

# Hardwired to Connect

## The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities

### Executive Summary

THIS REPORT IS about rising rates of mental problems and emotional distress among U.S. children and adolescents. Written by a group of 33 children's doctors, research scientists, and mental health and youth service professionals, the report does three things.

1. It identifies the crisis.
2. It presents what these experts believe to be a main cause of the crisis.
3. And it introduces a new concept, *authoritative communities*, intended to help youth service professionals, policy makers, and the entire society do a better job of addressing the crisis.

*A Report to the Nation from the Commission on Children at Risk and co-sponsored by YMCA of the USA, Dartmouth Medical School, and Institute for American Values.*

### What's the Crisis?

THE CRISIS COMES in two parts.

The first part is the deteriorating mental and behavioral health of U.S. children. We are witnessing high and rising rates of depression, anxiety, attention deficit, conduct disorders, thoughts of suicide, and other serious mental, emotional, and behavioral problems among U.S. children and adolescents.

The second part is how we as a society are thinking about this deterioration. We are using medications and psychotherapies. We are designing more and more special programs for "at risk" children. These approaches are necessary. But they are not enough. Why? Because programs of individual risk-assessment and treatment seldom encourage us, and can even prevent us, from recognizing as a society the broad *environmental* conditions that are contributing to growing numbers of suffering children.

### What's Causing the Crisis?

IN LARGE MEASURE, what's causing this crisis of American childhood is a lack of connectedness. We mean two kinds of connectedness — close connections to other people, and deep connections to moral and spiritual meaning.

Where does this connectedness come from? It comes from groups of people organized around certain purposes — what scholars call social institutions. *In recent decades, the U.S.*

*social institutions that foster these two forms of connectedness for children have gotten significantly weaker.* That weakening, this report argues, is a major cause of the current mental and behavioral health crisis among U.S. children.

Much of the first half of this report is a presentation of scientific evidence — largely from the field of neuroscience, which concerns our basic biology and how our brains develop — showing that 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.

Because in recent decades we as a society have not been doing a good job of meeting these essential needs, large and growing numbers of our children are failing to flourish.

## **What Can Solve the Crisis?**

WHAT CAN HELP most to solve the crisis are *authoritative communities*.

Authoritative communities are groups that live out the types of connectedness that our children increasingly lack. They are 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. Renewing and building them is the key to improving the lives of U.S. children and adolescents.

“Authoritative community” is a new public policy and social science term, developed for the first time in this report. It is intended to help all those in our society working to understand and improve the lives of children.

Much of the second half of the report is a definition of authoritative communities, an analysis of their role in society, and proposals for strengthening them.

## **What Is To Be Done?**

THE REPORT PROPOSES three big goals and 18 recommendations. All of the goals and recommendations focus on renewing and building authoritative communities.

The goals and recommendations ask something of all of us. Youth service organizations and youth service professionals. All levels of government. Employers. Philanthropists and foundations. Religious and civic leaders. Scholars. And families and individuals.

Reaching these goals and implementing these recommendations would constitute fundamental social change in our society. The report argues that nothing less will do.

## **What's New about this Report?**

AMONG SCHOLARLY REPORTS on children at risk, this report is distinctive in several ways.

- For what may be the first time, this project on children's mental and emotional health brings together prominent neuroscientists and children's doctors with social scientists who study civil society. As a result, this report represents an early serious effort to integrate the "hard science" of infant attachment and child and adolescent brain development with sociological evidence of how civil society shapes outcomes for children. Call it a new — watch out, big word coming — bio-psycho-social-cultural model of child development. This new model is intended both to deepen our understanding of today's crisis of childhood and to provide practical help to youth professionals, policy makers, and others working to improve the lives of our children.
- For what may be the first time, a diverse group of scientists and other experts on children's health is publicly recommending that our society pay considerably more attention to young people's moral, spiritual, and religious needs.
- It is not new, but it is not common either, for doctors and other professionals involved in the delivery of social and medical services to recommend a fundamental social change model, as opposed to an improved service delivery model, as a key to improving the mental and emotional lives of children.
- The authors of this report have come together from across the philosophical and political spectrum.
- The report introduces and argues for the importance of a new public policy and social science concept: authoritative communities. This concept is the report's major innovation and, potentially, its most important contribution. What's new is not just the term itself, but more importantly, what it seeks to designate. For what may be the first time, a concept has been developed to help policy makers, youth service professionals, scholars, journalists, philanthropists, and others to identify the specific traits across social institutions that are most likely to produce good outcomes for children.

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## **Who We Are**

THE COMMISSION ON CHILDREN AT RISK is a group of 33 children's doctors, research scientists, and mental health and youth service professionals. Our mission is to investigate empirically the social, moral, and spiritual foundations of child well-being, evaluate the degree to which current practice and policy in the U.S. recognize those foundations, and make recommendations for the future.

Our methodology has included interdisciplinary deliberation (including a conference in June of 2002 at Dartmouth Medical School), a comprehensive literature review, and the evaluation of 18 commissioned papers. This report, *Hardwired to Connect*, is the summary and culmination of our work to date.

The Commission is an independent, jointly sponsored initiative of YMCA of the USA, Dartmouth Medical School, and the Institute for American Values. The commission's principal investigator is Dr. Kathleen Kovner Kline of Dartmouth Medical School.

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