Could helicopter parenting and a decline in 'free play' be causing the youth mental health crisis?

Boston College professor Peter Gray says screen time is less of a problem than people think.

By **Adam Piore** Globe Staff, Updated April 22, 2024, 7:49 a.m.

Boston College professor Peter Gray posed for a portrait at Waites Mill Park in Millis. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

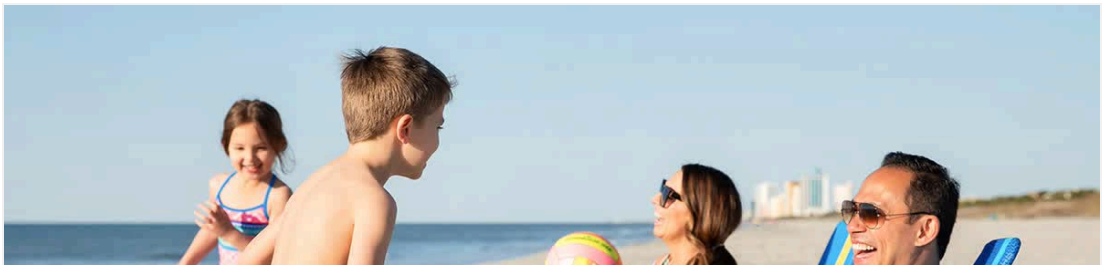
When Peter Gray remarried and became a stepfather to two small children in the early aughts, he made a discovery that surprised him. Most children were no longer allowed to play outdoors on their own.

The Boston College evolutionary biologist soon noticed other changes that highlighted just how much childhood had transformed since his first son, Scott, graduated from high school in the late 1980s. Once they entered elementary school, his stepchildren spent more time in the classroom and on homework at younger ages. Their after-school hours were overscheduled with adult-supervised sports and activities.

Even before smartphones ushered in the age of the modern “screenager,” it seemed to him, unstructured play time — a staple of most childhoods since the dawn of humanity — had almost completely disappeared.

“The nature of childhood itself was changing,” he said. “And changing profoundly.”

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, as public attention has focused on the teen mental health crisis, experts and commentators have increasingly linked soaring rates of anxiety, depression, and suicides to the rise of smartphones and social media. Gray has emerged in recent years as a leading advocate for an alternative theory that is quietly gaining ground among experts. Could the disappearance of free play, and not teenagers’s obsessions with their phones, be the key factor driving the teen mental health crisis?



In a recent paper, published in *the Journal of Pediatrics* late last year, Gray and his colleagues made the case by drawing from a voluminous body of evidence spanning developmental psychology, neuroscience, evolutionary biology, and other fields. While it may be true that the prevalence of anxiety, depression, and suicide among children and teenagers appears to have risen in tandem with the use of smartphones and social media, they concluded that teen and child mental health has actually been on the decline for at least five decades. That period coincides with the decline in opportunities "for children and teens to play, roam, and engage in other activities independent of direct oversight and control by adults," they wrote.

"Everything that I know about play suggests that if you take play away from children, there's going to be negative consequences," said Gray, whose 2013 book *Free to Learn,* argued that free play is the primary means by which children develop resilience.

In 2019, nearly one in five children between the ages of 3 and 17 in the United States had a diagnosed mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral disorder, up by more than 40 percent since 2009, according to a 2021 Surgeon General advisory. Between 2008 and 2020, the rates of death by suicide for Americans between the ages of 12 and 17 rose by 70 percent.

In the fall of 2021, the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and Children's Hospital Association issued a joint statement declaring child and adolescent mental health a "national emergency." Soon after, US Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy issued a rare public health advisory, calling youth mental health "the defining public health issue of our time."

But the surgeon general has blamed the crisis on social media and on the amount of time children and adolescents spend online. Those links are also one of the key takeaways from *"The Anxious Generation,"* a recently published bestseller by NYU social psychologist Jonathan Haidt. In his book, Haidt, a longtime Gray collaborator, also laments the decline of the "play-based childhood." He chronicles its replacement with a "phone-based childhood" and details what he calls a "great rewiring," a state of affairs that is interfering with the healthy social and neurological development of the nation's children and fueling an epidemic of addiction, loneliness, attention fragmentation and mental illness.

Gray said he read early copies of Haidt's book and urged him, unsuccessfully, to change its focus.

Gray argues screens may have actually helped to attenuate the negative affects of the decline in free play on youth mental well-being. He suggests the rise of collaborative online gaming in the early 2000s coincided with a temporary reversal in the rate of youth mental health problems. (He believes the wide adoption of standardized testing, the common core, and other changes in American schools caused the number to rise once again).

"My objection to the book is that it feeds into everybody's prejudice," Gray said. "It doesn't matter that he says it's play also, because that's not what people are going to pay attention to with this book. The first chapters are all on social media. That's what's going to resonate. The book is selling because of the screens."

Haidt did not respond to a request for comment.

Swings hang empty at Waites Mill Park in Millis. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

Lenore Skenazy, president of Let Grow, a New York-based nonprofit that bills itself as leading the "movement for childhood independence," has been listening to Gray and Haidt debate the relative merits and drawbacks of video games for months, and her opinion falls somewhere in between. But she, too, worries that Haidt's message about play is not getting the attention it deserves in media coverage of the book.

"You can't just take phones away," she said. "You have to give kids back what we have taken out of their lives, which is the autonomy to be part of the world without constant supervision."

Skenazy, a New York-based journalist and the author of the book *"Free Range Kids,"* rose to national prominence in 2009, when she penned a viral column announcing that she had left her nine-year-old son alone in Bloomingdales and allowed him to make his way home alone on the bus and subway. She teamed up with Gray; Haidt, who had previously written on the psychological fragility of college students; and investor turned

philanthropist and campus free speech advocate Dan Shuchman to form the nonprofit in 2017.

The organization has been working with schools around the nation to form "free play clubs" that allow children to play uninhibited and without phones before or after school. It has also been lobbying state legislators to pass laws aimed at promoting what it calls "reasonable childhood independence," by protecting parents against neglect and criminal charges for allowing children to travel to or from school or nearby locations by bicycle or on foot, playing outdoors, or remaining at home alone for a "reasonable" amount of time. Eight states —including Utah, Oklahoma, Texas, Colorado, Virginia, Illinois, Connecticut, and Montana — have since passed such laws.

A growing body of evidence has emerged from scientific labs in recent years suggesting that "free" play isn't just fun, it's a crucial tool for normal development. One hint of its evolutionary importance is its universality. Scientists have observed play, which can be defined as purposeless activity engaged in purely for fun, in dogs, cats, monkeys, crocodiles, bears, fish — even spiders and bumblebees. Play, they have shown, allows developing animals to experiment with new capabilities, to improvise. and test their limits and abilities in a safe, protected environment. In humans, it allows children to use their imagination, express their creativity, and learn to deal with and respond to the unexpected.

Peer-to-peer play is also important for socialization. It's how, Marc Bekoff, a professor of ecology and evolutionary biology at the University of Colorado, Boulder, puts it, animals "learn how to behave like a card-carrying member of their species." Play may even be crucial to shaping the developing brain, by strengthening neurons that are important and "pruning" the ones that are unused. In one recent Canadian study. researchers showed that the brains of rats that were reared without play experienced far less pruning in areas of the brain essential for executive functions such as emotional regulation, sociability, motivation, and cognitive processing. In later years, they lacked impulse control and were unable to respond appropriately to potential mates.

Peter Gray photographed at his home. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

To make the case for play clubs, Gray helped design a systematic research study that is being run by Jessica Black, a professor at the Boston College School of Social Work, in elementary schools across New Hampshire. Selected schools have committed to establishing a “play club,” offering an hour of free play to children in kindergarten through fifth grade either before or after school. The children who participate will undergo a wide variety of psychological tests designed to measure psychological well-being, and other metrics. Their outcomes will be compared with a control group of schools without it.

“Play is how children naturally develop,” Gray said. “It’s how they learn to push the limits and deal with fear, to solve problems, and to deal with anger and get along with playmates. Take it away, and they’re just not going to be prepared for the stresses of life.”

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