Big Idea 3:

The work of providing this non-academic nurture is done largely by families, neighbourhoods, community groups, and religious organisations (authoritative communities). Taken as a whole, these institutions have been growing weaker when we need them to be much stronger.

> *If this is true, shouldn't all of us as one be working harder to strengthen the authoritative communities that are, or could be, part of our lives? Given the central role of the family, shouldn't strengthening families be a much higher and more explicit national priority? And shouldn't government and private funders be doing more to make sure that the community and faith-based groups on the front lines of nurturing our kids have the resources they need to do their jobs?* (pp. 2-3)

Gladish's questions are too important to be ignored by authoritative communities, including schools. Schools would do best when they work to build and sustain a nurturing environment that fosters emotional wholeness and helps to ameliorate the devastating effects of anorexic relationships; they would do best when they mold and shape a child's social, moral and spiritual development that will in turn assist the child in achieving their God-given desire to build effective connections with their peers; and they will do best when they continue to commit to the task of socialising children and adolescents, including the development of vibrant and healthy friendship connections with their class mates and staff.

Loneliness is a silent killer. The human heart, irrespective of age or gender, has been designed to connect with another heart: not just any connection, but an emotional union that allows a mutual sharing of heart-matter. We have been designed to give ourselves away. Our hearts have been formed to unite in relationships with others, and to experience the reciprocal strengthening and renewing that comes when we take the risk to connect. Children and adolescents urgently need these heart-connections to thrive in a world characterised by detachment and loneliness. TEACH

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*"shouldn't government and private funders … make sure that the community and faith-based groups on the front lines of nurturing our kids have the resources they need to do their jobs?"*

# Loneliness gets a bad report

**Trafford Fischer**
Family Ministries Director, South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists, Wahroonga, NSW

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**The Christian text is quick to introduce the imperative to build close relationships. At the commencement of human history God declares that it is not good for a person to be alone (Gen 2:18 NIV). Loneliness was clearly not a part of God's original plan for human existence. As Henri Blocher (1984) states,**

> ***Solitude contradicts the calling of humanity. From the very beginning, the human being is a Mitzein, a being-with; human life attains its full realisation only in community . . . . Every human individual, being either masculine or feminine, must abandon the illusion of being alone. The constitution of each of us is a summons to community. (p. 96)***

To be human is to experience a deep desire to be in relationship and to build and sustain close connections with others. According to Murphy and Kupschik (2012), loneliness can be defined as "an overwhelming sense of inner emptiness and social isolation. . . . Loneliness is more than a person feeling that they want to be able to connect on a social level with others – but rather it is a perceived sense of disconnection, rejection and alienation" (para. 1). Lonely individuals often experience a subjective sense of inner emptiness combined with feelings of separation and isolation from others. Rotenburg and Hymel (1999) suggest that the universality of loneliness may well arise "from the universal need for belongingness – the need to establish stable social bonds with others who care. In that context, loneliness is the cognitive and affective reaction to the threat to social bonds" (p. 3).

However, loneliness is not the same as being alone. Being alone in a place of solitude away from societal noise can be a positive thing: it can be a time of renewal and reward. Loneliness is when we believe no one is there for us – we have no one on our side. We believe we are disconnected from others and feel isolated and vulnerable. We can be surrounded by a crowd of thousands and yet feel desperately alone. Weiss (1973), cited in Qualter, (2003, p. 11), used two terms to describe loneliness: 'social loneliness' ('loneliness of social isolation') and 'emotional loneliness' ('loneliness of emotional isolation'). He suggests that 'social loneliness' refers to 'being alone' – "the physical absence of other people." In contrast, 'emotional loneliness' is about a lack of attachment which can be either 'felt' or real. Weiss argues that "'emotional loneliness' can only be alleviated by a satisfying attachment relationship." .

Research indicates that the negative impact of loneliness on health can be significant. Early research by James Lynch (1977), published in *The Broken Heart: The Medical Consequences of Loneliness*, continues to be supported in more recent literature. Lynch's hospital based research lead him to conclude that:

> *there is a biological basis for our need to form loving human relationships. If we fail to fulfil that need, our health is in peril.*
>
> *Social isolation, the lack of human companionship, death or absence of parents in early childhood, sudden loss of love, and chronic human loneliness are significant contributors to premature death. Almost every cause of death is significantly influenced by human companionship.*
>
> *… loneliness and isolation can literally 'break your heart.' (Preface, para. 1)*

> *Loneliness … is a perceived sense of disconnection, rejection and alienation … loneliness is not the same as being alone.*

House, Landis & Umberson (1998), note "developments suggest that social relationships, or the relative lack thereof, constitute a major risk factor for health-rivaling the effects of well-established health risk factors such as cigarette smoking, bloodpressure, bloodlipids, obesity, and physical activity" (p. 451). Later research (Umberson & Montez, 2010; Commission of Children at Risk, 2003) also clearly links loneliness to negative effects on both the physical and mental health of individuals. Holt-Lunstad, Smith and Layton (2010) reviewed 148 studies that link death with social relationships and found that "people with stronger social relationships had a 50 percent increased likelihood of survival than those with weaker social relationships" (para. 11). Further, when comparing loneliness with other

death risk factors such as cigarette-smoking, high blood pressure, and alcoholism, loneliness was found to lead toward death as much as smoking 15 cigarettes a day (Figure 6). The researchers also found that the effect of social relationships on human health is the same, regardless of age, gender, initial health status or cause of death.

Sue Johnson (2008) refers to research by Louise Hawkley, at the University of Chicago Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience, where Hawkley calculated that loneliness raises blood pressure to the point where the risk of heart attack and stroke is doubled. Hart (2003), former Director of the School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary, has stated, "Research confirms the importance of human bonds. Without relationships humans wither and die, both emotionally and physically. The quality of our life diminishes when there is no one to share it with – family, friends, or spouse. . . . Everything about us was designed to live in close community and interaction with others. We certainly were not designed to go through life emotionally disconnected" (p.50). Sue Johnson (2008), links close links to others as 'vital' to mental, emotional and physical health.

Billy Joel alludes to the desire for human connections in his song, *The Piano Man (1973)*:

> *Now Paul is a real estate novelist*
> *Who never had time for a wife*
> *And he's talkin' with Davy, who's still in the Navy*
> *And probably will be for life*
>
> *And the waitress is practicing politics*
> *As the businessmen slowly get stoned*
> *Yes, they're sharing a drink they call loneliness*
> *But it's better than drinkin' alone. (15)*

"*what's causing this crisis of … childhood is a lack of connected-ness … two kinds of connected-ness—close connections to other people, and deep connections to moral and spiritual meaning*"

While it might be easy to imagine loneliness as a pressing issue for previous generations, we may find it more difficult to imagine loneliness being an issue in the digital age with iPhones, iPads and iPods, and LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook! Surely the ability to have instant contact 24/7 would eliminate any hint of loneliness. The research suggests otherwise. Current evidence indicates that the quantity and/or quality of social relationships in industrialised societies are decreasing. Holt-Lunstad, Smith and Layton (2010) refer to research indicating that despite increases in technology and globalisation that would presumably foster social connections, people are becoming increasingly more socially isolated.

In a major piece in its May 2012 issue, American magazine *The Atlantic* even postulated that the ubiquitousness of Facebook in our lives, and a growing preference to connect to friends and family via electronic devices rather than physical contact, had created an epidemic of loneliness. "We are living in an isolation that would have been unimaginable to our ancestors, and yet we have never been more accessible" (para 3). Turkle (2011), author of *Alone Together*, suggests that technology may offer the illusion of companionship but it doesn't provide all that we desire, or need, from friendships.

### Children, Adolescents and Loneliness

Loneliness is not just an issue for the aged or geographically isolated—it also confronts children and adolescents. The class room and play-grounds do not offer an automatic buffer against loneliness. Rotenburg (1999) reports that while early research had considered loneliness in adults and adolescents, more recent research has focused on loneliness in children, including those in kindergarten. For example, one study suggested that loneliness in kindergarten children is linked to friendship, peer-group acceptance, victimisation, aggression, withdrawal, teacher–child relationships, parent characteristics, and parenting styles. Loneliness can eat away at a child's soul and diminish the ability to be fully available to the multiple experiences of learning during the school hours. It can restrict potential friendships and opportunities for healthy, creative interaction and development.

A significant study, published in the USA, reported the lack of meaningful relationships among adolescents. *Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities* prepared by the Commission on Children at Risk (2003), stated that in the midst of unprecedented material affluence, large and growing numbers of U.S. children and adolescents were failing to flourish and more and more young people were suffering from mental illness, emotional distress, and behavioural problems. The study referred to statistics that highlighted the high and rising rates of depression, anxiety, attention deficit, conduct disorders, and thoughts of suicide. In their executive summary (Commission on Children at Risk, n.d.) of the research, the authors note, "In large measure, what's causing this crisis of American childhood is a lack of connectedness. We mean two kinds of connectedness—close connections to other people, and deep connections to moral and spiritual meaning" (p.1).

The members of the Commission make reference to a growing amount of research in biology and neuroscience that strongly suggests the need for enduring and nurturing relationships is hardwired in the human brain. "Biological systems

predispose human beings to form and sustain enduring, nurturing relationships" (Boisture, p. 4).

### Building Authoritative Communities

The Commission outlined a number of recommendations designed to deal with the growing lack of connectedness in adolescents. The Commission in particular called for a new model that focused on promoting the healthy development of children and youth by surrounding them with a network of nurturing, supportive relationships. The Commission proposed such a model – what the report called 'Authoritative Communities.' Authoritative communities (or authoritative institutions), could play a role in providing children and youth with a safe, secure and supportive environment in which to form both nurturing relationships and a positive moral and spiritual perspective on life. The Commission suggests a simple working definition: "Authoritative communities 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" (Boisture, p.6).

The Commission came up with a list of 10 characteristics that describe authoritative communities:

1. they include children and youth
2. they treat children as ends in themselves
3. they are warm and nurturing
4. they establish clear limits and expectations
5. their core work is performed largely by non-specialists
6. they are multigenerational
7. they have a long-term focus
8. they encourage spiritual and religious development
9. they reflect and transmit a shared understanding of what it means to be a good person
10. they are philosophically oriented to the equal dignity of all people and the principle of love of neighbour. (p. 6)

The report states that the family is (or at least should be) the most obvious authoritative community. Parents who are defined as authoritative are warm, involved and accepting, and establish clear-cut and reasonable guidelines, consequences, and expectations. They state that research has consistently demonstrated that children are more likely to experience healthy emotional development when they are reared by parents who practice an authoritative approach. Other core authoritative communities include youth organisations and other community groups involved with children, religious congregations, and schools.

### The Weakening of Authoritative Communities

After defining the concept of authoritative communities and identifying their key characteristics, the Commission then considered the health of authoritative communities in contemporary American society. Their conclusion was that over the last several decades a range of social forces had seriously weakened those types of communities which had seriously reduced their effectiveness in nurturing children and youth. In particular, the Commission spoke of the weakening of American families and social institutions in society. Boisture (2003) notes that "abundant data and multiple analysis confirm what the authoritative communities' model predicts: When authoritative communities grow weaker, children suffer" (p. 7).

> *"abundant data and multiple analysis confirm … When authoritative communities grow weaker, children suffer."*

### Big Ideas

Dr Kenneth Gladish (2003), National Executive Director of the YMCA, offers three 'big ideas' and asks a series of questions that challenge homes and schools to be more in-tune with the need for child and adolescent relational health that promotes close connections and spiritual and moral development that may help in minimising the debilitating effects of loneliness:

Big Idea 1:

Surrounding kids with a richly nurturing environment from birth through adolescence is critical to promoting their healthy physical, emotional, moral, and spiritual development.

*If this is true, then why are so many of our current youth strategies and programs focused on trying to put the pieces back together after kids are already in crisis rather than on providing the early and continuing nurture that will keep them healthy and whole?*

Big Idea 2:

Positive social, moral, and spiritual development is integral to the healthy overall development of children and youth, and, in turn, fundamentally depends on kids receiving consistent and effective nurture from committed and caring adults.

*If this is true, then why as a nation have we become so single-mindedly focused on promoting academic competence and, relatively speaking, committed so little time, effort, and money to supporting our children's social, moral, and spiritual development? Wouldn't a more balanced strategy, a more balanced investment, yield a significantly higher return?*