

Dr. Kathleen Kovner Kline discusses findings from the Commission on Children at Risk report, *Hardwired to Connect: the New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities*, during a forum held at Briarwood Presbyterian Church in Jackson Tuesday.

Vickie D. King/The Clarion-Ledger



2001, 28.3 percent of adolescents aged 14-17 reported bouts of serious depression in the preceding year. Depression puts adolescents at an increased risk for suicide. In 2001, 19 percent of high school students reported seriously considering suicide and 8.8 percent reported attempting suicide at least once.

■ **Alcohol use:** In 2001, 30.7 percent of high school students had ridden in a car (in the past 30 days) with a driver who had been drinking alcohol.

■ **Early sexual activity:** The 2001 Youth Risk Behavior Survey showed that 6.6 percent of high school students had first had sex by age 12, about 22.1 percent by age 14, and 41.7 percent by age 16. Many adolescents say that sexual experiences were consensual but "unwanted."

Source: *Hardwired to Connect: the New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities* (A report to the nation from the Commission on Children at Risk, 2003).



Study urges stronger community connections 'Crisis of childhood'

By Jean Gordon

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When Jane Taylor thinks about why it's important to nurture the nation's children, she recalls a sign she saw in a Texas classroom that read, "Kids are 25 percent of our population, but they're 100 percent of our future."

"These are going to be the people running our country," said Taylor, executive director of the Southwest YMCA in Jackson.

Along with some 50 metro-area youth service providers, Taylor took part in an all-day forum Tuesday at Jackson's Briarwood Presbyterian Church to discuss strategies to help children grow up to be productive adults.

The forum presented findings from the study, *Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities*, sponsored by Dartmouth Medical School, the YMCA of the USA and the Institute for American Values. The report documents a "crisis of American childhood" brought on by the breakdown of families and community networks.

"A lot of people don't recognize how big the problem is," said Dr. Kathleen Kovner Kline, the study's principal investigator. "They don't know how much community connectedness has deteriorated."

Integrating sociological evidence with the science of infant attachment and adolescent brain development, the report argues children are "hardwired" to seek close connections to other people for moral and spiritual development.

The Commission on Children at Risk — made up of a panel of 33 leading children's doctors, neuroscientists, research scholars and youth service professionals — prepared the study.

"It really elegantly looks at the relationship between nature and nurture," Kline said, explaining the report considered how children's behavior is affected both by their biochemistry and environment.

To promote positive youth development, the Commission proposes that family and social institutions surround children "with a richly nurturing environment from birth through adolescence" to promote healthy physical, emotional, moral and spiritual development.

Called "authoritative communities," Kline said such institutions include schools, youth organizations, child care centers and religious congregations.

"It's the scaffolding," she said. "It's a thick network of adults children can grow up and count on to give them similar, complementary messages about what it means to be a good person."

Institute of American Values founder and president David Blankenhorn — a Jackson native — said the study is one of the first that uses scientific and social science data to underscore the importance of moral and spiritual development.

"It's based on scientific evidence but not on a particular religious point of view," Blankenhorn said. "It says we're morally and spiritually thirsty beings."

Based in New York City, the Institute of American Values is a nonpartisan think tank focusing on complementary messages about what it means to be a good person.

Institute of American Values

ing on children, families and society.

Blankenhorn, who grew up attending Jackson's Fondren Presbyterian Church, said the study respects the range of religious and spiritual traditions in America's pluralistic landscape.

Rather than advocating particular faith beliefs, Blankenhorn suggests society pay more attention to the "spiritual and moral development of children."

Tuesday's forum was one of a series of similar events to be held throughout the country over the

next year, said Katie Ferrier, of the YMCA of the USA.

The Jackson gathering was the first step toward helping strengthen the metro-area's "authoritative communities," said Pamela Sultan of YMCA Metropolitan Jackson.

"The purpose is to bring attention to the need to be connected to kids in our community if we're going to take care of our children at risk," Sultan said.

YMCA Metropolitan Jackson sponsored the forum with Fondren Presbyterian Church, WLBT-TV and *The Clarion-Ledger*.

"Just getting the whole community on the same page is going to help," said Taylor of the Southwest YMCA, which runs a child care program for 275 children, 80 percent of whom come from low income families. "To change a person's behavior or habits, it's going to take the schools, churches, child care centers and the families."

ON THE WEB

■ *Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities*, www.ymca.net/hardwired-report/hardwired.htm