

MORAL PANIC · MEDIUM THEORY · DISABILITY · CHILDREN

The Anxious Generators

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

The medium is not the harm.

An adolescent would need sixty-three hours and thirty-one minutes of extra screen time a day, against the median effect, to move well-being by half a standard deviation. The day does not contain them.

Travis Gilly · Real Safety AI Foundation · Illinois, United States

ONE CLAIM, ONE PATTERN, ONE FORGOTTEN POPULATION

The shape of the argument

I

The medium is neutral.

The valence lives in content, design, social dynamics, and governance, not in the device, so the refutation reaches every user the same way.

II

The panic is a recurring pattern.

The same fear has attached to every new medium from writing to television. Both the recurrence and the predictable fade are diagnostic.

III

The aggregate forgets disabled children.

The frightening number is built by removing them from the count, the prescribed ban strips their accommodation, and the carve-out refutes the universal.

→ The remedy that follows: literacy paired with accountability, not prohibition.

The Recurring Panic

The same fear has arrived at every new medium, and it has been wrong every time.



From Plato against writing to the smartphone and now artificial intelligence, the pattern repeats, and so does the fade that follows it.

OLDER THAN PRINT

The same fear, every new medium

Writing	Plato has Socrates warn that it will breed forgetfulness in the young.
The novel	Charged with corrupting the morals and attention of young women.
The radio	Said to break up the family evening and colonize the child's imagination.
Television	Newton Minow calls American broadcasting a vast wasteland (1961).
The video game	Inherits the same certainty in turn.
The smartphone	The current rewiring of childhood, on the same terms as every medium before it.
Artificial intelligence	The charge is beginning to attach here next.

Sources Plato (1995). *Phaedrus*. | Minow (1961). *Television and the Public Interest*. | Cohen (1972). *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. | Warakaulle (2024). *J. Applied Mgmt. Accounting Research*, 22(2).

TWO DIAGNOSTICS, AND AN IRONY

Recurrence, fade, reversal

THE FIRST TELL

The recurrence.

A claim that arrives in the exact form that has been wrong at every prior threshold inherits a burden of proof it has not discharged.

THE SECOND TELL

The fade.

Every medium that was going to ruin a generation was absorbed into ordinary life, and that generation grew up to fear the next medium on the same terms. The pattern includes its own forgetting.

THE IRONY

The movement against itself.

Six years before warning that the phone is the danger, the same lead author argued that the danger was overprotection, the removal of risk and friction. The later book prescribes a sweeping new shelter, enforced by age.

What the Evidence Shows

The empirical core is far weaker than the rhetoric built on it.

The strongest studies find an association so small that harmless variables match it, and the one physical harm the screen carries is not the screen's.

63h
31m

The extra screen time per day, against the median effect, needed to lower an adolescent's well-being by half a standard deviation, the point at which a person notices any difference at all. Even the single largest specification still needs more than eleven hours a day.

THE SIZE OF THE EFFECT

An effect the size of eyeglasses and potatoes

Across three large datasets, 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 size. The point is not that the association is zero. It is the size of effects that nobody legislates against.

SLEEP, MEASUREMENT, AND THE WRONG QUESTION

The dose was the wrong question

SLEEP

One minute is not an emergency.

Each extra hour of screen use tracked about nine minutes less sleep on weekdays; a screen in the thirty minutes before bed, about one minute. A rounding error wearing the costume of one.

MEASUREMENT

The instrument is broken.

The field runs on retrospective self-report. Heavy users underestimate and light users overestimate, which biases the very comparison the alarmed reading depends on.

CONCEPT

The number does not exist.

The search for a single value linking screen time to outcomes was a search for a value that was never there. The shape is Goldilocks, not poison; what mattered was the composition of the day, not the count of the hours.

Sources Przybylski & Orben (2020). *PeerJ*, 8, e8427. | Orben (2021). *Infant & Child Development*, 31(1). | Przybylski & Weinstein (2017). *Psychological Science*, 28(2). | Chan et al. (2025). *Tech., Mind, & Behavior*, 6(4). | Christakis et al. (2025). *JAMA Pediatrics*, 179(4).

THE ONE HARM THE SCREEN GENUINELY CARRIES

Myopia is real, and it is not the screen's

The risk factor is sustained near focus with too little daylight, and the protective factor is time outside in bright light. The book does it too. Kepler recorded the link between close study and nearsightedness four hundred years ago, before any screen existed.

The severity is real and does not relocate the cause. The remedy, more time outside and breaks from near work, is identical for the page and the device, and points at the surface in neither case.

1 in 3

people with high myopia go on to develop visual impairment as they age. The condition can be grave, and the cause is still near focus, not the screen.

Four Harms, Four Contents

Take the bundle apart and none of the four is the medium.



Social deprivation, sleep, attention, and addiction each resolve into content, design, social dynamics, or governance.

THE BUNDLE, TAKEN APART

Four harms, four contents

- 1 Social deprivation is displacement, a property of any absorbing activity.**
A child lost in a novel is also not playing outside, and no one banned the novel. What matters is what is displaced and what does the displacing, which is content.
- 2 Sleep is the grip of content, not the glow of a surface.**
The mechanism is the one more episode that postpones sleep, the same as the one more chapter. The screen displays a sleep meditation and a slot machine with equal indifference.
- 3 Attention fragmentation is the format of the content.**
Two hours on one long film, or two hundred fragments of short video; the screen is identical across both. Format is a design decision made by the people who tune the feed.
- 4 Addiction is an engineered design pattern, named in the indictment itself.**
Intermittent variable reward is not a property of glass and silicon. The phone did not buzz; a company decided that it would, how often, and what waited on the other side.

THE DISPLACEMENT WORRY, STEP BY STEP

The device blamed for taking the face away is the first to deliver one

- 1 The screen replaces presence with something thinner.**
But the phone was never presence. The same charge was leveled at the telephone when it was new.
- 2 At least a call happens in real time.**
Voicemail, the email, the message returned hours later were all treated as connection long before the objects now under suspicion existed.
- 3 The one device that delivers a moving, answering face across any distance is a screen.**
It is the first in human history to bring a face to a child who could not otherwise have reached one.

And where the question is whether a screen can carry demanding interaction without loss, large randomized work finds no significant difference between in-person and live online learning. The gaps that appear are for recorded-only instruction, and they trace to its design, not the surface.

The Children the Evidence Forgot

Attending to the forgotten population does not soften the case. It sharpens it.

The frightening number is manufactured by removing disabled children, the ban strips a legally mandated accommodation, and the carve-out refutes the universal claim.

HOW THE FRIGHTENING NUMBER IS BUILT

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 make one.

- 1

Disabled children are removed before the count.

PISA permits excluding up to five percent of students overall and two and a half percent within schools, the permitted categories including functional, cognitive, behavioural, and emotional disabilities. Special schools are excluded before sampling begins.
- 2

The diluted remainder is carried into a hearing as the condition of children.

In January 2026 Senate Commerce testimony, an educational neuroscientist invoked PISA, TIMSS, and PIRLS as converging evidence of cognitive decline, without noting who had been sampled out.
- 3

A positive result for these children was sitting in the witness's own table.

Recentering against the average classroom sank the largest positive effect in the table to the floor, removed from view before the reader reaches it.

+0.47



+0.05

Effect for students with learning disorders, before and after recentering against the average classroom (0.42).

Sources OECD (2020). *PISA 2022 Technical Standards*. | OECD (2024). *Mapping study for the integration of accommodations*, Educ. Working Paper 308. | LeRoy et al. (2018). *Assessment in Education*, 25(4), 386–396. | Horvath (2026). *Written testimony, U.S. Senate Comm. on Commerce, Science, and Transportation*.

NEED, NOT WANT

For these children, the screen is the accommodation

- **Screens have carried assistive technology for decades.**

The communication app that gives a nonverbal child a voice, the screen reader and text-to-speech for a blind or dyslexic child, the symbol board, the predictive keyboard. Artificial intelligence now adds live captioning, communication support, and reading assistance.

- **A want is a preference. 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 that provide meaningful access, and a screen running assistive software is, for many children, exactly that.

- **The wrong is specific, not the age threshold in the abstract.**

It is a school or public service withdrawing the device, software, or connectivity a disabled student relies on, by blanket rule, without the individualized assessment the law requires.

THE EXCEPTION THAT COLLAPSES THE RULE

The carve-out is the movement's own refutation

- **A universal claim cannot survive a justified exception.**

The original claim was about screens and about children as such. A single sound counterexample refutes a universal, and the disabled child for whom the device is good is that counterexample.

- **The carve-out is the cleanest proof of neutrality.**

The moment a proponent admits the device is good for some children, the proposition that the device is bad for children is abandoned, and what remains is that the valence lives in the use.

- **The drug analogy does not rescue it. It concedes the point.**

Harmful recreationally, helpful therapeutically, is a claim that the valence is carried by the use, not the substance. There is no third door: deny the exception and you call a child's voice device harmful; grant it and you concede neutrality.

WHAT THE STRUCTURE ENCODES

A charity model wearing the language of care

- **Filing the child as a managed exception encodes an ontology.**

Treating the disabled child as a permitted category, rather than a counterexample to be reckoned with, is intelligible only if that child was never fully inside the category of children. That is the charity model, a dispensation granted as mercy, not the rights model.

- **It fails childism in both of its senses.**

Under Young-Bruehl, it is the benevolent prejudice the word names, harm done in the name of care. Under Wall, it legislates from an adult image of the endangered child and never consults the child whose accommodation it removes.

- **Two erasures cross, and the law runs the other way.**

As in Crenshaw's account, the disabled child falls through both axes at once. Childhood is not a protected class in federal law; disability is. The movement defends the unprotected category while stripping the protected one.

TWO KINDS OF RULE GET CALLED A BAN

A prohibition on a useful tool, in the costume of common-sense safety

Kind one prohibits a desired, useful thing, and it fails.

Alcohol Prohibition, the drug war, D.A.R.E., abstinence-only sex education. Each forbade demand instead of teaching people to navigate it, and each failed or backfired.

Kind two mandates protection or forbids pure danger, and it can work.

A seat belt law, a rule against celebratory gunfire. Nothing legitimate pushes against them, which is exactly why they hold.

The screen and AI ban is kind one, dressed as kind two.

Tobacco is the proof: never banned for adults, it fell through education, taxation, and denormalization. Australia's under-sixteen rule is the live experiment, and the average that justifies it is the statistic that hides the abused child, the queer child, and the disabled child at the margins.

NOT PASSIVITY. A CONCRETE SHAPE.

Literacy paired with accountability

- The content and the design are the harm. 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 at every prior threshold is equipping the user and holding the builder responsible, not prohibition paired with contempt.
- A state serious about the real harms would fund the public education a ban only pretends to deliver, and hold one line: make the teaching exist; do not author what it says. That line is what separates literacy from propaganda.

Gilly, T. (2026). *The Anxious Generators: Moral Panic, Medium Blindness, and the Children the Evidence Forgot. Working paper, v4. Real Safety AI Foundation.*

CASES	STATUTES, RULES, AND STANDARDS
Alexander v. Choate, 469 U.S. 287 (1985).	Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024 (Cth) No. 127 (Austl.).
	OECD (2020). <i>PISA 2022 Technical Standards</i> . OECD Publishing.
	OECD (2024). <i>Mapping study for the integration of accommodations for students with special education needs (SEN) in PISA</i> (OECD Education Working Papers No. 308).

SCHOLARSHIP AND REPORTS

Chan, E. W., Cheung, N. S. T., & Choy, J. Y. S. (2025). Links between adolescent time-use sequences and well-being. *Technology, Mind, and Behavior*, 6(4), 358–379.

Cheung, Y. Y. H., et al. (2023). A randomized controlled experiment comparing face-to-face and online teaching. *Frontiers in Education*, 8, 1160430.

Christakis, D. A., Mathew, G. M., & Reichenberger, D. (2025). Adolescent smartphone use during school hours. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 179(4), 475.

Cohen, S. (1972). *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. MacGibbon and Kee.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex. *Univ. of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167.

Ferguson, C. J. (2009). An effect size primer. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 40(5), 532–538.

Finkelhor, D. (2011). *The Internet, Youth Safety and the Problem of “Juvenoia.”* Crimes Against Children Research Center.

Furedi, F. (2001). *Paranoid Parenting*. Allen Lane.

Haidt, J. (2024). *The Anxious Generation*. Penguin Press.

Hobday, R., Aarts, M. P. J., & Cajochen, C. (2025). Myopia and daylight. *Frontiers in Medicine*, 12, 1481209.

Horvath, J. C. (2026). *Written testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation*.

LeRoy, B. W., Samuel, P., Deluca, M., & Evans, P. (2018). Students with special educational needs within PISA. *Assessment in Education*, 25(4), 386–396.

Lukianoff, G., & Haidt, J. (2018). *The Coddling of the American Mind*. Penguin Press.

Minow, N. N. (1961). *Television and the Public Interest* [Address to the NAB].

Orben, A. (2021). Digital diet. *Infant and Child Development*, 31(1), e2228.

Orben, A., & Przybylski, A. K. (2019a). The association between adolescent well-being and digital technology use. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 3, 173–182.

Orben, A., & Przybylski, A. K. (2019b). Screens, teens, and psychological well-being. *Psychological Science*, 30(5), 682–696.

Plato. (1995). *Phaedrus* (Nehamas & Woodruff, Trans.). Hackett.

Porter-Szucs, I., & DeCicco, B. (2022). TriHy. *SN Social Sciences*, 2(8), 143.

Przybylski, A. K., & Orben, A. (2020). Teenage sleep and technology engagement across the week. *PeerJ*, 8, e8427.

Przybylski, A. K., & Weinstein, N. (2017). A large-scale test of the Goldilocks hypothesis. *Psychological Science*, 28(2), 204–215.

Santelli, J. S., et al. (2017). Abstinence-only-until-marriage. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 61(3), 273–280.

Shah, R., Vlasak, N., & Evans, B. J. W. (2024). High myopia. *Ophthalmic and Physiological Optics*, 44(6), 1248–1260.

Stevens, G. J., et al. (2021). Online university education is the new normal. *Interactive Tech. and Smart Education*, 18(3), 278–297.

Wall, J. (2010). *Ethics in Light of Childhood*. Georgetown University Press.

Warakaulle, K. (2024). Gen Z: The anxious generation? *J. Applied Mgmt. Accounting Research*, 22(2), 11–16.

West, S. L., & O’Neal, K. K. (2004). Project D.A.R.E. outcome effectiveness revisited. *American Journal of Public Health*, 94(6), 1027–1029.

Young-Bruehl, E. (2012). *Childism*. Yale University Press.

Zhou, H., & Bai, X. (2023). The role of the school spatial environment in visual health. *Int. J. Environ. Research and Public Health*, 20(2), 1006.