



# Reclaiming Confidence:

## The Power of Play, Movement, and Nature to Heal the Anxious Generation

*Brooke Smith, LMSW  
Canopy Children's Solutions*

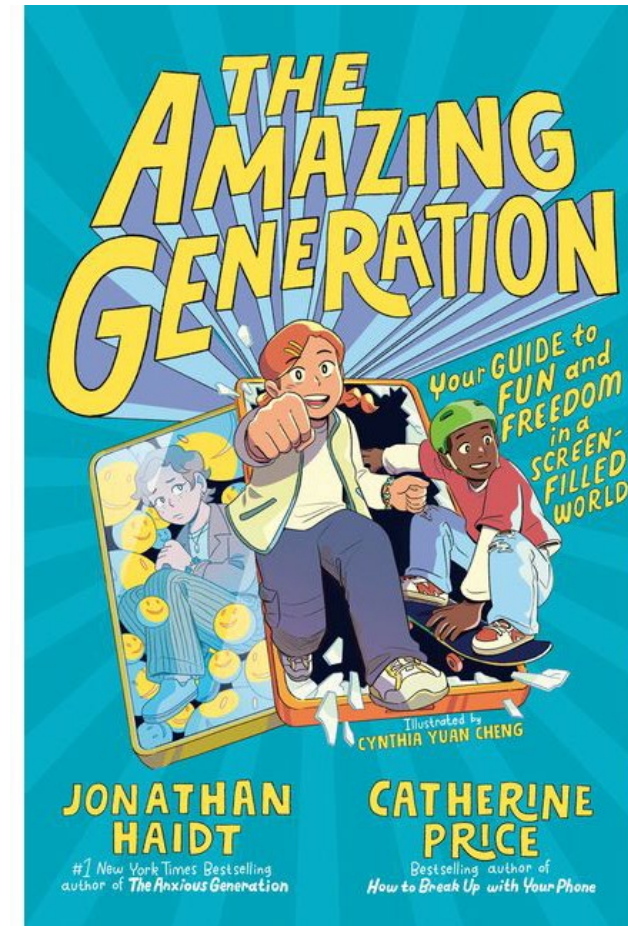
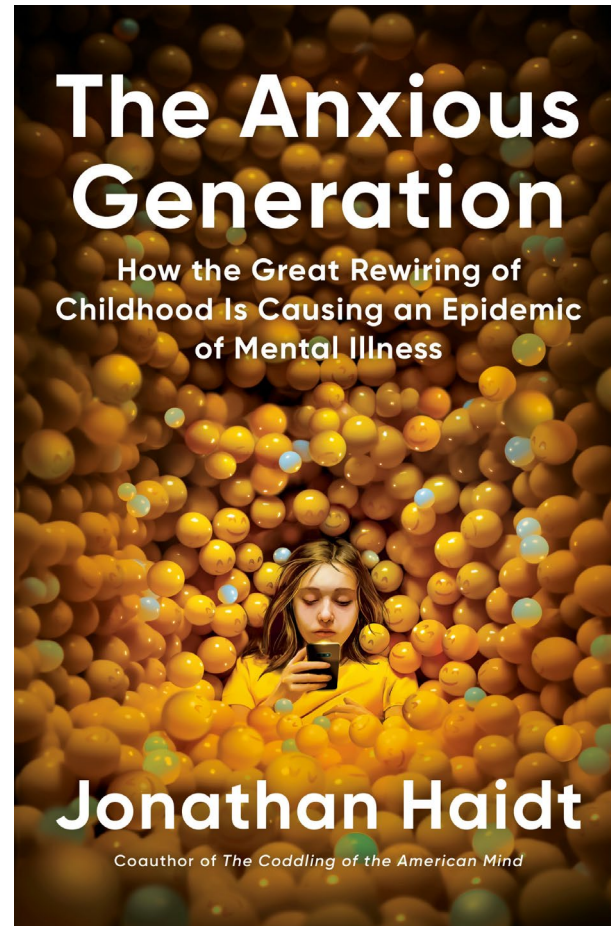


# Story of the “Y” Tree



# The Anxious Generation

By Jonathan Haidt



# Why Are Kids So Anxious?

According to *The Anxious Generation* by Jonathan Haidt:

- Anxiety and depression rates have more than doubled among teens in the last decade.
- Suicide rates are alarmingly high, and social media plays a big role.
- Today's kids are overprotected in the real world but under protected online.
- Less free play, more structured activities
- Healthy childhood foundations eroded





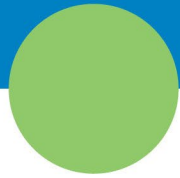
# Healthy Childhood Needs

- Free play for creativity and social skills
- Healthy risk-taking for confidence
- Face-to-face experiences over screens
- Nature and movement as antidotes

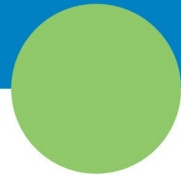




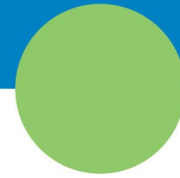
# Three Pillars



Play



Movement

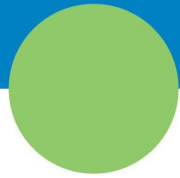


Outdoors

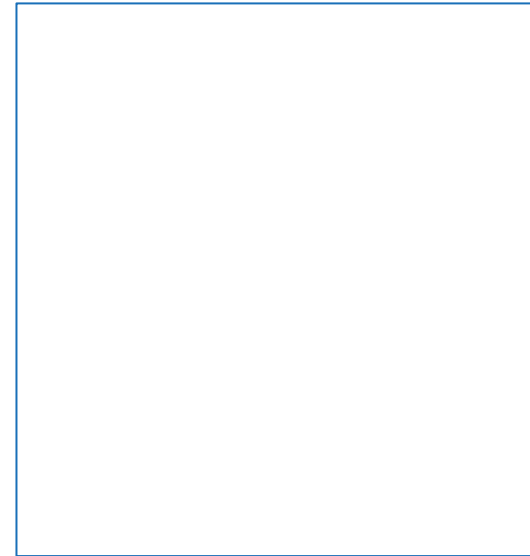
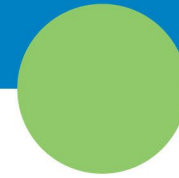
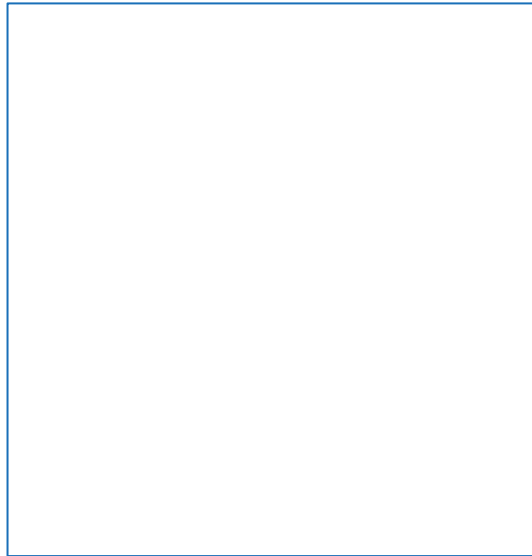
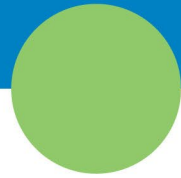




# Three Pillars



Play



# The Science of Play

## Increases:

- Resilience
- Confidence
- Social Competence
- Learning

## Decreases:

- Pressure threshold
- Defenses
- Fear-based behaviors
- Nervous system dysregulation



# The Importance of Play

“When kids are engaged in play, they cannot be engaged in a fear state.” – TBRI Podcast



## Play Styles

- Joker
- Kinesthetic
- Explorer
- Competitor
- Director
- Collector
- Creator
- Storyteller

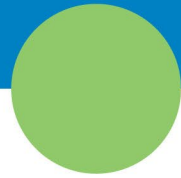
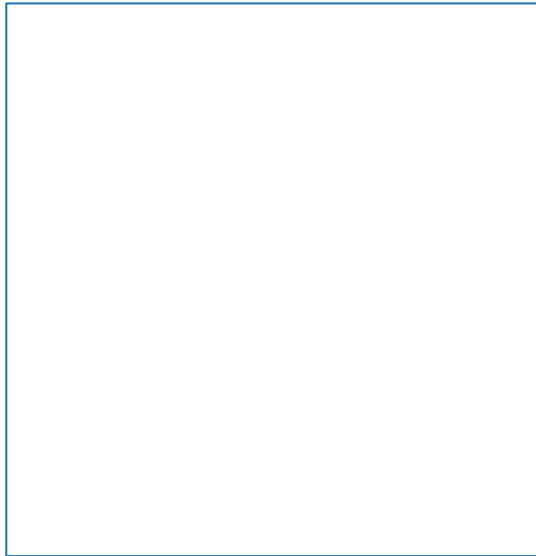
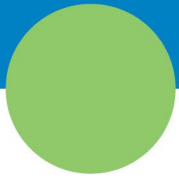
### Applications:

- Use scaffolding
- Match play styles to activities
- Leverage your play style
- Playful vibes
- No Sarcasm
- Quick, gentle redirections

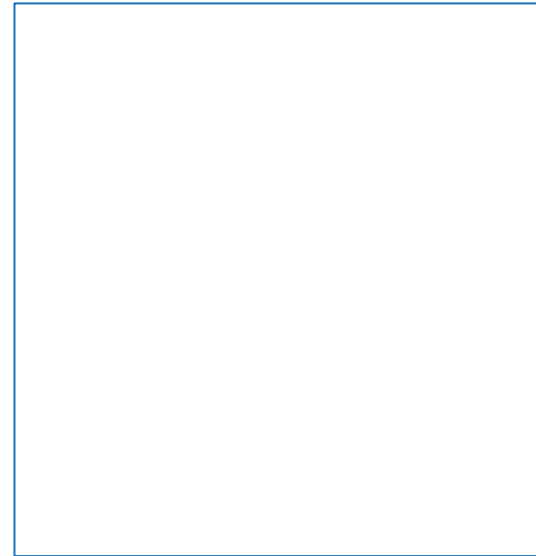
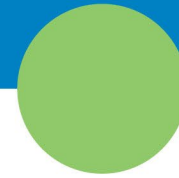




# Three Pillars



Movement



# The Power of Movement

- Strength Training → Confidence
- Cardio Exercise → Mood Regulation
- Rhythmic Movement → Nervous System Regulation (TBRI)
- Safe Stress → Resilience





# Movement Matters

“Walking is the foundation of all human movement.” (*Built to Move*)

“Your body is a system – mobility, sleep, stress, and strength are all connected.” (*Built to Move*)



## Resistance Training vs Aerobic and Endurance

- Weightlifting
- Bodyweight Exercise
- Building Strength →
  - Feelings of Competence and Accomplishment
  - Self-Efficacy and Confidence
  - Body Image
- Intensity Levels Matter

- Running, Biking, Swimming
- Hiking, Walking (brisk)
- Elevated heartrate →
  - Lowered Cortisol
  - Boosted Mood
  - Resilience
  - Higher Tolerance for Elevated Heartrates
- Intensity Matters



# Mindful Movement

- **Rhythmic, Repetitive Movement** (rocking, swinging, dancing) regulates the nervous system in youth recovering from trauma or chronic stress.
- **Shared movement activities** (walking together, dancing) strengthen attachment and safety between caregiver and youth
- **Consistency over intensity:** small, daily habits compound over time



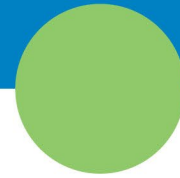
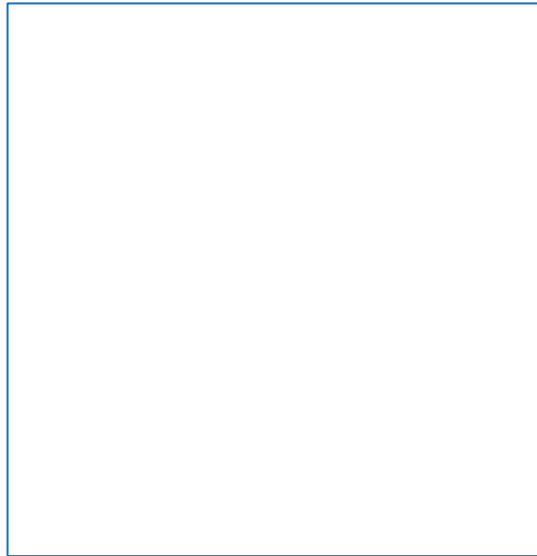
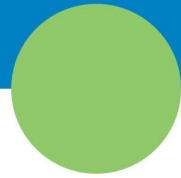
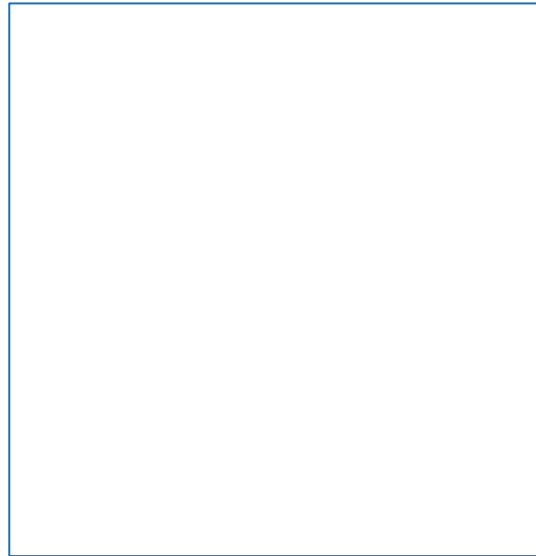
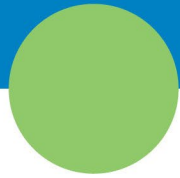
# Mindful Movement

- Yoga
- Dancing
- Walking (together)
- Climbing (slow, with intention)
- Focus on breath →
  - Lower cortisol levels
  - Reduction in chronic anxiety
  - Increase mind-body connection
  - Vagal nerve stimulation





# Three Pillars





# The Power of Outdoor Experiences

- Lowers anxiety and depression
- Lowers rumination (the repetitive, negative thoughts that fuel anxiety)
- Lowers amygdala activity (less “fight-or-flight” activation)
- Improves vagal tone, mood, and creativity
- Uneven terrain stimulates balance and confidence





# Science of Risky Play and Movement

- Small risks build confidence (Haidt)
- Controlled mistakes create brain change (Huberman)
- Physical challenges teach safety and resilience
- Stimulates learning
- Identity creation and reformation





# Science of Risky Play and Movement

Confidence is built through manageable risk

1. Climb
2. Balance
3. Jump
4. Fail safely
5. Try again



# Combining Play, Movement, and Outdoors

- Free Play
- Intentional Movement
- Outdoor Immersion
- Social Connection and Shared Challenges
- Small, Developmentally Appropriate Risks
  
- “It’s not about exercising harder. It’s about creating an environment where movement is inevitable.” (*Built to Move*)



# Examples in Real Life

1. Disc Golf

2. Adventure Wall



# Application Strategies

1. Clinical
2. School
3. Milieu
4. Family engagement
5. Discharge planning



# Application Strategies

- Walking therapy sessions
- Conflict resolution practice through play
- Mundane tasks as mini games
- Building self-efficacy with movement
- Co-regulation outdoors
- What else? - Discuss





# Troubleshooting and Empathy

- Start small
- Validate struggles
- Make movement inevitable
- Keep the vibe playful
- Support different play styles
- Intentionally define success



# Final Reflection

- Play
- Move
- Go Outside
  
- Thank you for showing up for young people!





# Q&A



## Resources for Further Learning

### Books:

- *The Anxious Generation* – Jonathan Haidt
- *Built to Move* – Kelly & Juliet Starrett
- *The Body Keeps the Score* – Bessel van der Kolk

### Podcasts:

- Huberman Lab
- The One You Feed
- TBRI Podcast

