

Although people with loving, Christian parents do make choices that lead to prison, unhealthy home environments are more closely linked to criminal behavior. But why do abuse and neglect predispose children toward deviancy as adults?

A major scientific research paper sheds light on how human beings are biologically designed to seek nurturing relationships and spiritual purpose, but the absence of these beneficial influences adversely affects brain development.

The Power of Connection

Crime is always a moral choice and cannot be outright excused by environmental factors. However, this study helps us understand how upbringing relates to the empathy deficits seen in prisoners and how the power of the Gospel brought by caring volunteers can help transform lives.

The study, called *Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities*, was conducted by the Commission on Children at Risk, a team of 33 pediatricians, research scientists, mental health specialists, and youth service professionals. The co-sponsors were Dartmouth Medical School, YMCA of the USA, and the Institute for American Values.

From this research, the Commission has published three key findings with important applications for prison ministry:

1. **Finding: “Humans are hardwired to form relationships.”** At the genetic level, human beings seem designed to form deep, lasting, nurturing attachments to others. Even hormones support the formation of relationships. Caring for and engaging intimately with others, for example, causes spikes in the levels of oxytocin (a bonding hormone that causes feelings of contentment) and depresses levels of testosterone (an aggression hormone).

Application: Our relational ministry to prisoners matters. While programming is important, nothing can replace the impact of the person-to-person connection we offer as volunteers. Even though trauma, shame, guilt, or distrust may warp prisoners’ natural instincts for intimacy, we will see results as we patiently share the love of Christ with prisoners.

2. **Finding: “The presence or absence of a nurturing environment during childhood alters brain development.”** When a child has a secure and highly nurturing environment, she actually develops brain circuitry that helps her cope well with stress and bond easily with others. Conversely, when a child grows up in an insecure and non-nurturing environment, the child’s brain develops a greater sensitivity to stress and an incapacity to form nurturing relationships.

Application: Our ministry to families matters. During early childhood and adolescence, young people learn altruism and empathy from adult role models, or they learn distrust and hostility. That’s why our efforts to reconcile and strengthen families through Angel Tree[®] Christmas, parenting workshops, and special family events are so crucial. As we support the development of secure, nurturing families, we increase the chances of success for the rising generation.

3. Finding: “Human beings are biologically primed to seek moral and spiritual meaning.”

Across races and cultures, children seem predisposed to seek out spiritual and moral meaning. Those who find it enjoy benefits including: stronger immune systems, more positive attitudes about life, reduced risk of injury, less drug abuse, and other positive outcomes.

Application: The “God factor” matters. No matter how far we wander or how hardened our hearts may become, we still long for God and thrive when we find Him. And even more importantly, God does not cease to knock on our hearts’ doors. That’s why as volunteers we can have hope that every prisoner — young or old — will respond to the Gospel. We are all “hardwired to connect” with Him.

For more information about these findings, read the report: *Hardwired to Connect*
(www.amazon.com/Hardwired-Connect-Scientific-Authoritative-Communities/dp/1931764042).