

## **Mental and behaviour health - *Old problem, new solution?***

Over the last three years there has been increasing discussion of a report, *Hardwired to connect: A new scientific case of Authoritative Communities*, by the Commission on Children at Risk a coalition of researchers from YMCA USA, Dartmouth Medical School and the Institute of American Values. It postulates that, amidst unprecedented material affluence, the mental and behavioural health of US children and adolescents is deteriorating as evidenced by high and rising rates of depression, conduct disorders and thoughts of suicide.

The evidence sighted includes 21% of US children aged 9-17 have diagnosable mental or addictive disorders, the current generation is more likely to be depressed than their parents, 20% of students report having seriously considered suicide, youth homicide has increased 130% since 1950 and youth suicide by 140%. Adolescents from immigrant families are less likely than US-born adolescents to experience school absences due to health and emotional problems and less likely to engage in risky behaviours.

The report argues that the current models of treatment by prescription drugs, a focus on the extremes and early intervention are inadequate and that a structural, systemic and social solution is required. The basis for its recommendations (see further on) are based on an argued scientific case that the brain develops best in the context of relationship with other brains establishing a resilience to psychiatric disorders. The case is extensively argued and can be read from various presentations available on the web. Just type "Hardwired to connect" into a search engine. (I used *Google*). I am not a scientist and can not argue the merits or otherwise of the extensive scientific case that is put forward.

Some of the conclusions are: that adolescent risk-taking and novelty-seeking behaviours are connected to changes in brain structure and function; that differences in gender, meaning and well-being are attributable to both environmental and biological factors; human communities across time and culture help to define and enforce social meaning and meet gender needs; and that morality is associated with a biological attachment. It is this emphasis on attachment or connectedness that leads to the description of the problem facing children and young people: there has been a breakdown in close connections to other people and associated with this breakdown, a loss of deep connections to moral and spiritual meaning. The question is asked: where do children find moral and spiritual meaning if their families are dysfunctional, their parents often physically and emotionally absent and no other significant adult relates to them directly? For older children, the question is raised about the social, not only personal well-being of the child by asking the question about their connectedness to school and other social groups that can provide meaning and connectedness.

It is in this context that religion is seen to provide meaning and connectedness. However, this is a very broad view of spirituality and religion. It is not a case for Christianity alone, but an opportunity for Christians to share their experience to help others fill this gap in their development. The research indicates that those who attend a church and are involved in church youth groups are less likely to show the risk-taking and novelty-seeking behaviours, but so to are those connected to other social groups, especially those focused on helping others.

There are many programs in the community, and increasingly in schools, that focus on service learning as a way to connect young people to their communities and to develop meaning and connectedness. These programs represent an opportunity for Christians, especially Christian teachers, to contribute to the development of young people and to go a step further by introducing them to churches with effective children's and youth work so that they might discover Jesus. The report concludes by emphasising the need for children and young people to be attached to "authoritative communities" which are characterised as: inclusive of children and youth, focused on children and youth needs, caring, able to set clear expectations and limits, comprising non-specialists, multigenerational, long-termed focused, promoting a shared understanding of what it means to be a good person, encouraging spiritual development and oriented to the principle of "love thy neighbour". Is your school or church an authoritative community?

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