

## HARDWIRED TO CONNECT

By Steve Hornberger



“...the human child is hardwired to connect... [to] other people and for moral meaning and openness to the transcendent.

Meeting these basic needs for connection is essential to health and to human flourishing.”

*Hardwired to Connect: The Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities (2002) Institute for American Values (with the Dartmouth Medical School) Executive Summary*

If, as suggested by the above, spirituality is grounded in human biology, is an essential component of our innate humanness, and urges one to find connection, meaning and/or purpose in life, then spirituality is fundamental to human development. This may explain in part why children and adolescents “crave” risky experiences, some of which lead to alcohol or substance use problems, especially if they are not provided with nurturance and healthy choices.

Particularly at risk are children of addicted parents, who are not living in a nurturing environment, one that encourages the development of spirituality. Parental addiction fosters fear, shame, and the development of an inauthentic connection to the world in an effort to hide the family’s problems.

Spirituality can be understood as more expansive and inclusive than any one spiritual belief system, spiritual tradition or relationship with the divine. One need not believe in God or an unseen unifying and organizing energy, or even a higher power, to be a good, moral, ethical, human being with clearly defined codes of behavior (toward others and the environment), to have a purpose to their life and a

yearning for connectedness. For the agnostic, atheist, or existentialist, this striving and yearning for “something” greater than one’s self could mean striving to be a better human being, to be more loving, or to make a stronger contribution to society.

Spirituality is relational and can be understood within the context of one or any combination of four primary relationships: (1) between people and the environment (the land, sea, mountains, sky, etc.); (2) between people and other people in terms of love and justice; (3) between people and their heritage (ancestry); and (4) between people and the divine.

Acknowledging and infusing this expanded definition of spirituality with the developmental tasks of children and adolescents helps them to participate and thrive in today’s society, while also preparing them to be responsible stewards of tomorrow’s society. By

appreciating the complexity and diversity of each human being, by providing for equitable opportunities and competencies, we foster a sense of belonging, strengthen resiliency and offer hope. Such support, belonging and hope is what 12 Step programs offer those struggling with and impacted by alcohol and other addictions.

It is fundamental to acknowledge that the developmental tasks of childhood and adolescence cannot be accomplished by the child or adolescent alone. They do not grow up into well functioning, healthy, contributing

adults only by their own actions. The adult generation is responsible to socialize and care for children and adolescents. We have the challenge and responsibility for how well, or ill-prepared, this next generation will be to succeed us, and for the conditions of society and the environment that they will inherit from us. All of us, family members and non-family members, have a stake and responsibility in the healthy physical, cognitive, emotional, psycho-social and spiritual development of children and adolescents. Their successful development builds the foundation of a just and sustainable society. Yet, children living in families affected by addiction are not likely to experience the consistent care and nurturance essential to healthy emotional, spiritual and social development. It is incumbent upon adults who touch their lives – in schools, faith communities, neighborhoods, health clinics, courts and extended family – to step up, inter-

vene, support and guide these vulnerable young people.

“A child is a person who is going to carry on what you have started. He is going to sit where you are

sitting, and when you are gone, attend to those things which you think are important. ...the fate of humanity is in his hands.”

-- Abraham Lincoln

*Steve Hornberger, M.S.W., is the lead author of the chapter “Spirituality: Bridging to Public Policy and Civil Society” in the recently published The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence. Roehlkepartain, E., King, P. E., Wagener, L., and Benson, P. L. (Eds.) Thousand Oaks: SAGE*

---

“SPIRITUALITY...  
URGES ONE TO FIND  
CONNECTION, MEAN-  
ING AND OR PUR-  
POSE IN LIFE...”

---