, first remind yourself that you're not optimizing for your child's short-term comfort, you're optimizing for your child's long-term resilience. Remind yourself that we can't expect our child to deal with adversity if they've never experienced any adversity. Remind yourself that your child's discomfort in trying something new is, actually, kind of the point - we want to help our kids feel more comfortable with discomfort which means learning to tolerate discomfort, not escape from it.

Next, we want to communicate with our kids from a place of *believing in them*, not *frustration or criticism*. So first, ditch phrases like, "Come on, you're old enough to do this" and "This is insane, a kid of your age shouldn't complain when I ask you to do something so basic!" and instead share things like, "I know you're capable of learning to fold laundry - you're right, it's not easy, and as you practice you'll get better" and "You're right, this is new and new things always feel tricky at first. I know you're a kid who can wrestle through that." Second, pick

one specific challenge where your child can experience themselves as capable and independent. Some examples: “I’ve tended to reach out to your coach when you’re running late to practice, and I realized that this is something you can manage on your own. Starting today, I see that as your responsibility, as you’re definitely capable of texting on your own!” or “I wrote a small list of items for the store and today I want to wait in the car while you go in and grab them on your own. I know this is something you haven’t done before, and I also know you’re a capable kid who can take on that responsibility.”

5. Take Collective Action

WHY THIS MATTERS

Collective action is the idea of collaborating with other parents to turn *individual family action* into *community action*. Connecting with other families often makes things easier—for us and our kids.

After all: If your kid is the only one without a certain device or app, that’s legitimately tough for them! There’s no denying they’ll miss out on certain conversations or experiences that are shaping their social circle. Now consider this: What if you got together with their friends or classmates’ parents and collectively decided to wait or enforce the same limits? Now, you’re not only insulating your child from the hard parts of being “the only one”—you’re also creating new social norms.

In addition, challenging your kid to take on more responsibility and act with more independence will be easier if there are other families similarly invested in their child’s competence and freedom.

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN DAY-TO-DAY LIFE?

What gets in the way of collective action? We’re often worried we might sound judgmental (or feel judged ourselves!), so we end up avoiding certain conversations all together. Here’s the thing: if there’s a tricky topic - like phones, screens, or how much freedom to give your child - then it’s likely that almost every parent is struggling with how to navigate it. And while parenting our kids will never be *easy*, our struggles always feel easier when we have community support.

Here are some scripts to start conversations about screens in a non-judgmental way:

“Hey, I’ve been thinking a lot about screen time and social media. And about how awesome it would be for some parents to come together and see if there are things we’re all doing that we wish we weren’t or any shifts we’d want to make together.”

“I’m thinking of getting a few parents together to talk about it. No judgment, no morality, just chatting about what’s on our minds. Do you want to join?”

Once you’re gathered for a conversation, remind everyone:

“The goal here isn’t to judge or compete. It’s to see if we have similar concerns and if there are shifts we want to make that would work for all of us. Collective action, even with small changes, makes a big difference!”

Every group will be different, and suggestions might range:

“Wow, amazing, we all agree on no phones at the dinner table!”

“So we are all saying we’re waiting at least til high school before we give a smartphone—and we’ll check in again in 6 months to see how everyone is doing.”

Here is a script to start a conversation about increased freedom and independence:

“Another thing I’ve been thinking about is how to ensure our kids feel less anxious and more capable - and I know that this comes from helping our kids take on tasks that we have traditionally done for them. Would you all be interested in setting up small challenges, in a way, for our kids to build their sense of competence?”

Every group will be different, and suggestions might range:

“Ok, so we all are going to empower our kids to do grocery shopping for the family this weekend. Amazing. I think it’ll be so much easier for our kids to start doing these things knowing that their friends have the same challenge!”

Thinking “I don’t really have another parent or group of parents to talk to”? We’ve got you. That’s exactly why we created a private, safe community within the Good Inside App—a place with no judgment or shame, just support from parents in the trenches with you.

You did it.

You just spent precious time and energy thinking about how to replace anxiety with resilience and confidence. Wow! We really mean this, your kid is lucky to have you as a parent. Take a moment to acknowledge yourself: “This is hard work and I am doing it.”

Looking to bring these ideas to life and get reminders of what to do when? Check out the Good Inside App—your 24/7 parenting coach. You can get personalized, age-based support (that takes less than 5 minutes a day!) and a Good Inside Chatbot to answer your in-the-moment questions. From screen time to phones to everything else, the Good Inside App helps take the guesswork out of parenting.

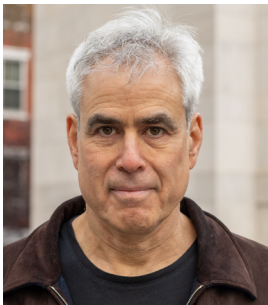
Scan the QR code below, or head to goodinside.com to learn more.





About Dr. Becky and Good Inside

Dr. Becky Kennedy is the visionary founder and CEO of Good Inside, a transformative global parenting movement that disrupts conventional parenting practices by empowering parents to become sturdy, confident leaders and raise sturdy, confident kids. Good Inside currently has members across more than 100 countries and millions of followers across social media platforms, including nearly 3M followers on Instagram alone. In August 2024, Good Inside released a first-of-its-kind mobile app that serves as a “24/7 parenting coach,” offering personalized, age-based support and an AI Chatbot trained on Dr. Becky’s entire library of content. Dr. Becky’s impact extends beyond the digital realm with her #1 New York Times bestselling book *Good Inside: A Guide to Becoming the Parent You Want to Be*, a chart-topping podcast, a popular TED talk on the power of repair, and an upcoming children’s book.



About Jonathan Haidt and The Anxious Generation

Jonathan Haidt is a social psychologist at NYU’s Stern School of Business and author of NYT’s bestsellers *The Happiness Hypothesis* (2006), *The Righteous Mind* (2012), *The Coddling of the American Mind* (2018, with Greg Lukianoff), and most recently *The Anxious Generation* (2024). Alarmed by the rates of anxiety and depression in adolescents, Haidt wrote *The Anxious Generation*, which diagnoses two interlocking changes to childhood since 2010: the loss of the play-based childhood and the rise of the phone-based childhood. Haidt also offers clear, actionable solutions for parents, schools, tech leaders, and policymakers. On the heels of this book debut, Haidt has launched a three-year campaign to raise awareness and inspire collective action. TAG is focused on supporting parents in delaying smartphone and social media use until 16, helping schools go phone-free, inspiring policy and technology change, and reigniting play and independence in childhood.



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