

Prepared by
The Mothers' Council Task Force
On the Needs of Children

Gather Around the Children
A Response to "Hardwired to Connect"

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Introduction

The latest research in the neurosciences confirms what many mothers have long known. Children are born to bond. They develop through intense emotional relationships with the beloved people around them. Children have an innate need to connect deeply with other people and they long for a sense of moral and spiritual purpose. These are human imperatives. When they are not met, a child's potential is stifled.

Children's needs are best met through nurturing communities in which mothers, fathers, and other adult caregivers spend ample time with children, telling stories, and sharing traditions – communities that articulate a clear and inspiring vision of a good and meaningful life, and then lovingly help children bring that vision to pass in their own lives.

Children in Crisis

Why is it that, in a nation of unprecedented material abundance, growing numbers of children are suffering from depression, addiction, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and other grave mental health and behavioral problems? Why, in spite of our unmatched scientific, technological, and economic progress, are so many children in the United States hurting themselves and others?

The Commission on Children at Risk, a group of distinguished physicians, scholars, scientists, and youth service professionals, has sought to answer these questions by amassing and integrating the most recent neuroscientific and social science evidence. In *Hardwired to Connect*, a report released on September 9, 2003¹, the Commission makes a compelling case that the problems facing young people are due in large part to our cultural failure to meet children's most basic human need for connectedness – connectedness with other people and connectedness to a sense of meaning and purpose.

A number of studies over the years have warned of growing threats to the well-being of children in the United States and called for action to address the needs of children at risk. These studies have been largely ignored. Our nation has so far been unable to muster the will to take the steps necessary to dramatically improve conditions for children.

With its remarkable report, the Commission on Children at Risk presents a new and powerful scientific case, and offers us yet another opportunity, to change course for the sake of our children.

The Commission urges all sectors of American society to take action to meet children's needs. As members of the Mothers' Council Task Force on the Needs of

¹ More information about *Hardwired to Connect* and the Commission on Children at Risk is available at www.americanvalues.org/html/hardwired.html

Children, we hope that every individual and institution will respond to this groundbreaking work.

We hope that mothers, fathers, and other primary caregivers will draw on the report to reaffirm their commitment to the work of raising their children, deepen their connections with other young people within their spheres of influence, and strengthen their advocacy and activism on behalf of all children.

We call on fathers to assess the report's implications for fathering and to respond.

This paper summarizes *Hardwired to Connect*, shares our initial thoughts on its implications for mothers, and calls upon mothers to seize this opportunity to work to ensure that the nation does right by its children.

The Urgent Message

One of the most striking findings of *Hardwired to Connect* is that the longer the children of immigrants live in the United States, the more they “tend to be less healthy and to report increases in risk behaviors. By the third and later generations, rates of most of these behaviors approach or exceed those of U.S.-born white adolescents.”

The inevitable conclusion: our culture is harmful to children's mental and emotional health; we must make radical changes or our children will continue to suffer.

According to *Hardwired*, the ecology of childhood in the United States is “at best anemic, in the sense of weak and inadequate to foster full human flourishing, and at worst toxic, inadvertently depressing health and engendering emotional distress and mental illness.”

But there is also encouraging news. The alarming trends can be reversed. The challenge put to us by the Commission on Children at Risk is to create a new, vibrant environment of childhood that will allow our children to flourish through deep connections with nurturing people and ennobling sources of meaning.

Born to Bond: Biology and Community

Hardwired to Connect describes key biological elements of the human drama in which mothers and fathers begin to play premiere roles when a child is conceived and born. Children grow and develop through a marvelous dance in which biology, family, and community interact in amazing ways – each influencing the other – for good or for ill.

Hardwired illustrates how the quality of the community into which a child is born, or adopted, and nurtured profoundly affects the ways in which genes are activated, how brain circuits develop, and ultimately, mental, emotional, and spiritual health.

The report shows that:

- 1) the mechanisms by which children become attached to others are biologically primed and can be discerned in the structure of the brain;
- 2) the quality of a child's environment affects gene transcription and the development of brain circuits;
- 3) the "nature versus nurture" debate is outmoded;
- 4) risk-taking in adolescence is related to brain structure and function;
- 5) gender is not irrelevant, that it is a part of identity, and that assigning positive meaning to gender influences young people's mental and emotional well-being;
- 6) a child's moral sense arises from the quality of her or his connections to and attachments with her or his mother, father, and other loved ones;
- 7) the development of morality involves a growing child's capacity to idealize individuals and ideas;
- 8) the quality of a child's primary nurturing relationships influences early spiritual development;
- 9) "religiosity and spirituality significantly influence well-being;"
- 10) the human brain seems to be attuned to ask spiritual questions – questions about ultimate meaning and purpose.

Disconnected Communities

Hardwired also shows how the nurturing quality of the communities in which we have been raising our children has deteriorated dramatically in recent decades – influencing our children's development largely for ill.

People in the United States today are largely "disconnected" from one another. Families have gotten weaker and so have most of the other major institutions of civil society.

In the words of the Commission, "those U.S. social institutions that most directly build and sustain our connectedness to one another and to shared meanings have deteriorated significantly in recent decades...and the thinning out of social connectedness is contributing significantly to a range of childhood problems."

These problems are especially serious for our nation's neediest children who live in poor and troubled families and neighborhoods. Yet studies show that even children with significant economic, educational, and material resources show the same symptoms of disconnectedness.

The Need for Connected Communities

The basic conclusion of *Hardwired* is that if we wish to reverse the steady decline in our children's well-being, we have no choice but to change the nature and quality of the communities in which our children are growing – to move, in essence, from disconnected to connected communities.

The Commission calls on us to renew and build what it calls “authoritative” communities – “groups that live out the types of connectedness that our children increasingly lack.”

The Commission acknowledges that moving from disconnectedness to connectedness will require fundamental social change and “ultimately require something from almost all of us.” With respect to low income neighborhoods, the Commission observes that improving the lives of our neediest children “will require special intensive attention and investment – not only from the leaders and residents of these low income neighborhoods, but from the nation as a whole.”

Authoritative communities, according to the Commission, are neither permissive nor authoritarian. They combine structure and warmth and are distinguished by ten essential characteristics.

These communities:

- 1) include children and youth;
- 2) treat children as ends in themselves, not means to other ends;
- 3) are warm and nurturing;
- 4) set clear standards and limits;
- 5) are led by non-specialists;
- 6) are multi-generational;
- 7) are focused on the future;
- 8) transmit a shared vision of what it means to be a good person and live a good life;
- 9) foster moral, spiritual, and religious development; and
- 10) promote the ideals of equal dignity of persons and love of neighbor.

These ten characteristics, the Commission contends, are the minimum necessary to create authoritative communities.

The Commission's Advice

Goals

To create the communities our children need, the Commission on Children at Risk urges the nation to set three overarching goals:

- 1) commit ourselves to the values that sustain connectedness (“values such as marital relationships, family connectedness, community action and civic engagement”) and “reconsider our commitment to those values that often replace or undermine them” (the values of “me first,” consumerism, materialism, the individual as sovereign);
- 2) increase measurably in the next decade the proportion of U.S. children who are members of authoritative communities; and
- 3) effect a major shift in public policy to meet the needs of children and youth by empowering authoritative communities.

Specific Recommendations

For all who interact with young people, evaluate the extent to which they meet the criteria for authoritative communities and make appropriate changes.

To strengthen families, make policy changes to support the creation of two- parent married families and to enable working parents to be better parents.

To help adolescents, provide “greater adult support, participation, and supervision,” and more attention to the “gendered needs” of teenagers.

To meet the moral and spiritual needs of children, youth serving organizations should “promote the moral and spiritual development of children.”

With respect to private and public resources, philanthropic organizations should support authoritative communities, including faith-based institutions, and Congress and state legislatures should empower authoritative communities.”

On the challenges facing children in the poorest communities, there should be increased investment and renewed efforts to address the problems of poverty. Also “allocate an additional one percent of the gross domestic product to children, targeting low-income troubled neighborhoods,” and a federal tax credit for contributions to youth-serving organizations.

Hardwired concludes by calling for “stronger partnerships between scholars and youth-serving organizations” and for “youth service and civic leaders” to help lead a sustained national conversation about meeting the crisis of childhood.

Initial Reflections on the Commission's Advice

Last year, in its *Call to a Motherhood Movement* (available at www.watchoutforchildren.org), the Mothers' Council urged mothers to "refuse to accept the continuing decline in the quality of our children's lives." It called upon mothers across the United States to "move boldly to change the conditions under which we mother and under which our children are living."

In keeping with that mothers' statement, we join this year with the Commission on Children at Risk in calling for a national mobilization to change the conditions of childhood in the United States. We commit to doing all we can to engage, energize, and empower mothers to play a leading role in that mobilization.

The Commission on Children at Risk is calling adults to attention. It is telling us that too many of our children are running on empty – they are empty of love, parental time and attention, empty of stories, of traditions, of relationships, of guidance, of purpose and meaning.

The stakes are high. If we lose our ability to connect, we lose our humanity. We must gather around our children and change the direction in which our culture is heading.

Our Task Force will have more to say on the Commission's recommendations in the coming months. For now, we offer the following general observations:

1. We prefer the term "connected communities."

We agree that the Commission's ten characteristics are the minimum necessary to create communities in which children have opportunities to flourish. We commit ourselves to using our best efforts through the Mothers' Council to spread the word and contribute to the revitalization and creation of such communities across the nation.

But we think "***connected communities***" is a better term than authoritative communities. It is, in our view, a more user-friendly term and fully consistent with the spirit of the Commission's findings on the importance for children of sustained bonds with parents and communities.

2. There is important news here for mothers.

If, as the Commission demonstrates, a child is born to connect with people, the most important person at the beginning of a child's life is his or her mother.

According to the Commission, a child's brain actually develops as a result of the emotional communication and growing relationships she has, first with her mother, then with her father, or other caregivers, and later on with others.

Mothers, it seems, are also primed to attach, even if they are not biologically related to their children. As the Commission puts it, “oxytocin is released during birth and lactation, and appears to strengthen the mother’s attachment to the baby...” And “caretaking, among other things, boosts some of the very neurotransmitters which appear to facilitate caregiving.” This points to the important role of birth mothers and adoptive mothers in the lives of children. It also points to the fact that when mothers are not able to provide care, other loving and consistent primary caregivers can successfully step in to provide the nurturing and sense of connectedness that children require.

Nevertheless, in most cases, a child’s first relationship is with his or her mother. Mothers therefore play a foundational role in the process of connectedness – the process that sets the stage for children’s gene transcription, the development of their brain circuitry, their emotional and mental health, their morality, and their spirituality. This primary relationship influences the capacity to respond to stress, and the development of personality, self-worth, the capacity for intimacy, and conscience.

In the *Call to a Motherhood Movement*, the Mothers’ Council urged an end to the culture’s devaluing of mothers and mothers’ work. The Council noted that “whether mothers are employed in the work force or not, the work that we do as mothers is of paramount importance, but profoundly undervalued and demeaned.”

The findings of the Commission on Children at Risk show how important mothers are and how valuable mothering is. They show that we give short shrift to the work of mothering at great risk to our children and to our society.

The Commission’s findings should give mothers the strength to say that mothers are central to children’s development; we are not easily interchangeable with other people. These findings should give us the courage to declare that bonding is a feminist issue and a human rights issue. They should embolden us to assert that efforts to improve the quality of life for children must also include efforts to improve the quality of life for mothers. They should give us courage to insist that our nation value and support all mothers, whether they are also employed in the workforce or not.

Viewed through the lens of the Commission’s deliberations, the work of a mother – work that is often sentimentalized, trivialized, and devalued – can be seen for what it is: foundational to the health and well-being of human beings and foundational to the vitality of the communities human beings create.

The Commission’s report gives mothers reason to celebrate. And, it gives us reason to work together to ensure that all mothers – in the paid and unpaid workforce – receive the emotional, practical, and economic support they need in order to do the vital work of mothering.

3. Missing from Hardwired: A Prominent Role for Parents.

The Commission does not say enough about the important part parents play in creating the connectedness that children need. In identifying next steps, the Commission calls on “youth service professionals and civic leaders” to lead the national conversation about solutions to the crisis facing our children.

Children are born to parents, not to institutions. In the first instance, children connect with people, not communities.

If we are to overcome the problem of disconnectedness in our culture, we must include mothers and fathers as leaders in this societal transformation. Our efforts must be more bottom-up than top-down. Specialists and civic leaders must be recognized and valued as resources and partners, but not as substitute leaders for parents themselves.

We must reach out to parent support groups across the country, such as La Leche League, a global leader in promoting connectedness. It has been working for years in neighborhoods across the nation and the world to empower mothers and create communities of mothers to support one another in breastfeeding – a vital part of biology’s design for securing children’s first relationship – the relationship with their mothers.

We cannot help children without addressing directly the needs of mothers and fathers. They too must be valued and supported. (For an overview of leading mothers’ organizations, please see, “Gathering the Mothers,” by Peggy O’Mara, in *Mothering Magazine*, July-August 2003.)

4. The Commission underestimates the magnitude of the challenge we will face in changing the ecology for our children.

The most powerful forces in the United States promote a value system that is diametrically opposed to the value system necessary to foster connectedness.

The Commission is asking a great deal of us. It is asking that we assess, and in many cases, work to change the tenor of our relationships with our spouses or partners and with our children, that we assess and change the way we run our homes, the way we relate to our neighbors, the way we run our early childhood centers, schools, all institutions that touch our nation’s children.

Changing course will mean that we will have to put our children ahead of materialism and radical individualism; that we will have to dust off that long-derided word: sacrifice.

To change the ecology for our children, we must offer ourselves and be prepared, as Gandhi taught, to be the change we seek.

The Commission recognizes our crisis of values, but offers no specific recommendations for dealing with this most potent challenge to the realization of its goals.

It asserts that we must deepen our societal commitment to the values that “build and sustain authoritative communities and reconsider our commitment to those values that often replace and undermine them.”

We agree. But fundamental change will require a great deal more than a simple “reconsideration” of the values that undermine our quest for connectedness.

We must work aggressively to make changes wherever we can to improve conditions for our children. But in order to transform the ecology of childhood, we will need to work on a fundamental reordering of the values and priorities of our society.

The Commission admits that fundamental social change will “require something from almost all of us.” We believe that it will require a lot from all of us. Curiously, the Commission fails to ask very much of our corporate community. It does not speak directly to the corporations that create and support the media environment that contributes in largely negative ways to our cultural ecology.

Unless we squarely confront and overcome our crisis of values, we will be condemned to tinkering around the margins of what our children need; we will not be able to effect fundamental social change.

A Call for Mothers’ Voices and Activism

We believe that mothers can play a critical role at this moment. We can be powerful and irresistible advocates in this cause.

Our work as mothers helps us see and understand in the most concrete ways what it takes to help our children grow and flourish. In this culture that is rapidly forgetting what it takes to nourish the human spirit, we mothers have our own urgent message to deliver.

Because of our work, we know something of what it takes to love actively –to offer love that listens, observes, values and empathizes. We know that it takes sacrifice in order to enable another human being to grow. We know that it takes a spirit of interdependence for human beings to be nourished. We know that raising a child often requires humility, a willingness to admit what we do not know and reach out to others for help and support. These and related qualities – qualities of the “mother world – are precisely the qualities our culture will need to cultivate in order to be able to make the changes the Commission proposes.

We call for the passion of the lionesses for their cubs. We call on mothers to be relentless in making the case for – and working to build – a more caring culture – from the inside out – from our relationships to our homes, our neighborhoods, communities, organizations, media institutions, workplaces, and government.

Mothers Motivated by a Mission

Steps You Can Take Right Now

You can create change in our culture through efforts in your own family and neighborhood.

Consider your own home and neighborhood in light of the *Hardwired* report. And decide what, if any, changes you would like to make. Take small, steady steps to realize your vision.

Spread the word about *Hardwired to Connect*. Encourage your family, friends, and members of your community to read the report and our response. Discuss the implications for you and for them personally.

Host a mothers' gathering and use the questions below as a way to spark discussion.

Engage young people; host gatherings for interested children and teenagers to hear their opinions and ideas and make sure that they are also included in carrying out the plans that are developed.

Contact us at (www.watchoutforchildren.org) and let us know what steps you and your family, neighbors, and friends decide on after reading and discussing *Hardwired* and *Gather Around the Children*.

Encourage others to hosts mothers' gathering to keep the circle of conversation and action going.

Suggested Questions for Discussion

1. As a mother, what do you think about the *Hardwired* report?
2. Applying the essential characteristics of authoritative communities discussed in *Hardwired*, can you cite any examples of authoritative or connected communities in your neighborhood and city?
3. Referring to the essential characteristics, what weaknesses do you observe in groups and organizations serving children and teens in your community?
4. The Commission on Children at Risk uses scientific terms such as "hardwired" and "bonding". Mothers often use terms such as "love" and "caring". How can mother's language enhance our national discussion as we seek to strengthen families and communities?
5. How can mothers make a significant impact in encouraging and developing more connected communities?
6. What do mothers need in terms of support in order to make an impact?

Conclusion

Let us be bold. Let us set our sights high – intent on creating something entirely new. Let us build on the gains of the women’s movement to propel us forward to a newfound leadership for mothers in the public and the private spheres. Let us create healthy, nurturing families – families founded on principles of equal dignity and equal regard. Let us build a place of joy for children.

About the Mothers’ Council

The Mothers’ Council was convened in 2001 by the Motherhood Project of the Institute for American Values to examine – and spark public debate and mobilization on – matters affecting mothers, children, and the work of mothering. The Council’s Task Force on the Needs of Children is charged with developing and implementing strategies for deepening the public debate on children’s needs.

The members of the Task Force on the Needs of Children are: Heidi Brennan, Board of Directors and Public Policy Advisor, Family and Home Network; Brenda Hunter, Psychologist and author; Loretta Pleasant-Jones, Mother; Lysa Parker, Executive Director, Attachment Parenting International; Barbara Nicholson, President, Attachment Parenting International; and Enola Aird, Director, The Motherhood Project, Institute for American Values.

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