

Hardwired to Connect: Nurturing “Authoritative Communities”

Part II

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This is my last article until September. I hope the next few months prove relaxing for you. I also hope that given the theme of this article, you will spend some time during these months to reflect upon the connections that exist in your life and ways to strengthen these connections and build new ones.

In last month’s article I discussed a thought-provoking report that was recently released, “Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities.” The report, which was prepared by the Commission on Children at Risk, a group comprised of 33 prominent children’s doctors, researchers, and mental health and youth service providers, details the deteriorating mental and behavioral health of children in the United States.

The Commission contends, “In large measure, what’s causing the 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.” The Commission observes that while research from the fields of neuroscience and basic biology indicate that children are “hardwired to connect” to other people and for moral meaning in their lives, “in recent decades, the U.S. social institutions that foster these two forms of connectedness for children have gotten significantly weaker.”

As an antidote to this lack of connectedness, the Commission advocates the creation of “authoritative communities.” They explain their use of the word “authoritative” by noting, “First 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. Second the word comes from the Latin *auctor*, which can mean ‘one who creates.’ We like that. Authoritative communities just don’t happen. They are created and sustained by dedicated individuals with a shared vision of building a good life for the next generation.”

As I noted in last month’s article, the Commission lists the following 10 main characteristics of an authoritative community:

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.

This list requires more than just a perfunctory reading. I believe we should carefully consider each point and ask, “In what way do I foster the qualities of an authoritative community within my family, my neighborhood, my place of work?” An awareness of the 10 characteristics can guide our individual behaviors as we assume responsibility for ensuring that our children thrive emotionally, physically, and spiritually. All-too-often as a society we have focused on dealing with children’s problems once they appear rather than on preventing problems from emerging. It makes more sense to adopt a crisis prevention rather than a crisis intervention approach in the upbringing of our youth, guided by the goal of creating environments in which children feel secure and connected.

Each of us can contribute to the realization of this goal. Each contribution, regardless of how large or small, builds upon the foundation and structure of an authoritative community. There are many ways in which parents and other adults can help to construct such a community. What follows are several suggestions, which I hope will prompt you to consider other possible avenues for realizing an authoritative community.

I should first like to consider the role of parents. Almost all parents recognize the value of developing warm, comfortable, and secure relationships with their children, but various external pressures and challenges can serve as obstacles in achieving this task.

For example, there are a large number of children being raised in single parent homes in which the parent receives little, if any, support and is overwhelmed by a myriad of demands that lessen her or his effectiveness as a parent. Of course, such stress is not unique to the single parent. During the past couple of decades dual-parent households have witnessed an increase in both parents working. Juggling work schedules with parenting demands has resulted in many stressed-out parents who feel they are on a nonstop treadmill going around in circles. As one father said, “I want to spend time with my children. I know I should spend time with them, but with all of my responsibilities at work, I seem to be spending less and less time with them.” A mother lamented, “I have some flexibility in my work schedule, but even with that flexibility I feel like I am constantly driving my kids from one activity to the next. I think I spend more time with my kids in the car than anywhere else. That would be okay if I was relaxed in the car, but I’m not since I’m always rushing and worried that I won’t get my kids to where they should be on time.”

As a parent and as a therapist, I certainly recognize and appreciate the stresses of parenting in today’s world. I can understand the parent who says, “I know I should limit the number of hours my children watch television or play video games, but at least it keeps them occupied while I’m catching up with other things.” However, while I can empathize with these sentiments, I believe we must strive to build into our daily routine opportunities to truly connect with our children without the presence of countless distractions. Not only will our children benefit from our undivided attention and love, but it has been my experience that our own emotional health will be enhanced as we engage in activities that bring meaning and purpose to our lives as parents.

In our book *Raising Resilient Children*, my colleague Sam Goldstein and I recommend several steps for nurturing connections with our children and helping them to feel acceptance and unconditional love. For example, we advocate setting aside times each day, week, or month that are designated as “special.” When we actually use the term “special,” we express to our children that we value them and that we enjoy having uninterrupted time with them. Obviously, these prearranged times should not preclude having other spontaneous moments in which they have our undivided attention.

However, time set aside each week for all of our children together as well as each child alone emphasizes their significance to us and that we love them.

When children are young, parents can say to the child, “When I read to you, when I play with you, it is such an important, special time that even if the phone rings I won’t answer it.” One six-year-old in my practice reported with excitement and joy, “I know my parents love me.” When I asked how he knew, he answered, “When they read to me and the phone rings, they let the answering machine answer it.” As I have often noted, sometimes the simplest gestures bring far-reaching results.

These special individual times should continue into the adolescent years of our children. We must remember that even as our teenagers appear to be pushing us away with one arm, the other arm is often holding us near. There are countless opportunities to spend time with our adolescent, whether going to a sporting event, going out for dinner, cooking a meal together, playing a video game (better to join certain activities than to fight them), or being involved with a cause that holds special interest for our teenager. I recall one father’s relationship with his teenage daughter improving significantly when he collaborated with her in her efforts to have a traffic light placed at a dangerous intersection in their town.

Connections with our children are nurtured through family traditions we create. Hectic schedules should not deter parents from involving their children in activities such as holding a family meeting each week to discuss “family matters” and to consider if any changes are necessary in family life, or volunteering as a family to work for a charity, or establishing a weekly meal during which family members voice positive comments about and appreciation for each other. I worked with several families who initially were skeptical about such an activity, believing it was very contrived; they were pleasantly surprised to discover that even if contrived at first, they soon enjoyed hearing more positive comments from each other.

There are many opportunities for adults, whether they are parents or not, to support the existence of an authoritative community beyond the boundaries of one’s family. To do so we must subscribe to the belief that each child is our “own” child, that each child is part of “our” community. There is ample research to demonstrate that the presence of even one caring adult in a child’s life can foster hope and resilience in that

child and diminish the likelihood of violent behavior, drug use, or dropping out of school. One must never underestimate the power of one adult to change the course of a child's life forever.

There is an urgent need for adults of all ages to serve as mentors for children, especially those youngsters who have limited experience with caring adults who can help them to develop compassion, responsibility, self-esteem, and self-discipline. Numerous organizations such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters as well as church-sponsored groups are in existence to bring adults in contact with children in need. Youth sports is another avenue through which children can connect with adults and in the process learn the importance of teamwork, fun, perseverance and, very importantly, how to lose and win with grace and dignity. However, without adults who are willing to donate their time as coaches, youth sports cannot exist. Adults can also tutor children and reinforce their strengths or "islands of competence" in areas such as music or art.

The specific activity with a child is less important than the development of a child's relationship with an adult who appreciates the features of a community in which children are nurtured and valued. In this regard, we should keep in mind a key recommendation offered in "Hardwired to Connect," namely, "that all adults examine the degree to which they are positively influencing the lives of children through participating in authoritative communities, and where possible to do a better job." Many other recommendations and suggestions may be found in this report.

As you consider the ways in which you can impact positively on the lives of youth in your community, you may wish to reflect upon the words of Hillel, the Hebrew scholar who lived in the first century:

"If I am not for myself, then who will be for me?
And if I am only for myself, then what am I?
And if not now, when?"

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