

Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities

A report to the Nation from the Commission on Children at Risk sponsored by the Dartmouth Medical School Institute for American Values.

What's the crisis?

Two parts:

1. **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.
2. **How we as a society are thinking about this deterioration-** We are using medications and psychotherapies, and these approaches are necessary; however, they are not enough. Why? Because they prevent us from recognizing as a society the broad environmental conditions that are contributing to growing numbers of suffering children.

What's the causing the crisis?

In large measure, what's causing the crisis of American childhood is a lack of connectedness—close connectedness to other people, and deep connectedness to moral and spiritual meaning.

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.

What can solve the crisis?

Authoritative Communities: Groups that live out the types of connectedness that our children increasingly lack. They are groups of people who 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 rebuilding authoritative communities is the key to improving the lives of U.S. children and adolescents.**

An authoritative community is defined by the following ten characteristics:

1. It is a social institution that includes children and youth
2. It treats children as ends in themselves
3. It is warm and nurturing
4. It establishes clear limits and expectations
5. The core of its work is performed largely by non-specialists
6. It is multi-generational
7. It has a long-term focus
8. It reflects and transmits a shared understanding of what it means to be a good person
9. It encourages spiritual and religious development

10. It is philosophically oriented to the equal dignity of all persons and to the principle of love of neighbor

Why “Authoritative”?

The word refers to a strong body of scholarly evidence demonstrating the value of that particular combination of warmth and structure in which children in a democratic society appear most likely to thrive. The word comes from the Latin “*auctor*,” which can mean “one who creates.” Authoritative communities don’t just happen. They are created and sustained by dedicated individuals with a shared vision of building a good life for the next generation.

What is to be done?

This 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:

1. 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.
2. **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.**
3. It is not common 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.
4. The authors of this report have come together from across the philosophical and political spectrum.
5. The report introduces and argues for the importance of a new public policy and social science concept: authoritative communities.

Our Synthesis:

We, the staff, volunteers, committee, and donors associated with Portland Central Young Life are in the midst of one of the greatest opportunities in our nation’s history. The “American Child” is currently more disconnected than ever before, and we represent a ministry that focuses on connection. *Hardwired to Connect* is an encouraging study for our mission because it helps us to understand the importance of relationships within

community, but it also highlights the importance of thinking intentionally about building, sustaining, and living out *authoritative community*. We believe that our ministry model is creating community, but we are also concerned about the long-term sustainability of our relational model. If we are going to live out the 5-7 commitment to kids (and this study reemphasizes the importance of the 5-7 commitment!) and continue to reach more teenagers, we are going to need to recruit potential leaders and empower our current students to reproduce the discipleship they are experiencing in the lives of those around them. We believe we need to make a slight paradigm shift in the way we frame our discipleship process. Currently, if we are honest, we disciple students as an afterthought of our intentional evangelism (we should not be ashamed of intentional evangelism! Kids are meeting Christ in a fresh way!).

¹If authoritative community is our long-term goal, we need to create an environment that is conducive for girls to become women and boys to become men. Traditionally, the Church has been the vehicle for this to happen in the Christian context; however, for eleven years we have had a very difficult time helping students make the transition from Young Life to Church. This is an unfortunate reality, but we believe there are many reasons why this transition is difficult. Perhaps it is most important to note that students in our outreach model are encouraged to make a commitment to Jesus while experiencing our most important value: no-strings-attached relationship. When comparing values between what he or she experiences in Young Life and the Church, a student with no previous Christian history views the Church to hold a contradicting set of values to that of Young Life. Our goal is not to reinforce misperception (as we all belong to a church in Portland); however, we also recognize the need for more vibrant worshipping communities with similar values to that of Young Life. As a result of this need, we are led to believe that the idea of authoritative community should be synonymous with the idea of Church.

This study, our current ministry success, and the need for more worshipping communities in the inner-city of Portland, has led us to rethink a new vision with new goals. We recognize the risk of “spreading too thin,” but we also recognize the increasing needs of young people in the city. Portland Central Young Life will be taking the next eight months to research the viability of planting a church in the inner-eastside of Portland, Oregon, but we will not move ahead without your input. We are going to be asking for your help with this. Please feel free to initiate with either Anthony or Ben after reading this. Our goal is not to make anyone feel cornered into this conversation, but it is important to us that each member of our team is given input into such a major conversation.

¹ From here on out, the “we” refers to Ben Sand and Anthony Jordan not all people associated with PCYL.