

# CAPITAL COMMENTARY

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## Hard-Wired to Connect

Living in one of the most prosperous, free, and stable nations in the world, we might easily ignore a growing crisis in the “authority structures” of American society. But if we truly care for the well-being of children and youth, it’s exactly this esoteric and “undemocratic” idea that our leaders and lawmakers should consider, according to a striking new study released by Dartmouth Medical School, the Institute for American Values and the YMCA.

A team of 33 distinguished medical doctors and mental health and youth counselors set out to discover why their waiting rooms were overflowing in epidemic proportions with American youth suffering from emotional and behavioral problems, such as depression, mental illness, drug abuse, and suicidal and violent tendencies. Their young patients were well educated, up on all the latest technologies, such as cell phones and the Internet, and materially quite well off compared to their peers internationally. Yet, research on American youth finds that at least one in four of them is at serious risk of never achieving productive adulthood. What is wrong with this picture?

The team reviewed new research on the brain, human behavior, and social trends, and the answers they found surprised many in the media and scientific community. First, “belonging” is critical. They learned that humans are “hard-wired” biologically to need close connections with others. Children need responsible parents to provide care and nurture and a web of supportive relationships to survive and thrive.

Second, religion and spirituality are key factors in prevention. When both belonging and belief are absent, children are more likely to experience physical, emotional, and spiritual crisis. Researchers now believe that children naturally seek to connect with sources of moral and spiritual meaning. Like adults, children and youth long to discover a purpose that makes life worth living, to find something to live for greater than themselves or their material possessions.

Third, to provide both types of connection, children need to be part of what researchers call

“authoritative communities,”—strong families and schools, religious congregations and other associations and youth groups that provide encouragement, clear limits, and accountability. When these communities weaken, children suffer. Families and other institutions of civil society that should help immunize children from distress have themselves been seriously undermined in recent decades by a variety of social forces and by public policies that have neglected their important roles.

If children are more likely to succeed when they are connected to healthy families and strong social and religious networks of support, how then can citizens and elected officials help address America’s growing “social deficit?” To begin, the report urges all adults to examine the impact they are making on children’s lives through their family and community ties. Do these relationships model what it means to live a good life and nurture a child’s sense of belonging and emotional and spiritual growth?

Candidates in Campaign 2004 should take to heart the findings of this study, and advocate policies that will energize and not debilitate the efforts of the “authoritative communities.” This idea is not new. Both Republican and Democratic administrations have adopted policies and programs such as the Family and Medical Leave Act, the newly announced Marriage Initiative, and the Faith-Based and Community Initiative that show how government at its best can support the unique roles that families and other critical social institutions play.

Finally, during this campaign season, voters also bear important responsibilities. When candidates ask for our votes, we should expect them to serve more than narrow special interests. The critical citizen should ask which candidate will use his or her authority to empower America’s community institutions to do what they do best for the common good.

—Stephen Lazarus  
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To learn more about “Hardwired to Connect”, visit <http://www.americanvalues.org/html/hardwired.html>.

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