

## Books for Our Anxious Generation

By guest columnist: Katie Parker, Library Media Specialist, Clinton Elementary School

“My central claim in this book is that these two trends--overprotection in the real world and underprotection in the virtual world--are the major reasons why children born after 1995 became the anxious generation.”

Jonathan Haidt

American businessman and philanthropist, Bill Gates has often attributed his success as a technopreneur to his ability to read, write and think deeply about the future for significant periods of time without interruption. Recently, after reading “The Anxious Generation” by Jonathan Haidt, Gates contemplated how this talent for concentration may have been different if he had grown up with today’s technological distractions. While Gates acknowledges that he doesn’t have any answers to offer, he does stress that everyone who cares about how young minds develop should be asking questions like those addressed in “The Anxious Generation”.

Recently, in collaboration with the Kirkland Town Library, the Clinton Central School District embarked on a community-wide book study of “The Anxious Generation” in order to build a better understanding of today’s learners through meaningful conversations about technology, well-being, and emotional health. Recognizing the value of school-family partnerships, as the Clinton Elementary School Librarian, I offer the following reading recommendations in hopes of offering younger readers an opportunity to engage with ideas related to our rapidly changing digital world through open, reflective conversations at home.

“Your Fantastic Elastic Brain: Stretch It, Shape It,” a picture book by educator and psychologist Dr. JoAnn Deak, that challenges young readers to stretch and grow their own brains, while introducing the anatomy and function of the human brain in an accessible and engaging way. As conversations about the importance of trying new things and not giving up are sparked by the Deak’s easy-to-digest facts, adults can introduce concepts related to fostering healthy habits and boundaries around technology.

“If You Give A Mouse an iPhone: A Cautionary Tail,” written by David Milgrim under the pseudonym Ann Droyd, is a plugged-in parody of Laura Numeroff’s circular tale, “If You Give A Mouse A Cookie”. Published in 2014, this picture book features an energetic pet mouse named Applesauce who becomes mesmerized by an iPhone and becomes oblivious to his surroundings including life-threatening dangers until his battery runs out and he is jolted back to his present reality, a deserted island. Both silly and obvious, this lesson segues nicely into conversations related to the state regulation of bell-to-bell cell phone expectations, especially the well-researched benefits of uninterrupted focus, face-to-face interaction, and distraction-free learning environments.

In his sequel to his 2015 bestseller, “Nerdy Birdy,” “Nerdy Birdy Tweets,” New York Times bestselling author Aaron Reynolds provides young readers with an introduction to social media via familiar characters, Nerdy Birdy and Vulture. Prominently featured in “The Anxious

Generation,” social media has significantly contributed to the mental health crisis in a way that adolescents seem particularly susceptible to given its addictive nature. Thoughtful conversations about the importance of actual friends over virtual ones are likely to emerge as Nerdy Birdy ignores Vulture in favor of a new online platform, Tweetster, that allows him to make hundreds of friends across the globe. One specific moment in the book, when Nerdy Bird secretly posts an unflattering picture of Vulture online, presents young readers with a situation to which they can easily relate. Conversations about considering potential consequences of one’s online actions, especially when sharing content with others, will likely emerge naturally.

His wife’s experience with anxiety inspired author-illustrator Dan Santat to create the vibrant picture book, “After The Fall: How Humpty Dumpty Got Back Up Again”. This charming story of the familiar egg protagonist focuses on Humpty Dumpty after his famous fall, exploring moments of fear, anxiety, and overcoming adversity. Accompanied by beautiful illustrations, the message of perseverance and self-belief definitely speaks to Haidt’s concerns about overprotection in the real world leading to a potential lack of resilience and independence in navigating daily stressors. Santat’s visual storytelling helps the reader to understand Humpty’s fears, as well as his passion, as we share in his triumph over anxiety:

“Life begins when you get back up.”

Dan Santat