

The Anxious Generators:

Moral Panic, Medium Blindness, and the Children the Evidence Forgot

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ABSTRACT

For two generations a recurring movement has warned that a new medium is harming the young, and the current version, organized around Jonathan Haidt's *The Anxious Generation*, holds that smartphones and now artificial intelligence are damaging children and that the remedy is to restrict access by age. This paper argues that the movement is wrong, and wrong in a way that is general rather than special. The four harms the movement attributes to the medium, namely social deprivation, sleep disruption, attention fragmentation, and addiction, are on inspection properties of content, design, social dynamics, and governance rather than of the device, and the strongest empirical work finds the association between screen use and well being to be real but so small that ordinary and harmless variables show effects of comparable size. This holds for every user, child or adult, disabled or not, because the medium is a delivery surface and the valence lives in what is delivered. The paper situates the present alarm in a pattern that runs from Socrates through the novel, the radio, and the television, in which both the recurrence and the predictable fade are diagnostic, and it notes that the movement's own intellectual leadership reversed itself, moving from a warning against overprotecting children to a program of restriction. It then turns to a part of the case the movement does not account for, that the frightening aggregate is in part manufactured by removing disabled children from the count, including by the published design of the assessments cited in legislative testimony, that the prescribed age restriction strips a legally mandated accommodation from the children who depend on the device most, and that the exception the movement grants for disabled children is fatal to its own universal claim while revealing an ontology its holders would disavow. The argument is built to outlast its occasion and to apply to the next medium the pattern will fear.

Keywords: moral panic, screen time, medium theory, design, disability, Section 504, assistive technology, artificial intelligence, children

I. INTRODUCTION

A claim has organized itself into a movement. The claim is that screens, and now the artificial intelligence systems that run on them, are harmful to children, and that the appropriate response is to keep children away from the device until some threshold age. The movement has a canonical text in Jonathan Haidt's *The Anxious Generation* (Haidt, 2024), which argues that a shift from a play based childhood to a phone based childhood between roughly 2010 and 2015 is the primary cause of a crisis of anxiety, depression, self harm, and suicide among adolescents, and especially

among girls. The book has been an unusually effective instrument of policy. It is cited in legislative hearings, and it stands behind the wave of age based restrictions now moving through national parliaments and American statehouses, including Australia's ban on social media for users under sixteen.

This paper argues that the movement is wrong, and the heart of the error is general rather than special. The four harms the movement attributes to the medium, social deprivation, sleep disruption, attention fragmentation, and addiction, are on inspection properties of content, design, social dynamics, and governance, not of the device. The strongest empirical work in the area finds the association between screen use and well being to be real, negative, and so small that ordinary and plainly harmless variables show associations of comparable magnitude. None of this is a claim about children in particular. It is a claim about a medium. A screen is a delivery surface, and the same surface carries a reading lesson, a synthesized voice, and an engagement loop built to keep a user scrolling. The valence lives in what is delivered, which means the refutation of the four harms reaches every user the same way, child or adult, disabled or not.

The alarm is also not new, and the novelty it claims for itself is itself a recurring feature of the pattern. The fear that a new medium is rewiring the young runs from Plato's complaint against writing through the novel, the radio, and the television, and in each prior instance both the panic and its eventual fade followed the same shape. A claim that arrives in the exact form that has been wrong at every previous threshold inherits a burden it has not discharged.

There is a further part of the case, and it is where the paper makes its sharpest contribution, but it is a part rather than the frame. The frightening aggregate the movement relies on is in part manufactured by removing disabled children from the sample before the counting begins, including by the published design of the international assessments most often invoked in testimony. The age restriction the movement prescribes strips a legally mandated accommodation from a large population of children for whom the screen and the system running on it are assistive technology rather than entertainment. And when proponents are pressed on that population, they grant an exception, which turns out to be fatal, because a universal claim cannot survive a justified exception and because the structure of the exception is intelligible only if disabled children were never fully inside the category of children to begin with. That exception does double work in this paper. It exposes an ontology, and it also supplies the cleanest single proof of the neutrality the rest of the argument establishes, because to grant that the device is good for some children is to concede that the device was never the variable.

Two premises run underneath the argument and are stated here rather than defended at length, because each has been developed elsewhere and is treated here as settled ground. The first is that the locus of harm in a communications technology is its content and its design, not the medium that carries them. The second, which the later disability section relies on, is that disabled people have been engaged with, across the modern period, in ways that did not register them as full persons by significant portions of the communities they lived among, a treatment whose institutional record is extensive and whose legal correction is recent.

A reader may object that the novel contribution here is the disability case, and that the broader claim of medium neutrality is too general to carry a paper on its own. The objection inverts the structure of the argument. That restrictions fall hardest on disabled children is the familiar half, and on its own it reads as a plea for an exception, a carve out from a rule everyone else accepts. The neutrality of the medium is what turns the exception into a refutation. If the four harms live in content, design, social dynamics, and governance rather than in the screen, then the case for restricting any child rests on a mistake about where the harm is, and the disabled child is not a separate and narrower argument but the cleanest place to see the mistake, because there the cost of the restriction is plainest and the benefit of the tool is most clearly a right rather than a preference. The breadth is not a weakness to be trimmed back toward the disability case. It is the premise the disability case rests on, and removing it would leave that case standing on nothing.

The structure is as follows. Section II places the present panic inside the recurring historical pattern and argues that both the recurrence and the predictable fade are diagnostic. Section III examines what the empirical literature actually

shows about screens and well being. Section IV decomposes the four harms into properties of content, design, social dynamics, and governance. Section V turns to the population the movement does not count, developing the deletion of disabled children from the evidence, the accommodation the prescription would strip, the carve out that refutes the universal claim, and the concept of the child the movement operates with, which fails both established senses of childism. Section VI contrasts the prohibition reflex with the education and harm reduction approach that has a record of working. Section VII concludes.

II. THE RECURRING PANIC

The fear that a new medium is damaging the young is among the most reliably recurring anxieties in the historical record, and the present version is the latest entry in a sequence that is older than print. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato has Socrates warn that writing will produce forgetfulness in the souls of those who learn it, because they will cease to exercise memory and will rely instead on external marks (Plato, 1995). The complaint is exact in its structure. A new technology for storing and transmitting thought is said to atrophy the natural faculty it supplements, and the young who adopt it are said to be the casualties.

The same complaint recurs, with the medium swapped, at every subsequent technological threshold. The novel was charged with corrupting the morals and attention of young women. The radio was charged with breaking up the family evening and colonizing the child's imagination. The television drew the most developed version of the modern form, including the epithet that called it the boob tube and Newton Minow's 1961 description of American broadcasting as a vast wasteland (Minow, 1961). The video game inherited the charge in turn. Each of these media was, in its moment, the device that was rewiring childhood, and in each case the rewiring language carried the same certainty that now attaches to the smartphone and is beginning to attach to artificial intelligence.

Sociology has a name for this and a literature that anatomizes it. Stanley Cohen's account of the folk devil and the moral panic describes the cycle by which a condition, episode, or group is defined as a threat to societal values, presented in a stylized and amplified form, and met with a response disproportionate to the demonstrated harm (Cohen, 1972). Frank Furedi's work on parental anxiety describes the specific modern form in which the management of imagined risk to children becomes a constant and escalating demand (Furedi, 2001). David Finkelhor named the generational version of the pattern juvenoia, the exaggerated fear about the influence of social change on children and youth (Finkelhor, 2011). The pattern is not a discovery of the present paper. It is a documented regularity, and the present movement fits it closely enough that a recent review situates *The Anxious Generation* directly within the lineage that runs from the delinquency panics of the 1930s through the rock music panic of the 1950s and 1960s to the media consumption panics of the 1970s and 1980s (Warakaulle, 2024).

A. *The Tell of the Fade*

The recurrence is the first diagnostic. The fade is the second. In each prior cycle, the medium that was going to ruin a generation was absorbed into ordinary life, the panic subsided, and the generation that had been the object of concern grew up to raise its own children and, with remarkable consistency, to fear the next medium on the same terms it had once been feared on. The adults who were told that television would rot their minds became the adults who told their children that video games would rot theirs. The pattern includes its own forgetting. Each cohort experiences its panic as unprecedented, which is precisely what every preceding cohort also experienced.

This does not prove that the present concern is empty. A pattern of false alarms does not entail that the current alarm is false, and it would be a fallacy to argue that it does. What the pattern establishes is a prior. When a claim arrives in the exact form that has been wrong at every previous instance, the claim inherits a burden of proof that the

next two sections show it has not discharged.

B. The Movement Against Itself

There is a smaller irony worth recording, because it sits inside the movement's own intellectual leadership. Six years before *The Anxious Generation*, the same lead author argued, in *The Coddling of the American Mind*, that the central danger to young people was overprotection, the well meaning removal of risk, friction, and independence that left a generation fragile (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). The remedy proposed there was less shelter and more exposure to manageable difficulty. The later book turns the wheel the other way and prescribes a new and sweeping shelter, the removal of a tool, enforced by age. A program that begins by warning against overprotecting children and arrives at a campaign to restrict what they may use has traveled toward the very posture it set out to criticize, and the tension is not resolved in the later text so much as left unremarked.

III. WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS, AND DOES NOT

The empirical core of the case is considerably weaker than the rhetoric built upon it. The most rigorous work in the area, conducted on large and nationally representative samples with transparent analytic methods, finds associations between digital technology use and adolescent well being that are real, negative, and extremely small. In a specification curve analysis of three large datasets, Orben and Przybylski found that the association between technology use and well being was so slight that ordinary and plainly harmless variables, including wearing eyeglasses and eating potatoes, showed associations of comparable magnitude (Orben & Przybylski, 2019a). The point is not that the association is nonexistent. The point is that it is the size of effects that nobody legislates against.

The magnitude becomes vivid when it is translated into the units a parent or a lawmaker would actually use. In a study built on three nationally representative time use diary datasets, Orben and Przybylski estimated that an adolescent would need to report roughly sixty-three hours and thirty-one minutes of additional technology use per day, against the median effect, to lower well being by half of a standard deviation, the magnitude at which a person would begin to notice a difference at all. Even on the single specification that produced the largest effect, the figure was still more than eleven hours per day (Orben & Przybylski, 2019b). A claim that cannot move the outcome it names without more hours in the day than the day contains is not a claim about a dose. This is what media effects researchers mean when they insist on a smallest effect size worth caring about, below which a statistically detectable association carries no practical significance (Ferguson, 2009).

Sleep is the harm most often asserted with confidence, and it dissolves under the same measurement. Examining the United Kingdom Millennium Cohort, Przybylski and Orben found that each additional hour of screen engagement across the day was associated with roughly nine minutes less sleep on weekdays and three minutes on weekends, and that using a screen in the thirty minutes before bed was associated with about one minute less sleep (Przybylski & Orben, 2020). One minute is not a public health emergency. It is a rounding error wearing the costume of one.

There is a serious dispute in this literature, and honesty requires naming it. A prominent line of work argues that the small average conceals a real and rising harm concentrated among heavy users and among girls, and that comparing well being across levels of use is more informative than the variance a single coefficient explains (Twenge, 2019). This is the strongest version of the case for the medium, and it is not frivolous. But even its proponents are arguing about the interpretation of effects that the measurement keeps returning as small, and two structural problems sit underneath the entire dispute and cut against the alarmed reading.

The first structural problem is measurement. The dominant instrument in this field is retrospective self report, in which a person estimates how much time they spent on a screen. The evidence that people cannot do this accurately is

overwhelming, and the inaccuracy is not random. Heavy users tend to underestimate and light users tend to overestimate, which biases the very comparisons the alarmed reading depends on (Orben & Przybylski, 2019b; Przybylski & Orben, 2020). The second structural problem is conceptual, and it is the one that organizes this paper. The search for a single number linking screen time to outcomes was, as Orben has argued directly, a search for a value that does not exist, because the relevant variable was never the quantity of exposure (Orben, 2021). The shape of the relationship was always more like the Goldilocks pattern in which moderate use sits slightly higher than either abstention or saturation, which is not the shape of a poison (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017). A recent analysis makes the point in the affirmative. When researchers examined not the total quantity of screen time but the sequence of activities in which it was embedded, the apparent effects of screen time largely disappeared once total time was accounted for, and what mattered was the composition of the day rather than the count of the hours (Chan, Cheung, & Choy, 2025). The point is not confined to the skeptics of the alarm. Writing in *JAMA Pediatrics*, researchers more sympathetic to the worry about screens state the same proposition plainly, that measuring screen time alone is insufficient to understand its effects, and that what a young person is viewing and what the time displaces are the factors that matter (Christakis, Mathew, & Reichenberger, 2025). The dose was the wrong question. The content and the arrangement were the right ones, which is the case made at book length by critics who have reviewed the same evidence and concluded that the science does not support the alarm (Etchells, 2024; Dienlin, 2024).

A. The One Real Harm, and Why It Is Not the Screen's

Honesty about the evidence requires conceding what the evidence supports, and there is one physical harm that the screen genuinely carries. Sustained near focus is associated with the development of myopia, the nearsightedness that has risen sharply among children over recent decades, and screens are one of the activities through which children now spend long stretches focused on something close to their eyes. An argument that denied this would be committing in the other direction the error this paper criticizes, asserting a conclusion the measurement does not support. The concession is granted without reservation.

Two things about it matter, and together they return the one real harm to the argument rather than against it. The first is that myopia is not a harm of the screen. It is a harm of near focus and of insufficient time outdoors in daylight, and the literature is consistent on the point. The risk factor is intensive close work and the protective factor is time spent outside in bright light, with the evidence pointing to daylight exposure rather than to any particular object held in front of the eyes (Zhou & Bai, 2023; Hobday, Aarts, & Cajochen, 2025). The same body of work finds that children who read large amounts of printed text are likelier to become nearsighted, which is the printed book producing the identical harm, and that the association between intensive study and myopia predates the screen by centuries. Johannes Kepler recorded the link between close study and nearsightedness in students four hundred years ago, before any screen existed (Hobday, Aarts, & Cajochen, 2025). The child who weakens their distance vision reading novels under the covers and the child who does it scrolling are running the same mechanism, close focus displacing daylight, and the remedy, more time outside and breaks from near work, is identical and has nothing to do with withdrawing either the book or the device.

The second is that the severity the evidence does support still does not make this a harm of the screen, and the easy version of the concession, that myopia is mild and fully fixed with a pair of glasses, is itself false. In its advanced forms myopia is not a cosmetic inconvenience. High myopia carries a raised lifetime risk of sight threatening complications, and roughly one in three people with high myopia go on to develop visual impairment as they age (Shah, Vlasak, & Evans, 2024). The condition can be serious, and conceding that changes nothing about where it comes from. The mechanism that produces it, sustained near focus with too little daylight, runs identically through the printed page and was named centuries before any screen existed, as the previous paragraph set out. The strongest physical case the movement can bring is therefore a real and sometimes grave condition that the book produces exactly as well as the

phone, whose remedy is time outside in daylight, and which points at the surface in neither case. Even at the one place the body of evidence will bear a physical harm, the harm is medium neutral.

IV. DISAGGREGATING THE BUNDLE

The strongest form of the position deserves to be stated before it is answered. Haidt does not rest the argument on a single screen. He describes a bundle, a phone based childhood that arrives together with social media, the collapse of unsupervised play, a shift in the timing and texture of adolescence, and a collective action trap in which no parent can hold a child out of the network because every other child is already inside it (Haidt, 2024). Put that way, the claim is not that a rectangle of glass emits harm. It is that a cluster of changes converged on one cohort at one moment, and that the phone is the thread running through all of them. This is a serious argument, and it is not answered by observing that screens are neutral in the abstract, because the bundle is the point.

It is answered by taking the bundle apart. Each strand resolves into one of four things, and none of the four is the medium. Some are matters of content, what is on the screen. Some are matters of design, how the thing is built to hold attention. Some are matters of social dynamics, what happens when a tool becomes the place a peer group lives. And some are matters of governance, the rules and defaults a society sets or fails to set around a powerful technology. Sorting the harms into these four is not a rhetorical move. It is the difference between a problem a ban could fix and a set of problems that bans cannot reach and in several cases make worse.

The canonical case attributes four foundational harms to the phone based childhood, namely social deprivation, sleep deprivation, attention fragmentation, and addiction. Each of these is real as a phenomenon. The claim this section contests is the attribution. In each case the harm is a property of content or of design, and the medium is the surface across which a designed experience or a particular kind of content is delivered. The decomposition matters because it determines what the remedy should target. If the harm lives in the glass, you ban the glass. If the harm lives in the design, you regulate the design, and banning the glass both misses the harm and destroys the benign and necessary uses the glass also carries. Nothing in this section is specific to children. It is an argument about a medium, and it applies to any user.

Social deprivation is displacement. Time spent in one activity is time not spent in another, and a person absorbed in a screen is a person not doing something else. This is true and it is not new. A child absorbed in a novel is also not playing outside, and no one proposed to ban the novel to recover the lost hours of fresh air. Displacement is a property of any sufficiently absorbing activity, and the question of whether a given displacement is harmful turns entirely on what is displaced and what does the displacing, which is to say on content, not on the medium.

The displacement worry reaches its emotional peak in the claim that screens are taking face to face interaction away from children. The claim has a staircase built into it, and every step gives way. The first step says the screen replaces in person contact with something thinner. But the phone was never in person contact, and no one charged the landline with starving children of presence, though the same complaint was leveled when the telephone was new and was said to be replacing the visit. The second step retreats to synchrony and says that at least a phone call happens in real time. Answering machines, voicemail, the message left and returned hours later, the email, the thread at work, all of these are real connection conducted out of time, and they were treated as connection long before the objects now under suspicion existed. The third step is where the argument turns on itself. The one technology that delivers a face, visible and moving and answering in real time, across any distance, is a screen. The device blamed for taking face to face away is the first device in human history to deliver a moving, answering face across any distance to a child who could not otherwise have reached one.

The point is not that a video call equals sitting in the same room, and the evidence assembled here does not claim it.

What the same pane of glass demonstrably carries is the emptiest scroll and the richest conversation alike, so what sets the value of any given contact is the use rather than the device. On the narrower question of whether a screen can carry a genuinely demanding, interactive exchange without inherent loss, the record is now large and lands where the neutrality of the medium predicts. A randomized controlled experiment with 725 students across seven university courses found no statistically significant difference in learning outcomes between in person teaching and live online teaching (Cheung, Lam, Zhang, Kwan, Wat, Zhang, Zhu, Chung, & Yin, 2023). A study that ran all three modes at once, in person, live online, and recorded online, found no statistically significant difference in learning outcomes among them (Porter-Szucs & DeCicco, 2022). A scoping review of 91 comparisons found online instruction at least as effective as in person instruction, and better in a plurality of cases, with the advantage tracing to purpose built content that supported student led inquiry rather than to the delivery mode (Stevens, Bienz, Wali, Condie, & Schismenos, 2021). These are studies of learning, run with adults who chose their mode, and on their own they do not show that mediated sociality substitutes for embodied play or for the particular work of adolescent friendship. They show something narrower and sufficient, that a surface able to carry rigorous interactive instruction without measurable loss does not thin what passes through it by its nature, which is the premise the displacement argument requires. Where a gap does appear it is typically for recorded online instruction taken on its own, the asynchronous mode stripped of any live component, and the work that reports such gaps ties them to how that mode was built and to the missing live instruction rather than to the screen that displays it. The outcome tracks the design, not the medium.

One strand of the social pressure worry does not reduce to content or design, and the argument is stronger for admitting it. Part of why a child feels compelled to be on a platform is simply that everyone else is, and that pressure would exist even if the product carried no engineered hooks at all. The proof is the telephone, which had no infinite feed and no variable reward and still produced an overwhelming sense that a household without one was cut off. This is a network effect, and it has a floor that no amount of better design removes. But the floor is a property of the platform, not of the medium, and that distinction decides the remedy. A network effect attaches to wherever the network happens to be. Ban the device and the pressure does not dissipate, it reconcentrates on whatever the next gathering place turns out to be. The lever that actually reaches a network effect sits at the level of the platform and the rules around it, interoperability so that no single product owns the network, and coordination among the adults and institutions setting the defaults, none of which is a ban on a child holding a screen. The one part of the worry that survives the design analysis still does not survive into a case for prohibition.

A reader steeped in the recent literature on video call fatigue may answer that live online contact carries its own cost, and that literature is real. It does not rescue the displacement claim, and it does not touch the children this paper is most concerned with. For a child whose disability makes leaving the house, or sitting in a crowded room, or processing a fast in person exchange, a barrier rather than a given, the remote channel is not a tiring substitute for presence. It is the only door into the room that exists. The fatigue objection is one made by and for people who can choose either channel, and it cuts hardest against exactly the users for whom the remote channel is the sole means of access rather than a matter of preference. An account of harm that overlooks them repeats the omission this paper has been tracing throughout.

Sleep deprivation, where it occurs, is the grip of content, not the glow of a surface. The mechanism the literature actually finds is not photons but engagement, the one more episode and the one more message that postpone sleep, which is the same mechanism as the one more chapter that has kept readers awake for as long as there have been books. The relevant variable is whether the content is built to resist being put down, and that is a design property of the content, not a property of the screen, which displays a sleep meditation and a slot machine with equal indifference.

Attention fragmentation is the format of the content, not the device that renders it. A person can spend two hours in a single sustained experience on a screen, following a long film or a complex game that demands continuous attention, and a person can spend two hours on the same screen in two hundred fragments of short video. The screen is identical

across those two cases. What differs is the format of what is delivered, and format is a content and design decision made by the people who build and tune the feed.

Addiction is the clearest case, because the mechanism is named in the indictment itself. The pattern the alarmed literature describes, the intermittent and variable reward that keeps a user returning, is not an emergent property of glass and silicon. It is a design pattern, deliberately engineered, drawn from the psychology of reinforcement and implemented in the recommendation and notification systems that decide what appears and when. The phone did not buzz. A company decided that it would buzz, and decided how often, and decided what would be on the other side of the buzz. To call this a harm of the medium is to address the designer's choice to the object the designer chose, which is precisely the error this paper is naming.

A. Digital Dementia as Medium Blindness in Miniature

The tendency to locate in the device a harm that lives elsewhere reaches its purest form in the phrase digital dementia. The term was coined by the German neuroscientist Manfred Spitzer in a 2012 book, and it has circulated widely enough to appear in policy adjacent discourse as though it named a condition (Spitzer, 2012). It does not. Digital dementia is not a recognized diagnosis and appears in no diagnostic manual, a point conceded even in the popular health literature that repeats the term. The phrase is also self refuting on inspection. Dementia names a degenerative and substantially irreversible loss of cognitive function. The phenomena that digital dementia actually points to, a memory process under practiced because it has been offloaded, an attention span shaped by the content one consumes, are by the proponents' own account reversible by changing the behavior. A condition that resolves when you change what you do was never dementia. It was a habit, described in a borrowed and frightening word. The word does the work that the medium blind argument always does, which is to dress a question about content and use in the language of organic catastrophe and attach it to the device.

V. THE CHILDREN THE EVIDENCE FORGOT

The argument to this point is general. The medium is neutral, the evidence is weak, and the harms attributed to the device are properties of content, design, social dynamics, and governance for every user. This section turns to a population the movement does not count, and shows that attending to it does not soften the case but sharpens it, at the level of the evidence, of the prescribed remedy, and of the concept of the child the movement is operating with.

A. How the Frightening Number Gets Manufactured

If the average is small, the alarmed case needs a frightening number, and there is a reliable way to manufacture one. You remove the children whose presence would complicate the story, and then you report the diluted remainder as though it described everyone.

The international assessment most often invoked in testimony about declining youth outcomes does this by published design. The Programme for International Student Assessment, administered by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, sets technical standards that permit national centres to exclude up to five percent of the target population overall and up to two and a half percent within schools, with the categories of permitted exclusion including students with functional disabilities and students with cognitive, behavioural, or emotional disabilities (OECD, 2020, 2024). Special schools for students with disabilities are excluded at the school level before sampling even begins (LeRoy, Samuel, Deluca, & Evans, 2018). The OECD's own mapping study concedes the consequence plainly. Because the assessment has offered only limited accommodations for students with special education needs, some of those students are excluded from the target population at the sampling stage, and in a number of countries the exclusion rate

is growing as more students are recognized as having disabilities that would require accommodation (OECD, 2024). Researchers who have studied the practice over multiple cycles have documented both the lack of transparency in the reporting and the resulting opportunity for countries to improve their apparent standing by adjusting whom they exclude (LeRoy, Samuel, Deluca, & Evans, 2018).

The mechanism deserves to be stated without euphemism. The assessment that is cited as evidence of a generational decline is built on a sample from which disabled children have been removed, by rule, in advance. The diluted leftover is then carried into a legislative hearing and presented as the condition of children, full stop. The disabled child is twice disappeared, first from the count and then from the conclusion, and the policy that follows is written as though that child did not exist.

This is not a hypothetical. In January 2026, Dr. Jared Cooney Horvath, an educational neuroscientist and the author of a book contending that classroom technology harms learning, testified before the United States Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation that two decades of expanding educational technology had coincided with a stalling and reversal of children's cognitive development (Horvath, 2026). His written testimony rests substantially on international assessments, citing the Programme for International Student Assessment, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study as converging evidence that classroom screens track weaker outcomes. These are precisely the instruments that remove students with disabilities by their published technical standards. Beyond a single recentered row in an effect size table, students with disabilities do not appear in the testimony, and the exclusion built into the assessments it relies on is nowhere noted.

The same testimony shows how a positive result for these children is made to vanish even when it is sitting in the data. Horvath's table of meta analytic effect sizes is recentered by subtracting the average effect of ordinary classroom instruction, a value he gives as approximately 0.42. In that table, the row for students with learning disorders carries a recentered value of +0.05, which means the underlying effect size, before the subtraction, was approximately +0.47, one of the largest positive effects anywhere in his own table and larger than the value he reports for general learning. The subtraction sinks it to the floor. The benchmark being subtracted is the average mainstream classroom, which silently changes the question from whether the tool helps the child relative to having no tool, the only question an accommodation exists to answer, into whether the child's assistive technology outperforms the typical classroom. His own unadjusted number says the tool helps these children substantially, and his method removes that finding from view before the reader reaches it.

What follows is a dilemma, and it is put as one because the alternative, an allegation of intent, is neither provable nor needed. Either the testimony omitted a material limitation in the assessments it relied on, the exclusion of the very population in which the effect runs the other way, or it relied on those assessments without attending to how they are built. Neither reading can ground a blanket conclusion about all children, and neither requires any claim about the witness. The structure of the testimony does the work. It offers evidence about children in general that was assembled by removing, or rendering invisible, the children for whom the conclusion is false.

The number that frightens, then, is built on assessments that were never measuring the children most affected, and a witness can carry that number into a hearing room without ever telling the room who was left out of it.

B. Need, Not Want

The general argument treated the screen and the system as things people want and are entitled to want. The stronger fact, for a large population of children, is that the screen and the system are things people need, and need in a sense the law recognizes. Screens have been the delivery surface for assistive technology for decades, carrying the augmentative and alternative communication application that gives a nonverbal child a voice, the screen reader and the text to speech

engine that give a blind or dyslexic child access to print, the symbol board and the predictive keyboard that make written language reachable. Artificial intelligence is now moving into the same role, providing live captioning, communication support, and reading assistance that extend what these surfaces can do.

This changes the legal register, and the change is decisive. A want is a preference, and a preference can be overridden by a sufficiently good reason. An accommodation is a right. Under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act, a qualified individual with a disability is entitled to the auxiliary aids and reasonable accommodations that provide meaningful access (Alexander v. Choate, 1985), and a screen running assistive software is, for many children, exactly that. A blanket prohibition on screens or on artificial intelligence for minors therefore does not merely inconvenience a population of users who would prefer to keep their devices. It withdraws a legally mandated accommodation from the children who depend on it most, which is not a regrettable side effect of an otherwise sound policy. It lands hardest on the children who gain the most from the tool the policy removes.

The legal point has to be stated with the precision the law actually has, because the claim is not that every age based rule about technology violates a child's rights. A general law setting an age for social media accounts is one thing. A school or a public service that withdraws or forbids the device, software, or connectivity a disabled student relies on, and does so by blanket rule without the individualized assessment that Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act require, is something else, and in that setting a blanket prohibition can shade into unlawful discrimination rather than mere policy. The wrong is specific and situational. It is the denial of an accommodation to a person who is entitled to one, not the existence of an age threshold in the abstract.

C. The Exception That Collapses the Rule

Confronted with the assistive case, the careful proponent does not deny it. To deny it is to tell a nonverbal child that the device through which they speak is harmful, which is monstrous on its face and persuades no one. So the proponent grants an exception. Screens and artificial intelligence are bad for children, the revised claim runs, except for children with disabilities, for whom they are permitted.

That concession is fatal, and it is worth being precise about why. The original claim was universal. It was a claim about screens and about children as such. A universal claim cannot survive a justified exception, because the exception is a counterexample, and a single sound counterexample refutes a universal. The moment the proponent admits that the device is good for some children, the proposition that the device is bad for children has been abandoned, and what remains is the proposition this paper has argued for from the start, that the valence lives in the content and the use rather than in the device. The carve out, in other words, is not only a problem for the movement. It is the cleanest available proof of the paper's central claim, offered by the movement against itself.

There is one escape the proponent will reach for, and it must be closed. The proponent will say that the device is harmful recreationally and helpful therapeutically, on the model of a drug whose street use is dangerous and whose medical use is beneficial. This appears to rescue the claim. It does the opposite. The drug analogy concedes the entire point, because it relocates the harm from the device to the use. A substance that is harmful in one use and helpful in another is a substance whose valence is carried by the use, not by the substance, and to say this of the screen is to say that the screen is neutral and the use is what matters. There is no third door. Deny the exception and you call a child's communication device harmful. Grant the exception on a distinction between recreational and therapeutic use and you have conceded that the device is neutral and the use carries the harm. Either branch refutes the universal claim. The proponent cannot keep the claim and the exception at the same time.

A different retreat remains, and it must be closed as well. Pressed on the exception, the proponent abandons the universal and falls back to a population level claim, holding that screens harm most children rather than all of them, or

that they harm children in ordinary recreational use where no disability is in play. As an empirical matter that retreat may even be defensible, and this paper does not need to contest it. What the retreat cannot do is carry the policy, for two reasons that operate independently. The first is that it concedes the argument of this section outright, because a claim about most children under most conditions is a claim about content, circumstance, and design rather than about the screen, which is the neutrality thesis stated in the proponent's own words. The second does not depend on the neutrality thesis at all. Once the rule at issue is a blanket institutional one, a school or a public service withdrawing the device, software, or connectivity a disabled child relies on, by categorical rule and without the individualized assessment that Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act require, the average child drops out of the analysis. Disability law exists precisely to keep an aggregate from erasing the individual whose access depends on an accommodation. The child who needs a device to speak, to read, to caption, to regulate, or to participate is not answered by the observation that most children would fare better without one. At that point the question is no longer whether restriction helps children on balance. It is whether a covered institution may deny a disabled child meaningful access by removing the tool through which that access is provided, and absent the individualized showing the law requires, the answer is that it may not.

D. The Ontology the Structure Encodes

The collapse of the universal is a logical result. The next move connects this argument to the long history of how disabled people have been treated, and it requires care to state without overreaching.

A genuine universal cannot survive a justified exception. So the fact that the exception feels natural to the proponent, rather than contradictory, is itself a finding. When a person who holds that screens are bad for children encounters the disabled child for whom the screen is good, the logically forced response is to treat that child as a refutation and to abandon or narrow the universal. That is not what happens. The disabled child is filed instead as a separate and managed category, an exception to be permitted rather than a counterexample to be reckoned with. The universal is preserved and the child is set to one side. This is intelligible only on one assumption, which is that the disabled child was never fully inside the category of children over which the universal ranged.

This assumption is not new, and the historical record around it is extensive. Disabled people have been engaged with, across the modern period, as something other than full persons by significant portions of the dominant communities they lived among. The eugenic sterilization the United States Supreme Court authorized in *Buck v. Bell* (1927) proceeded on the premise that certain disabled people were not the kind of persons whose reproduction the polity needed to respect. Custodial institutionalization placed disabled people in facilities on the explicit ground that they could not function as persons in ordinary community life, a practice that continued in the United States into the 1980s (Trent, 2017; Charlton, 1998). When the Americans with Disabilities Act passed in 1990, it did not pass because the dominant perception had shifted to register disabled people as full persons. It passed because organizing made the political cost of withholding legal standing higher than the cost of extending it, and the perception lagged the law (Shapiro, 1993). The carve out is that same ontology, surfacing in a new venue. It is the charity model, which grants the disabled child a dispensation as an act of mercy toward the afflicted, rather than the rights model, which recognizes that the child holds the same claim to a tool as any child because the child is a person in the same sense that any child is a person.

A guardrail belongs here, and it is the guardrail that makes the argument unanswerable rather than dismissible. The claim is not that the people who advocate age based restrictions consciously regard disabled children as less than persons. Most would be appalled by the suggestion, and most believe they are being protective and kind. The claim is structural. The position they hold encodes a view of disabled children that the position's holders would reject if it were named to them. The argument dissects the logic of the exception, not the contents of anyone's conscience, and that is why it cannot be deflected by sincere protest. A person can truthfully say that they did not mean it. They cannot say

that the structure does not say it.

E. Childism, and Why the Movement Fails Both of Its Definitions

The concept of the child the carve out encodes has a name in the scholarship, and naming it sharpens the point rather than softening it. The term is childism, and it carries two distinct meanings the literature has not reconciled. In one usage, associated with Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, childism names a prejudice against children analogous to racism and sexism, including its benevolent and protective forms, the harm done to children in the name of caring for them (Young-Bruehl, 2012). In the other, associated with John Wall, childism is an emancipatory stance modeled on feminism, a correction that takes children's own experience and standpoint seriously instead of imposing an adult construction of childhood upon them (Wall, 2010). The movement to restrict children's screens speaks the language of protection and care, which makes it worth testing against each definition in turn. It fails both.

Under Young-Bruehl's definition, the movement is an instance of the very thing the word condemns, a harm done to a population of children in the name of protecting them, which is the benevolent prejudice the concept was coined to name. Under Wall's definition, the movement does not qualify for the thing the word honors. Wall's childism requires centering children's actual experience, and the movement does the reverse. It legislates from an adult image of the endangered child and never consults the child whose accommodation, or whose only community, the restriction takes away. That is the exact error Wall's account exists to expose, the substitution of an adult construction of childhood for the standpoint of actual children, the same move androcentric thought once made when it treated a male construction of the human as the human and erased the standpoint of women. The movement cannot claim the good sense of childism while enacting the bad one, and applying either sense consistently yields the same verdict.

For disabled children the failure is not merely present but compounded, and Wall's own logic forces the escalation. The feminist tradition Wall builds on produced the recognition that single axis thinking renders invisible those who sit where two subordinations cross, the insight Kimberlé Crenshaw named in showing that doctrines attending to race alone or sex alone erased Black women, who are erased by each taken separately (Crenshaw, 1989). The disabled child holds that structural position here. Childism erases them because adult centered thought treats the adult's construction of the child as the default, and that default construction is tacitly the abled child, so the disabled child falls through both and never enters the picture at all. This is the same fact the prior subsection reached from the other side, the disabled child who was never fully inside the category of children, now restated as a standpoint the movement's construction of childhood could not reach even if it tried. Because Wall's objection is to the erasure of a subordinated standpoint, and because the disabled child's standpoint is the most completely erased, doubled across two axes rather than one, Wall's own commitment forces the conclusion that the movement fails his childism hardest at exactly the child it most loudly claims to protect.

A legal asymmetry sits underneath this and completes it. Childhood as such is not a protected classification in federal antidiscrimination law. Children are not a suspect class, and youth below the thresholds of the age discrimination statutes carries no heightened protection. Disability is a protected classification, secured by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act. The movement thus casts itself as the defender of a category the law does not specially protect, childhood, while the mechanism it proposes strips the legally protected attribute, disability, from the very children it invokes to justify the proposal. It claims the mantle of protecting children in general by removing the one protection these particular children actually hold.

F. The Tell in the Behavior

There is a behavioral correlate of all this, and it is worth recording because it is observable rather than inferred. When the assistive case is raised with advocates of age based restriction, in public comment and in direct exchange, the common response is acknowledgment. The point is granted, often warmly, and then it does not enter the message. The next broadcast restates the universal, that screens are harmful to children, with the exception that was just conceded nowhere in it. The pattern that matters here is the gap between the acknowledgment and the message, the conceding of the exception in the reply and its omission from the position. This paper does not need to characterize the inner state behind that gap. This yields a prediction rather than an accusation, and a prediction can be tested. If the case for restriction genuinely accounted for disabled children, the materials making that case would carry the accommodation through to the recommendation, the exception named at the start would survive into the policy proposed at the end. The prediction is that it will not, that disabled children will appear, if at all, as a sentence of acknowledgment near the front and then drop out of the remedy entirely, so that the policy lands on them as if the acknowledgment had never been made. That is a claim anyone can check against the next white paper, the next model bill, the next round of testimony. If the carry through is there, this part of the argument is wrong. The expectation here is that it will be missing, and that the omission will be structural rather than occasional.

VI. THE PROHIBITION REFLEX

Even a reader persuaded that the device is neutral might hold that an age based restriction is still the prudent response, on the model of the many rules a society imposes to protect children. This section argues that the prohibition reflex misclassifies the case, and that the misclassification is the rhetorical engine of the entire movement.

Two different kinds of rule are routinely called bans, and they have opposite records. The first kind prohibits a desired thing or activity that has legitimate uses. Alcohol Prohibition, the criminal prohibition of drugs, the abstinence based drug education delivered through programs such as Project D.A.R.E., and abstinence only sex education are all of this kind. Each declared a desired thing or behavior off limits, addressed demand by forbidding it rather than by teaching people to navigate it, and failed or backfired. The independent evaluation literature found that the dominant school drug prevention program produced no lasting reduction in use (West & O'Neal, 2004), and the major medical and adolescent health bodies have concluded that abstinence only programs do not achieve their aims and withhold information adolescents need (Santelli et al., 2017). The second kind of rule mandates a protective measure or forbids a purely dangerous act that has no legitimate countervailing use. A seat belt law does not ban a desired thing. It mandates a protective behavior, or read the other way, it forbids the dangerous behavior of driving unbelted, and there is no underground demand for unbelted driving that the rule must overcome. The prohibition of firing a weapon into the air during a celebration forbids an act whose falling rounds can kill and which serves no legitimate purpose. Rules of the second kind can work, precisely because nothing legitimate is pushing against them.

The screen ban and the proposal of no artificial intelligence for minors are rules of the first kind, and the movement's central rhetorical move is to dress them as rules of the second kind. The analogy to alcohol and to cigarettes, deployed routinely in the case for restriction, is exactly this costume. It asks the listener to file a prohibition on a desired and useful tool under the heading of common sense safety that no reasonable person could oppose. The costume should be refused. The screen and the artificial intelligence system are not seat belts, which are pure protection with no demand against them, and they are not rounds fired into the sky, which are pure danger with no legitimate use. They are desired and widely useful tools, which places them in the first category, the category with the unbroken record of failure.

Tobacco is the instructive case, because it is a desired thing of the first category that was never banned and that nonetheless declined. Cigarettes remained legal for adults throughout. Smoking fell through education, taxation,

denormalization, and the steady correction of an information environment, not through prohibition. Tobacco is the proof that for a desired thing of the first category, the lever that actually moves the outcome is the one the prohibition reflex refuses, which is to inform and to shape incentives rather than to forbid.

The live experiment is already running. Australia's restriction on social media for users under sixteen is the first large scale test of the age based prohibition, and its design illustrates the cost the aggregate conceals. A blanket age cutoff is justified by an average, and the average is precisely the statistic that hides what happens to the children at the margins, the abused child for whom an online community is the only safe space, the queer child in an unaccepting town for whom it is the only mirror, the disabled child for whom it is the accommodation this paper has described. The policy that is defended by the mean is the policy that is blind to the distribution, which returns the argument to where it began. The case is built on a number that was constructed by removing the children it will harm.

It is worth conceding directly what an age ban does not solve, because the concession costs the argument nothing. The platforms an under sixteen rule reaches carry private messaging, and private messaging is where some of the gravest dangers to children actually live, grooming, the circulation of abuse material, sexual exploitation. None of that is in dispute and none of it is minimized here. But the Australian statute itself draws the line elsewhere. It defines its target as a service whose sole or significant purpose is to enable online social interaction, and it hands the specific inclusions and exemptions to separate rules rather than writing them into the Act (Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024, s 63C). The dangers of private messaging are real, and they are problems of design, of moderation, and of education, addressable by building the channel more safely and teaching children to use it, not by setting an age at which a person may open an account. They are a serious subject. They are not this paper's subject, and they are not an argument for the medium being the thing that harms.

VII. CONCLUSION

The movement to restrict children's access to screens, and now to artificial intelligence, presents itself as protective, and most of the people who advance it are sincere. This paper has argued that they are nonetheless wrong, and wrong about the basic thing. The medium is not the harm. The four harms the movement names are properties of content, design, social dynamics, and governance, the strongest evidence finds the association between the medium and well being too small to bear the weight placed on it, and the alarm itself is the latest instance of a pattern that has misfired at every prior medium from the written word forward. None of that depends on whose childhood is in question. It is true of the medium, and therefore true for everyone the medium reaches.

The case is made worse, not better, by the population it forgets. The frightening aggregate is in part built by removing disabled children from the count, including by the published design of the assessments cited in testimony. The prescribed ban strips a legally mandated accommodation from the children who depend on the device most. And the exception the movement grants for those children refutes its own universal claim while exposing a concept of the child in which disabled children were never fully counted. The movement does not count those children when it builds its fear, and it harms them first when it acts on it. It fails both senses of childism at once, harming children in the name of protecting them and erasing the standpoint of the children it claims to center, and it does both most completely to the disabled child it never counted.

The alternative to prohibition is not passivity, and it has a concrete shape. A government that wanted to reduce the real harms here could fund and require what a ban only pretends to deliver, broad public education about emerging technology and freely available guidance for parents, carried through the channels that actually reach families. The line that keeps this from becoming its own hazard is the one between enabling the education to exist and controlling what it says. The state's role is to make sure the teaching happens and is available to everyone, not to author its content, and

holding that line is what separates literacy from propaganda.

The pattern the movement instantiates is old, and it has a known resolution. The content and the design are the harm, and they can be named, regulated, and taught around without withdrawing a surface that millions of people, and the people with the most to lose among them, depend on. The lever that has worked on every prior occasion is literacy paired with accountability, equipping the user and holding the builder responsible, rather than prohibition paired with contempt. That lever is available now, and it will be available for the next medium the pattern fears, which on present evidence is the one this paper was written on.

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