

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.

A FEW NOTES ABOUT TERMINOLOGY. WHEN I TALK ABOUT THE “REAL world,” I am referring to relationships and social interactions characterized by four features that have been typical for millions of years:

1. They are *embodied*, meaning that we use our bodies to communicate, we are conscious of the bodies of others, and we respond to the bodies of others both consciously and unconsciously.
2. They are *synchronous*, which means they are happening at the same time, with subtle cues about timing and turn taking.
3. They involve primarily *one-to-one or one-to-several communication*, with only one interaction happening at a given moment.
4. They take place within communities that have a *high bar for entry and exit*, so people are strongly motivated to invest in relationships and repair rifts when they happen.

In contrast, when I talk about the “virtual world,” I am referring to relationships and interactions characterized by four features that have been typical for just a few decades:

1. They are *disembodied*, meaning that no body is needed, just language. Partners could be (and already are) artificial intelligences (AIs).
2. They are heavily *asynchronous*, happening via text-based posts and comments. (A video call is different; it is synchronous.)
3. They involve a substantial number of *one-to-many communications*, broadcasting to a potentially vast audience. Multiple interactions can be happening in parallel.

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4. They take place within communities that have a *low bar for entry and exit*, so people can block others or just quit when they are not pleased. Communities tend to be short-lived, and relationships are often disposable.

In practice, the lines blur. My family is very much real world, even though we use FaceTime, texting, and email to keep in touch. Conversely, a relationship between two scientists in the 18th century who knew each other only from an exchange of letters was closer to a virtual relationship. The key factor is the commitment required to make relationships work. When people are raised in a community that they cannot easily escape, they do what our ancestors have done for millions of years: They learn how to manage relationships, and how to manage themselves and their emotions in order to keep those precious relationships going. There are certainly many online communities that have found ways to create strong interpersonal commitments and a feeling of belonging, but in general, when children are raised in multiple mutating networks where they don't need to use their real names and they can quit with the click of a button, they are less likely to learn such skills.