

Building the Case for Stronger Communities

by Heidi L. Brennan

Every year sees at least one new report about the declining well-being of our nation's children: physically, emotionally and cognitively. For concerned parents, it is at least discouraging if not alarming to continuously hear this news. Short of our efforts on behalf of our own families, we are often left wondering what we can do as citizens to help other children, who will after all, become the peers and partners of our own children.

A distinctive and creative new report, "Hardwired To Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities," combines data from unique and diverse sources to come to a deeper understanding of children's needs and ways to meet them. Released September 2003, it was sponsored by the YMCA of the USA, Dartmouth Medical School and the Institute for American Values. The report was prepared by the Commission on Children at Risk: 33 prominent and innovative neuroscientists, children's doctors, and social scientists who study civil society, as well as youth service professionals.

In addition to acknowledging the litany of negative symptoms seen in children, the report places greater emphasis on *how* we as a society are thinking about

these problems. It claims that we are putting most of our problem-solving emphasis on medications, psychotherapies, and special programs for "at risk" children, while ignoring a much larger problem: broad *environmental* conditions that are significant contributors to children's suffering today.

The report claims, "In large measure, what's causing this crisis of American childhood is

a lack of *connectedness*. We mean two kinds of connect- edness—close connections to other people, and deep connections to moral and spiritual meaning."

The basis of this loss is found in the weakening of the many social institutions which supply connectedness: families, neigh-

borhoods, schools, and the variety of voluntary associations that form communities.

The commission calls for the restoration of necessary relationships through a new intellectual model, which the report calls "authoritative communities." These are defined as "groups of people who are committed to one another over time and who model and pass on at least part of what it means to be a good person and live a good life." Central to the report's conclusion is the need for parents to spend more time with their



children throughout their lives, and also to have time to participate in developing and maintaining a safe and nurturing community.

While these conclusions may not seem startling, they have always been difficult to “prove” from a biological model. Perhaps the most dramatic part of this report is its use of research in biology, neuroscience, and a range of other disciplines which is shedding important new light on our biological systems. “The human child is ‘hardwired to connect.’ We are hardwired for other people and for moral meaning and openness to the transcendent. Meeting these basic needs for connection is essential to health and to human flourishing.”

Key findings in this report include:

- Early nurture powerfully affects brain development.
- Nurture can neutralize genetic vulnerabilities.
- The biologically-based need for nurture continues through adolescence.
- Human beings are biologically primed to seek moral and spiritual meaning, and nurturing relationships are a central foundation for positive moral and spiritual development.
- Nurturing relationships and a spiritual connection to the transcendent significantly improve physical and emotional health.

These are bold claims in our society, as we witness the many conflicts involving religious diversity, and the constant political tension between different understandings of constitutional law and historical/cultural tradition. Yet, the commission members who were themselves philosophically, politically, and spiritually diverse, achieved a consensus about children’s needs which embraced a deeper appreciation of the social and spiritual ecology of our communities, and its prominent role in helping children survive enormous stresses

and flourish as well.

This fascinating and readable report provides information and interpretation which can set the stage for a renaissance of family policy and activism, including substantial goals and recommendations for all leaders, including parents. Particularly practical is the appendix of leading social indicators on children’s overall health. The complete report (70 pages) can be purchased from the Institute for American Values. An excellent executive summary may be freely downloaded from their web site.*

The report (or its summary) is an excellent tool for a thoughtful discussion amongst parents, teachers, youth leaders and others. My husband looks forward to using it in a future Boy Scout leader training session. I plan to share this information and organize discussions with personal friends, the faculty of our daughters’ school and the religious education staff/faculty of our church.

I believe that we parents need to support each other’s best efforts in our homes and whenever possible, find ways to stimulate and participate in effective community-building to sustain all children. The expression “think globally, act locally” is a very apt phrase for creating the connections that children so desperately need.♥

Heidi L. Brennan is a member of FAHN’s Board of Directors and is its Public Policy Advisor. She and Catherine Myers, Executive Director, attended a national symposium on September 9, 2003, where they participated in round table discussions about this report on behalf of FAHN.

* The Institute for American Values web site is: www.americanvalues.org. Phone: 212/246-3942. Address: 1841 Broadway, Suite 211, New York, NY 10023. Single copies of the report are available for \$7. See web site or call for multiple copy discounts.