

Study Says Teens May Be Hardwired For Religion

Christianity Has The Truth About Community – But Are We Living Up To The Biblical Model In The Lives Of Our Children?

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What if we could find something that would make teenagers less likely to become involved in crime, drug and alcohol abuse, and premarital sex?

And at the same time, what if this little miracle "something" would turn adolescents into safer drivers, make them more likely to participate in extracurricular activities like a higher sense of self-esteem?

Sound too good to be true? It's not. Religion is the key – more specifically, the religious communities that are able to transmit the beliefs, values and morals that help give young people a sense of the transcendent, an ordered universe and their own place in it.

That's the conclusion of a new scientific study from the Commission on Children at Risk in its report *Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities*. The results have tremendous implications for the future of our culture and, perhaps, Western Civilization. But those results also carry deep challenges for the church, which often seems to miss the truth almost as badly as do those in the secular fields of science.

Withering in the Midst of Plenty? The commission describes itself as an independent, jointly-sponsored initiative of Dartmouth Medical School, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and the Institute for American Values. The members consisted of a group of 33 children's doctors, research scientists, and mental health and youth service professionals.

The commission was convened because of a growing sense that children and teens today are facing a widespread and deepening crisis. "In the midst of unprecedented material affluence, large and growing numbers of U.S. children and adolescents are failing to flourish," the commission said.

Mental and emotional difficulties seem to have afflicted our youth at staggering rates, including depression, anxiety, attention deficit disorder, conduct disorders, and thoughts of suicide – and a wide variety of physical ailments that have their roots in emotional troubles, such as heart disease, irritable bowel syndrome and ulcers.

The report said: "Despite increased ability to treat depression, the current generation of young people is more likely to be depressed and anxious than was its parent's generation. According to one study, by the 1980s, U.S. children as a group were reporting more anxiety than did children who were psychiatric patients in the 1950s." (Emphasis in original)

Hand-in-hand with these mental and emotional problems, the report also noted what it said were unacceptably high "rates of related behavioral problems such as substance abuse, school dropout, interpersonal violence, premature sexual intercourse, and teenage pregnancy."

There are profound and long-term ramifications of this breakdown, as noted by Dr. Robert Shaw, a child and family psychiatrist and director of the Family Institute of Berkeley in California, in his recent book, *The Epidemic: The Rot of American Culture, Absentee and Permissive Parenting, and the Resultant Plague of Joyless, Selfish Children*.

If the title of Shaw's work is a bit cumbersome, its message is not. These mental and emotional problems are affecting the nation and its future. "Large numbers of children, even including those who could be considered privileged, are not longer developing the empathy, moral commitment, and ability to love necessary to maintain our society at the level that has always been our dream," he writes.

Hardwired for Meaning

So what's the problem? A significant cause of the "crisis," the commission said, is that children and teens are experiencing "a lack of connectedness...to other people, and [lack of] deep connections to moral and spiritual meaning."

Such connectedness is critical for developing children, because the report insisted that human beings, from their earliest years, are essentially "hardwired" to form close attachments to other people, beginning with parents, and then expanding to include a wider group of people as the child grows up.

Not surprisingly for Christians who believe that God has designed the human race for this sense of and need for community, the commission noted that this appears to be hardwired into the biology of personhood.

According to Shaw, however, kids are experiencing these connections less and less in modern America. He said, "I believe that the parenting trends that have evolved over the last 30 years promote the development of unattached, uncommunicative, learning-impaired, and uncontrollable children."

Calling these parenting trends "a prescription for disaster," Shaw said the lifestyle choices many parents have made have compromised children's "opportunity for the connections and rituals and nurturing that are so necessary to children's healthy development."

One of the biggest modern parenting mistakes, he said, is: "Not conveying to your child – through both actions and words – the moral, ethical, and spiritual values you believe

in (or not having moral, ethical, and spiritual values in the first place.)"

This means a growing moral vacuum in our kids that is eventually filled with the values implicit in the media and a consumerist culture. Even worse than a vacuum, however, is that Shaw said, "our culture may well be breeding a generation of unattached, predatory children who are cognitively smart but lack the capacity to appreciate the feelings and positions of other people."

Morality was also one of the things emphasized by the commission's report. In fact, *Hardwired* stressed even more than morality – it stressed religion. The commission said a significant body of scientific evidence is beginning to demonstrate that "we are hard-wired for meaning, born with a built-in capacity and drive to search for purpose and reflect on life's ultimate ends."

The report stated that the human brain appears to have a built-in capacity for religious experience. Using brain imaging, for example, scientists have discovered that such spiritual activities as prayer or meditation actually increase the activity in specific areas of the brain.

Many scientists still don't delve into those kinds of issues, but some are beginning to see the importance of religion. Psychologist Lisa Miller of Columbia University said, "a search for a spiritual relationship with the Creator may be an inherent developmental process in adolescence."

While such science appears to be in the early stages, it does give some added weight to the theory that adolescents who are involved in religion are not simply responding to the way they were raised. As the commission put it: "[T]he need in young people to connect to ultimate meaning and to the transcendent is not merely the result of social conditioning, but is instead an intrinsic aspect of the human experience."

If America continues to secularize the environments in which children are raised, *Hardwired* insisted that teens will pay the price. "Denying or ignoring the spiritual need of adolescents may end up creating a void in their lives that either devolves into depression or is filled by other forms of questing and challenge, such as drinking unbridled consumerism, petty crime, sexual precocity, or flirtations with violence," the report said.

Authoritative Communities.

The key solution to the problems facing our children and youth, according to the commission, is what it called authoritative communities.

"Authoritative communities are groups that live out the types of connectedness that our children increasingly lack," the report said. "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."

Among the characteristics that define an authoritative community: It is a social institution that is warm and nurturing; establishes clear limits and expectations; is multigenerational; has a long-term focus; reflects and transmits a shared understanding of what it means to be a good person; encourages spiritual and religious development; and is philosophically oriented to the equal dignity of all persons and to the principle of love of neighbor.

The commission stated: "We believe that building and strengthening authoritative communities is likely to be our society's best strategy for ameliorating the current crisis of childhood and improving the lives of U.S. children and adolescents."

It is startling to see a scientific body make such a resolute call for a change in public policy that, among other things, praised the role of religion in our culture.

And the commission's report seemed to understand the uniqueness of the approach it had recommended: "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 considerable more attention to young people's moral, spiritual, and religious needs."

A Challenge to the Church.

The model of authoritative communities presented by the commission members should look at least vaguely familiar to Christians – because it sounds suspiciously like the New Testament model of church life.

Thus, as heartening as it may be for Christians to see a scientific body give a "thumbs up" to religion, the recommendations made by the Commission on Children at Risk in its *Hardwired* report present a challenge to the Christian church.

Is the church providing these things? Is it, in fact, an authoritative community, or is church more of a social club?

According to the scientific data collected in *Hardwired*, only one of those models will help our young people.

Children and teenagers need to have a wider circle of relationships intertwined in their lives to help underscore the values that, hopefully, they're getting at home.

This challenge to the church is a twist on the old joke that portrayed scientists as climbing a mountain – a metaphor for knowledge – only to discover at the top that the theologians were there all along. The story is sometimes used by Christians in a smug manner to indicate that believers have the truth, and they are simply waiting for scientists to discover that for themselves – taking the long road, of course.

However, the church continues to lose ground in our culture – and lose its youth to the world.

The embarrassing reality could be that, at least in terms of understanding the principles of community, Christians will scale the mountain and find that the scientists were waiting for us.