FOUR NORMS TO DEAL WITH CELL PHONES ADDICTION

I offer these ideas for reforms, all of which aim to reverse the two big mistakes we've made: **overprotecting children in the real world (where they need to learn from vast amounts of direct experience) and under protecting them online (where they are particularly vulnerable during puberty)**.

Young people and their parents are stuck in at least four collective-action traps. Each is hard to escape for an individual family, but escape becomes much easier if families, schools, and communities coordinate and act together. Here are four norms that would roll back the phone-based childhood. I believe that any community that adopts all four will see substantial improvements in youth mental health within two years.

No smartphones before high school

Each child thinks they need a smartphone because "everyone else" has one, and many parents give in because they don't want their child to feel excluded. But if no one else had a smartphone—or even if only half of the child's sixth-grade class had one—parents would feel more comfortable providing a basic flip phone or no phone at all.

No social media before 16

Each adolescent feels a strong need to open accounts on TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and other platforms primarily because that's where most of their peers are posting and gossiping. But if the majority of adolescents were not on these accounts until they were 16, families and adolescents could more easily resist the pressure to sign up. The delay would not mean that kids younger than 16 could never watch videos on TikTok or YouTube—only that they could not open

accounts, give away their data, post their own content, and let algorithms get to know them and their preferences.

Phone-free schools

Most schools claim that they ban phones, but this usually just means that students aren't supposed to take their phones out of their pockets during class. Research shows that most students do use their phones during class time. They also use them during lunchtime, free periods, and breaks between classes—times when students could and should be interacting with their classmates face-to-face. The only way to get students' minds off their phones during the school day is to require all students to put their phones (and other devices that can send or receive texts) into a phone locker or locked pouch at the start of the day. Schools that have gone phone-free always seem to report that it has improved the culture, making students more attentive in class and more interactive with one another. Published studies back them up.

More independence, unsupervised free play and more responsibilities

Many parents are afraid to give their children the level of independence and responsibility they themselves enjoyed when they were young, even though rates of homicide, drunk driving, and other physical threats to children are way down in recent decades. Part of the fear comes from the fact that parents look at each other to determine what is normal and therefore safe, and they see few examples of families acting as if a 9-year-old can be trusted to walk to a store without a chaperone. But if many parents started sending their children out to play or run errands, then the norms of what is safe and accepted would change quickly. So would ideas about what constitutes "good parenting." And if more parents trusted their children with more responsibility—by asking their kids to do more to help out or to care for others—then the pervasive sense of uselessness now found in surveys of high-

school students might begin to dissipate. It would be a mistake to overlook this fourth norm. If parents don’t replace screen time with real-world experiences involving friends and independent activity, then banning devices will feel like deprivation, not the opening up of a world of opportunities.

[The Terrible Costs of a Phone-Based Childhood – The Atlantic]