

## **Chapter Seven — We Need To Reduce The Number Of People**

### **We Send To Prison**

We imprison far too many people in our country today. We disproportionately imprison people from our minority populations, and we disproportionately imprison people who have reading problems and who have dropped out of school.

Those are bad, dysfunctional, and damaging things for us to do. It will be very difficult for us to succeed as a prosperous and thriving country who is at Peace with ourselves if we continue down the path of putting far too many people in jail, and if we are clearly discriminatory in who we imprison.

We need to be a country where all children from all groups have an equally high opportunity for success. We need to help every child from every group avoid the pathways that lead to both financial difficulties and jail.

We need to make helping every child a clear and conscious goal and priority for us as a country and in our various communities, and we need to provide that support in a way that eliminates the discrimination and the disparities that are too often linked to ethnicity, culture and race. The book

*Ending Racial, Ethnic and Cultural Disparities in American Health Care*

deals very directly with a range of those issues relative to key areas of health care delivery. We need to apply some of the same principals that can be used to eliminate disparities in care, to the problems of disparities in our education and learning processes.

We need to be a country where each and every child is given the support that each and every child needs in the first key years of life to do well in school and to do well in other key aspects of their lives — and we need to do that work to the point where we do not have disproportionate numbers of people from any group being imprisoned.

We know now that 60 percent of our prisoners either read poorly or do not read at all — and we also know that over 80 percent of the children in our juvenile justice system today have those same problems.

We know that high school dropouts from all groups have a much higher likelihood of going to prison.

We need to be a country where every child from every group gets the kinds of direct and supportive interactions with adults that build brain capacity, language capacity, functional neuron connectivity growth, and basic underlying mental capability reinforcement in those first key months

and years of life when biology dictates the building processes and the neuron connectivity levels that happen in each child's brain.

We need to provide that support for all children to the point where we significantly reduce the number of children who can't read, and significantly reduce the number of children who drop out of school and end up with the kinds of major economic shortcomings and logistical problems that tend to follow the children who can't read for their entire lives.

We need to be a country where we accept accountability together to help every child during that time of high opportunity for neuron connectivity — because every child who we do not help in those key years can end up with disadvantages that can last each child for their entire lives, and we need to recognize the painful fact that those disadvantages actually push far too many of our people today into our jails.

We need to change that pattern of putting so many people in jail because putting large numbers of people in prison is ruining far too many lives and it is creating massive burdens on families, on communities, and on our society across multiple levels.

This is not a hypothetical or theoretical problem. We put far too many people in jail. We have more people in jail per capita today than any country

on the planet by a wide margin. We have more than six times more people in jail per capita than Canada. No other country on the planet puts so many people in jail and the gaps between us and other countries on that point is widening.

That painful reality is relevant to this *Three Key Years* book because the processes that end up putting too many people in jail tend to begin at an early age and because there is a clear link between reading and learning skills and large percentages of the people we imprison from every group in America.

We all need to understand the situation we face today. We should not pretend that this problem does not exist. We should be collectively — and painfully — aware of the reality that more than 84 percent of the children in the juvenile justice system today actually either read poorly or do not read at all.<sup>11,62</sup>

The basic pattern we see for far too many lives today is fairly obvious and highly visible. The children who cannot read tend to drop out of school. Those children who have dropped out of school from all groups have a much higher likelihood of being arrested, jailed, and ultimately imprisoned.

We should do what we need to do to have all children from all groups ready to learn to read when they enter kindergarten so that we create those disadvantages for far fewer people, and so that far fewer people have lives that are scarred and damaged by being incarcerated.

### **We Are All Better Off When We All Win**

We need to think of this as an opportunity to create clear and intentional win/win outcomes for every group of people. We need to stop putting disproportionate numbers of people from each and every group in jail, and we need to take very clear steps to help every group prosper and thrive.

To succeed as a nation, we need children from every group and setting to do well and to succeed. We need all of us to win — so that we have the collective strength as a country and as a society that comes from everyone doing well and from everyone functioning at levels that create the best chances for success in life for each and all of us.

We are weaker as a country when we have significant learning gaps and when too many children are headed down a path that will lead to dropping out of school, being unemployed, and too often being imprisoned.

We are far stronger as a country when we have all groups succeed. We are stronger when all groups succeed in achieving basic economic goals. Collective success leads us to shared success. Shared and mutual success is very clearly and very logically a rising tide that can actually lift all ships in this country.

We all do better when we all do better. We all win when we all win. That is a simple logic that we all need to understand and embrace and then apply in functional ways to the basic neuron development realities for our children.

## **We Need To Support Neuron Connectivity For Every**

### **Brain**

For us all to do better, we need to do the things that need to be done to help every child in those months and years when neuron connectivity levels can be exercised to build and structure a strong brain. We should all very clearly understand those processes and that science and we should collectively make a commitment as a society to provide that support for every child in those time frames when those interactions provide the most value to each child.

We need to do that work one child at a time.

We need to do that work one child at a time because our best new science teaches us that those processes happen separately for each brain. The basic underlying biology is the same for every child, and the time frames are the same for all children from all groups. The basic developmental process happens, however, one brain at a time.

Each brain develops based on its own pathway in that key period of time that means, from a pure logistical perspective, that we need to figure out ways of providing that support to each child at the time the support is needed for that child.

### **We All Do Better When We All Do Better**

That process and that commitment to provide that support is important at a very individual level for each child — and that process and its aggregate consequences are also very important for us collectively as a nation at multiple levels.

We should do that work to help our children for purely ethical reasons. We should do it because it changes individual lives for the better and that knowledge creates an ethical obligation for people who now know it. Ethics and a sense of basic accountability that is created by having that knowledge about those processes require us to do that work for every child.

## **The Economic Benefits Are Painfully Clear**

We should also do that work for very clear and important economic reasons. The economics of these issues is remarkably clear. From a pure economic perspective, economists who have studied these issues tell us that there are huge financial dangers and costs that result from doing those processes badly, and there are huge financial rewards and financial benefits — both for society overall and for individual people in our society — when we do it well.

Highly credible and well-regarded economists from a wide spectrum of economic thought have looked closely at those issues. The economists who have studied those issues have reached important and highly consistent conclusions about what they have seen and about the impacts of those realities for us as a country.

We now know that very credible economists in important academic settings believe that those early childhood brain growth processes and their consequences have major functional, financial, and economic implications for us as a nation that should be a priority for our policy thinking at the national level.



Several important economic studies have shown that the pure financial return on our collective investment that comes from helping our children in those first years get to a path for each child that includes being employed rather than being unemployed (and far too often actually being incarcerated) is conservatively a multiple of the program expenses that would be spent to achieve those goals.

James J. Heckman, Nobel Laureate and Economics Professor at the University of Chicago, has done some remarkable work focused very directly on those issues. His work should be studied by every government agency and legislature process that is focused on early childhood economic realities.

Dr. Heckman points out — from the perspective of a Nobel Laureate — that the right investment in high risk children at that age is the best and most effective way to break the failure cycle for that group of children, and he demonstrates that the economic benefits of breaking the failure cycle are huge.

Dr. Heckman shows us that it makes very clear economic sense to make the right investment on behalf of those children at that point in their lives because the pure economic return on that investment for society is so high.<sup>21</sup>

Other economic analysts in other settings have reached similar conclusions.<sup>29</sup> Economist Aaron Sojourner has done some important research at the University of Minnesota that has reinforced those findings. His papers on those issues are worth reading.

A Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank study estimated in 2003 that the pure economic return for that investment in early childhood brain development would exceed an \$8 gain for each dollar spent on the program.

Work done by economists Arthur J. Rolnick and Robert Grunewald for the Federal Reserve on that issue make very similar points with painful and persuasive clarity, and they also deserve everyone who cares about the economics of those issues reading their thoughts and their conclusions.<sup>30</sup>

Federal Reserve Chair Janet Yellen gave a talk in October of last year reinforcing those positive economic impacts of helping pre-kindergarten children.

A Harvard Economics study released last year showed a return of \$4 to \$9 for every dollar invested in early childhood support for children. That study was done and released by the Center on The Developing Child at Harvard.

The evidence assembled by those economists about the economic benefit of helping children at that early point in children’s lives is fairly compelling. In addition to making lives better in important ways for all of the children who are helped, we now know that there might not be any other functional economic investment in our people that creates a better pure financial return and a higher economic benefit for us as a society.

We do well financially as a country and we will do well financially as both states and communities by doing well and by “doing right” for each child in those key years. We will do better societally and personally at multiple levels when we have more children able to succeed and when we have fewer children on a path to failure, unemployment, negative economic realities, and long term and far too frequent incarceration.

**We Will Not Succeed As A Society If We Continue To Fail And Jail So Many Of Our Young People**

We need all of our people to do well. That can happen — but it will only happen if we take very deliberate steps now to help all of our children get the needed levels of support in those key years when that support is so badly needed and when the opportunities for changing the life trajectory of each individual child away from prison into lives of success are so great.

We will not be able to succeed as a safe and prosperous nation or succeed as safe and prosperous communities if we fail increasing numbers of our children relative to their personal life paths and trajectories. We will not prosper as a nation if we end up with growing numbers of people who are permanently unemployed and unable to make significant and regular contributions to our society as either employees or taxpayers.

Our cities and our states will not do well with large numbers of people who are permanently functionally unemployed or significantly perpetually underemployed. Gangs thrive in those conditions, and gangs are not good for the residents of our neighborhoods and cities.

We could face a future of having major population segments in this country unable to succeed and increasingly angry and divisive because of the obvious differences in life outcomes and the major differences in levels of success that will continue to exist for our various groups of people if we don't deal with these issues successfully and soon.

## **We Will Be A Nation Divided Against Itself If We Don't**

### **Change Incarceration Realities**

We run the risk of being a nation divided against itself in a number of angry, cruel, dysfunctional, and damaging ways if we don't address a

number of key disparity issues now and create the opportunity for children from each and every group to do well because all children from every group are learning ready when it is time for each child to learn.

We need to be honest with ourselves about the fact that we are failing too many of our children today — and we need to be honest with ourselves about the fact that the consequences of that failure reach into multiple areas of our societies and our lives.

### **We Imprison More People Than Any Country On The Planet**

We need to be brutally honest with ourselves about a very important reality. We have three times as many people in prison as any other western country. We have more than six times more people in jail per capita than Canada. We imprison more people than any country in the world today by every measure, and the number of prisoners in our country has been growing for decades.<sup>69</sup>

We do many things very well as a country. In some areas of our performance, we lead the world in ways where we can be justifiably proud of our successes. Putting world-leading numbers of people in jail is not an area where we can take any pride. We are failing badly in our imprisonment realities.

We need to change that reality — and in order to change that reality, we first need to clearly understand that reality.

Two key points need to be understood about that overall incarceration reality. One key point that we all need to understand and acknowledge is that hugely and painfully disproportionate percentages of our prisoners today come from our minority populations. We clearly have discriminatory arrest and imprisonment rates. We have very high percentages of minority Americans in jail.<sup>67</sup>

The second key point that we all need to recognize that most people do not look at in dealing with our imprisonment issues is the basic functional reality that a high percentage of our prisoners can't read. Reading is a relevant issue that we need to think about and address. We imprison non-readers. Roughly 60 percent of the people in our jails either read poorly or do not read at all.<sup>70,71</sup>

## **We Discriminate By Race, Ethnicity And Reading Levels** **Relative To Who Goes to Jail**

Undeniable and painful data shows us very clearly that we discriminate in our imprisonment practices as a nation and in communities by race and ethnicity, and equally important data shows us that the people

from every race and every ethnicity who can't read are the most likely people from each group to go to jail.

The disproportionate imprisonment rates that exist by race and by ethnicity in this country are so extreme that they are hard to believe. Hispanic Americans are more than three times more likely to go to jail than White Americans, and African Americans are more than six times more likely to go to jail than White Americans.

More than 10 percent of all African American males in their 30s are either in jail or on probation today. Current projections from credible experts predict that more than one in three African American males who are in their 30s today will end up in jail over the course of a lifetime if we continue with our current pattern and our current pace of incarceration.<sup>67</sup>

We have far too many people in jail — and we imprison people from our minority populations at a painfully disproportionate rate and level. The numbers are beyond dispute and the consequences of those grossly disproportionate incarceration rates are divisive, damaging, and destructive to us at multiple levels.

## **We Are Putting People In Jail From Each Group Who Can't**

### **Read**

As we look at those levels of discrimination, we also should recognize that within each of those groups, an extremely high percentage of the imprisoned people from the group either read poorly or do not read at all.<sup>65,68,69,70,71</sup>

For each group of people in prison, highly disproportionate percentages are non-readers. That is an important point to recognize. Non-readers from every group are much more likely to go to jail. When you look at the imprisonment rates for people who are readers, those rates are significantly lower for the readers compared to the non-readers in every group.

When you look at the rate of imprisonment for African American males who have attended even one day of college, that imprisonment rate drops to levels that are only slightly over the level for all White males in the country, instead of being six times higher.

When you look at numbers that link dropping out of school with going to jail, a study at Northeastern University showed that one in four young black male dropouts is in jail today. Other reports have indicated that nearly 60 percent of male African American dropouts in their 30s are likely to spend time in jail over the course of their lives.



It is clearly not a good thing relative to incarceration to be a dropout.

It can be very difficult at multiple levels to be a high school dropout from any group. Dropouts are much more likely to be unemployed.

Unemployed people who cannot find a job and who need to get access to money for all the basic reasons that people want and need access to money are more likely to do things that result in incarceration to get that money.

The unemployment rate for black male dropouts in this country last year was 69 percent. The unemployment rate for Hispanic dropouts was 47 percent. For White dropouts, the unemployment rule was 54 percent.

We need to understand the reality that we are putting people in jail from all groups who can't read. We also need to understand that the people from all groups who drop out of school and who can't read create higher rates of being unemployed and going to jail.

The positive way of looking at those realities and numbers is to know that people who can get through school because they can read are much more likely to have jobs, and the people who can read from every group are significantly less likely to go to jail.

### **People With Low Levels Of Interactions In Those First Three**

### **Key Years Of Life Tend To Have Low Reading Levels**

That very clear fact base about who is unemployed and who can't read and who is in jail ties back in obvious logistical and highly linear ways to the main points about early childhood brain structure and neuron connectivity opportunities and development that are at the core of this book.

People who had low levels of neuron linkage support from the adults in their world and who received low levels of brain exercise in those first key months and years of life are less likely to be able to read.

That inability to read can lead those people who did not get that neuron connectivity support in those key months and years down those negative pathways that too often include a much higher risk of going to prison.

### **We Can Measure Differences At 18 Months — Based On First Year Interaction Levels**

We should not think of this as being just a long-term problem. Those brain strengthening processes that happen in those first months and years of life affect children immediately. We can identify with a high level of accuracy the children who are on that path to not being able to read by age three.

Some newer studies point to very powerful indicators of differences in learning status for children that can be measured at only 18 months old.<sup>2</sup>

Eighteen months is a very early age. The reality that we all need to understand is that good research is telling us that some children have already fallen behind by the time they were 18 months old.<sup>3</sup>

The children who fall behind by 18 months and who fall significantly behind by 3 years old are each more likely to be behind when they get to kindergarten. The children who have low vocabulary levels in kindergarten tend to be much more likely to have lower reading levels by the point at grade three when we tend to measure and compare reading levels in our schools.

We know that the people who can't read by third grade are much more likely to be unable to read in high school. We know that the students who can't read in high school are more likely to drop out of school, and we know that those students are also much more likely to end up in jail.

Those are not academic, ideological, hypothetical, speculative, theoretical issues or purely suppositional concerns. Those are very functional issues and realities, and they affect real children at each of those age levels every single day.

Brain development is a functional and biological issue for each and every child from every group of people in those key years. Functionally, that set of realities means we are pointing too many people to a life of crime and to major economic shortcomings in their lives by not giving each child the support needed in those first three years of life — and even in the first 12 and 18 months of life — that each child needs to be a reader and to have academic success.

### **Many Factors Lead To Imprisonment**

Context is extremely important and relevant as we are looking at and thinking about all of the incarceration issues. Those points about those sets of life influencing factors and processes for each child need to be understood in the complete context of our overall imprisonment factors and our full set of incarceration realities.

We clearly put people in jail at much higher levels if the people can't read. That is true of all races and ethnic groups.

It is also a pattern that we can see in other countries. Studies in Great Britain show that roughly 60 percent of the people in jail there also read poorly or do not read at all. There are similar patterns in the Scandinavian countries.<sup>66</sup>

Those countries all imprison far fewer people than we do — but they each also have a higher percentage of non-readers in the populations they do imprison.

So as we look at those issues, we need to recognize the clear linkage between high school dropout levels and both unemployment and incarceration. We need to recognize that reality and those linkages.

That is, however, only part of our problem with incarceration in this country. The biggest problem that we generally focus on when we look at those issues is that we clearly discriminate heavily in our incarceration rates based on both race and ethnicity.

As we aim at reducing the number of people we send to prison, we all need to recognize that the racial and ethnic discrimination that we see today exists in ways that are independent of any factors created by reading levels.

Reading proficiency is clearly one relevant factor for who is arrested. It is also clear that arrest rates vary significantly and even massively in some areas and settings by race and ethnicity with no regard to the reading levels of the people being arrested.

## **Race and Ethnicity Are Both Major Incarceration Factors In**

### **Too Many Settings**

A number of studies have shown us that minority Americans get arrested more often than White Americans for the same kinds of crime in all of our major urban areas. We also know from statistical analysis that minority people who are arrested and who go to court in many settings tend to have measurably higher average penalties than White criminals who are convicted of the same crime.<sup>72</sup>

One New Jersey study of traffic arrests showed that black drivers made up 15 percent of the drivers, 42 percent of the stops made by policemen, and 73 percent of the arrests. That study reported that the actual speeds for drivers were equivalent for all groups.<sup>72</sup>

The reading levels of the drivers were clearly irrelevant to those arrests.

Another Florida study done using video footage showed that racial minorities in that setting were 5 percent of the total drivers, but more than 80 percent of the people stopped and searched by police.<sup>73</sup>

There is no functional way that reading levels of those drivers could have created those disparities in police behavior.

A number of related studies and reports tell us that discrimination, disparities, bias, and prejudice clearly have an impact on many parts of our

judicial and law enforcement systems and that impact of those factors can be shown at statistically validated and functionally significant levels.<sup>74</sup>

The book, *Cusp of Chaos*, addresses some of those issues.

## **Equal Protection Under The Law Is The Official Goal For Our**

### **Country**

Equal protection under the law is our goal as a country. It is the right goal and it is a goal we all need to support. We do achieve that goal a significant proportion of the time.

Many law enforcement people work very hard to keep racism and ethnic prejudice — both conscious and unconscious — out of their practices and decisions. That is true and that is good. We need to encourage, recognize, honor, support and expect that behavior.

It is also true that basic patterns of discrimination clearly do exist today relative to some areas of arrest rates and penalties.

We need to understand that entire context of law enforcement realities and behaviors as we look to using our early childhood development strategies and approaches as strategies to ultimately significantly reduce the number of people we are sending to jail. We need to understand the issues

relating to illiteracy and we also need to understand the full set of negative and discriminatory issues and practices that relate to ethnicity and race.

As we look at the link between not being able to read and being sent to jail, we need to recognize that those bias-related linkages to incarceration do also exist — and that they exist in an overall context that we need to understand and acknowledge as we work to solve that set of problems.

### **We Need To Understand The Full Set Of Factors**

We can't take a simplistic approach to any of those issues. We do need to look honestly and directly in each of our settings at the full set of key factors that clearly influence that entire law enforcement and incarceration process.

The book *Ending Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Disparities In American Health Care* deals with those issues of bias and behavior in health care delivery very directly and addresses ways that we can address those issues in health care settings. The book, *The Art Of InterGroup Peace* also deals with those intergroup issues and their consequences in other settings.

Biased behavior that is relevant to which people are being arrested and who is being imprisoned clearly exists in too many settings today. There are significant trust issues relative to law enforcement in a number of



settings, and those trust issues in those settings tend to have a history that is based on actual negative inter group experiences of people in those settings.

We need to address those incarceration-related issues directly in each setting where they are relevant. We need each of our communities to address the issues that can result in biased behavior by law enforcement and in biased judgments by our courts.

We need police departments in all settings who understand those issues and who act in ways that cause the police to be people who are trusted by the full populations they support and who are aligned with the full communities that they serve.

## **A Number Of Police Departments Are Reaching Out To**

### **Create Better Linkages**

Many policemen do an excellent job of enforcing the law without prejudice or bias. We need to recognize, honor, and support that reality and those behaviors.

A growing number of police departments are recognizing that there have been some historic intergroup issues and that there continue to be some current intergroup issues as well. Many of those police departments are

reaching out in increasingly effective ways to the communities they serve in order to have better linkages with the people they protect.

Those issues are all real and valid in a number of settings. That particular set of issues has been addressed and discussed in *The Art of InterGroup Peace*, *The Cusp Of Chaos*, and *Primal Pathways*, three books that deal specifically and explicitly with intergroup issues.

We need to recognize that there are levels of discriminatory behaviors by both police and courts in some settings that have had a significant negative and prejudicial impact on who is in jail today.

This book about the future of our children accepts that reality and recognizes how much damage those behaviors do and have done.

This book also, however, says that those levels of discrimination and that context of too often intentionally functional bias are not the only relevant realities and factors that determines who spends time in our prisons.

We also very clearly do imprison people who can't read.

We need to deal with both sets of issues if we want to significantly reduce the number of people in our jails.

A major message of this book is that we do need to address and change the functional realities of our childhood development challenges and

we need to deal very intentionally with the real world child development opportunities that we can affect and change if we want to change the number of people we put in jail and if we want to change many lives for the better.

For this book about the impact of not being able to read and having a higher likelihood of dropping out of school, being unemployed, and being incarcerated, the focus for our thought process needs to be to get us all to look hard at the key and indisputable link that very consistently exists for all groups between not being able to read, dropping out of school, and going to jail.

We need to address those issues with focus, clear intent, and even some courage — and we need to figure out how to offer alternative pathways for those children who need better pathways for their lives.

We tend to imprison non-readers from every group. We need to take steps to increase the number of children who can read from every group so that we can, in fact, reduce the number of children from each and every group — every racial, ethnic, and cultural group — who end up in jail.<sup>76</sup>

**We Can't Allow Prejudice, Bias, And Discrimination To Divert  
Us From Nurturing Infant Brains**

We will be doing our children a huge disservice, and we will damage many lives if we allow those other sets of biased, discriminatory and prejudicial behaviors relative to race, ethnicity and even culture that do exist in multiple settings to distract us and detour us from the key job we have today of helping all children from all groups take full advantage of the biological brain development opportunities that happen for each child in those first months and years of life.

We need to save each child by strengthening every brain. We need to do that work one child at a time — and we need to do it in spite of any other levels of bias or prejudice or discrimination that might exist in any situation or setting. We can't ignore those negative factors, but we can't let them keep us from our focus on helping children.

## **We Can't Change People's Hearts — But We Can Strengthen**

### **Neuron Connections In Children's Heads**

We all need to understand that we will actually reduce the number of people who go to jail if we help children from every group with that key set of learning processes in those key months and years of brain development opportunity.

We can't change the prejudice or the bias that might exist in people's hearts, but we can strengthen the neuron connections that do happen and do exist in children's heads. Those connections in children's brains need to be strong to give every child from every group the best pathways to success in life.

Let's do what we can do now to make those connections strong for each child — and let's have many children's lives be better because we have done what we have done for each child.

So we need to recognize, understand and even address those clearly discriminatory practices. We also need to understand the clearly economics linked disparity issues. We need to deal with prejudice and we need to help people reduce their levels of bias when we can make improvements in those areas.

But we should not let dealing with those issues distract us from helping every child. We need to reduce the risk of each child going to jail even though all of those other discriminatory factors will continue to be relevant to the lives of too many people from too many groups and settings.

We all need to collectively understand and address very directly the high correlation that we can see for all groups between not reading and

going to jail and we need to reduce the risk of imprisonment by helping every child at the time when the help offers the most benefit to each child.

For this set of issues, there is great power and opportunity that results from knowing what we now know, because that knowledge allows us to take action at a time in the life of each child when that action will provide the highest levels of benefit for the child.

We know what to do.

We know when to do it.

### **We Need To Help Children Before The Kindergarten Years**

We know the things that we need to do to make a difference in the lives of many children and we know why that difference will happen for each child. The mystery of the learning gaps in our communities and schools that has puzzled and frustrated good and well-intentioned people for so long in so many settings is no longer a mystery.

We know that we can make some direct early support changes for the lives of our children that will significantly reduce the number of children who can't read, and that will also significantly reduce the number of children who end up in the juvenile justice system and in jail.

We need to talk, read, sing, play and interact in loving and supportive ways with each child.

Talking, reading, playing, and interacting in safe and caring ways with children in those key months and years can change lives and the functional consequences of those interactions with each child can put each child on a path that significantly reduces the likelihood that the child will end up in jail.

There is a golden opportunity today for us as a nation and as communities and families to make a major difference in many lives. We now have the ability to save children from the fate of learning deficiencies by helping more children be ready to read when the time comes in their lives for them to learn to read.

We need adults who interact with each child in those key first years of life when the right sets of interactions exercise each child's brain and build stronger brains for each child.

We very intentionally need to talk, read, interact, play and sing in very direct and individual ways to each child in those early months and years to change the trajectory of their lives.

Each child we save is a child we save. Each child we lose in the most damaging ways because of very low levels of direct and positive adult

interactions in the time frames when the neurons in the brain of that child are making their vital and beneficial connections, is a child who will probably face major difficulties and who could easily be an ongoing challenge to the rest of society in a significant way for their entire lives.

Negative paths loom for those children.

Each child who doesn't get that early support and who goes down those most negative paths of non-support is a child who is highly likely to be angry, damaged, and significantly disadvantaged for far too much of their lives. The likelihood of dropping out of school is much higher for children who do not get that early support.

We need people to not drop out of school — and we need to do the things we need to do to keep people from going down the economically and functionally disadvantaged life paths that are the reality for far too many dropouts.

## **Ex-Prisoners Who Can't Read Can't Even Fill In Job**

### **Applications**

We need to create a collaborative goal for us all to do the things that will keep people out of prison in the first place.



Once the prison cycle starts for any person, it's a very hard cycle for anyone to break. Recidivism is the rule. Readmissions to prison happen in very high percentages for far too many people.

Far too many people who are released from jail end up back in jail. It's an ugly and painful cycle and it is even harder to break that prison cycle when people who are in the cycle can't read.

That makes logistical sense. We know that when a person in prison who can't read or who reads poorly gets out of prison, those released prisoners can't apply for many jobs. They cannot apply for a high percentage of available jobs because those freed former prisoners who can't read can't even fill in any of the job applications or complete any application forms that require the applicant to read.

## **The Only Economic Infrastructure That Consistently Accepts**

### **Non-Readers Is Crime**

People who can't get jobs in the normal economy too often find that the only economic infrastructure in their communities that accepts them and creates a cash flow for them is gangs and crime.

Gangs are growing in America today. Gangs functionally rule many of our prisons now and gangs also now have a powerful and even defining role in many of our neighborhoods and communities.

Gangs do a lot of damage. Gangs can make life miserable and unsafe for people who live in their turf and who are subject to their very primal behavior and impact.

Non-readers in both our communities and our prisons too often find joining gangs to be one of their few available life choices and one of their few available economic options because gangs often do accept the people who can't read as gang members. Gangs directly accept non-readers as workers for their various criminal enterprises and gangs give those people who can't read work assignments of various kinds that do not require the person to read.

That access to an economic infrastructure is a major and important economic and logistical difference in the lives of the people who are in our communities and who can't read and it is an even more attractive source of alignment, connection and group identity for large percentages of the people who are prison and who can't read.

Gangs recruit those workers who can't read. The rest of society rejects them. Loyalty to gangs by those particular members can be intense. That loyalty and sense of personal and group identity that is tied to gang membership can be powerfully aligned with people's basic packages of instinctive behaviors and thought processes for all of the instinct linked reasons that are discussed extensively in the book, *Primal Pathways*.

### **We Need To Break The Economic Cycles As Well**

Those are cycles that we need to break and those are both economic and societal alignment realities that we need to address.

Finding jobs for people who can't read and who want to work to break one piece of the crime cycle in their own lives might be part of that answer. People who want to leave gangs and who need a source of income need other options to break the hold of gangs on their lives.

We need to build strategies in our communities that reflect the economic and functional reality of gangs in those settings.

We also need to take the larger view and the longer view and we need to help each of our very young children get that needed set of interactions that build neuron connectivity levels in each child's key time of high

potential and dire need so that gang membership is not an attractive and functionally incited life choice.

We need to provide that help to each child so that those children do not drop out of school and so they do not end up in trouble with the law.

We need to take stands as a nation and as communities on those sets of issues. We would be well served by setting goals in each community to cut the number of people who go to jail by half or more.

We could meet or exceed that goal by helping all of our young children have that full opportunity for personal brain connectivity growth in those three key years, and we could also help achieve that goal by having all police departments focused on being aligned and linked in direct, supportive and clearly collaborative ways with the communities they serve.

We need to focus now on the reading readiness levels of every child as an anchor to that process. Eighty-five percent of the young people in our juvenile justice system today can't read. That is a chilling number. We can change it, but we need to start now if we want that number to change.

### **We Need To Begin With The First Month Of Life**

We need to begin for each child with the first month of life. The new science of brain development and educational processes supports that time of beginning for each child.

We now know that we can see differences in the learning levels of children at only 18 months old. Those new studies showing those time frames for early learning point us in very good and useful directions. They create a sense of immediacy that is extremely good to have.

We actually don't need to wait decades to see changes in children's lives. We can see real changes for real children inside of two years. Those new academic studies about those first year learning impact levels are golden in their power to help us set priorities for what we do now to help children who are being born today.

The impact of those basic interactions is immediate for each child. We now know that there are measurable differences in learning readiness levels that happen almost immediately, and we know that we can make a real difference for each child by beginning the interactions immediately.

The long-term impact of those basic interactions can be massive and will change our communities for their future paths, and the short-term

impact of those basic interactions can be immediate and can change our children today. Immediate is a good time frame.

If we help our children today, each child we help today will be more learning ready one year from now. The percentage of children who are non-readers will change for children entering kindergarten in less than four years, and that set of basic interactions will change learning readiness levels for children entering grade school in less than six years.

When those children who have had that brain exercise support in the first months and years of life hit high school, they will transform the schools. Those learning ready children will break the school failure cycle that we see in too many schools today and they will break that failure cycle in those schools by not failing.

### **The Future Trends For The Percentages Of Non-readers Are**

#### **Not Good**

We need to take a hard and honest look at where we are today on some key trends. A chilling, sobering, alarming, and critically important potentially damaging point for us all to understand and consider is this: Some key trends that we see today relative to the future numbers of non-readers in our society and in our country are not good.

We are currently seeing significantly more children born into settings where reading levels currently are low and where the direct interaction levels with each child are too often even lower. The children who are born into those settings are at high risk of seeing those low levels of interactions happening for those key years of their lives.

We have multiple studies showing that high percentages of our lowest income families are not reading to their children or interacting with children today in ways that enhance brain connectivity levels for each child. High percentages of our low-income homes today have no one reading to the children at all.

The children in those homes with low levels of adult interactions today face challenging and logistically difficult futures through no action of their own.

The positive news — and this is extremely positive — is that roughly one-third of the low-income mothers do read daily to their children. Studies show that about 30 percent of our low-income mothers read to their children every day.

Studies also tell us that when low-income parents learn about reading opportunities, the number of readers can and does increase significantly.

But important studies also tell us that more than half of our low-income mothers currently do not read to their children at all.

One study showed that the lowest income mothers are reading — on average — less than 30 hours in total to their children over the five full years leading to kindergarten.<sup>17,22</sup> That compares to more than 1,000 reading hours for the children in the higher income homes during that same time frame.

Those children who average less than 30 hours of reading time between birth and kindergarten, and who also have very low levels of direct adult talking time in those key years, are ending up with very low vocabularies when they get to their prekindergarten years.

Too many children have only hundreds of words in their vocabularies rather than thousands of words at those early key points of their development and learning. It can be difficult for those children to catch up with the other children in their schools after that time.

### **More Than Half Of The Births In The Entire Country Last Year Were To Low-Income Mothers**

That set of facts and those patterns of behaviors and specific interactions with children for a high percentage of low-income mothers are both increasingly important to us as a country today because last year — for



the first time ever in the history of our country — more than half of our births were to our lowest income mothers.

That trend needs to be both understood and addressed. It gives us an opportunity that we need to focus on with a high level of immediacy.

Those are very real and sobering numbers and realities. We know from a number of studies that our low-income mothers are less likely to be talking and reading to their children. More than half of our births last year for the entire country were to low-income mothers.

We can be on very negative paths and we can far too easily face a very divided and difficult future if we don't figure out how to help each and all of those children avoid the patterns that we have seen in the past for the majority of children in our lowest income families in all of those key areas and activities.

If we don't do what needs to be done to help more of our children in those high need years in the growing number of families where the reading levels today are low and where the interaction support levels in those key areas for children are not happening at sufficient value for each child today, then we could actually be on a path to significantly increase the number of people in our jails.

That truly would be a crime.

### **Only Interactions Can Turn That Tide**

Now that we understand those issues, we have an obligation to deal with those issues. We need to do real things to help with very real problems and challenges and we need the courage to do the right things, because lack of courage on those issues at this point in time will create damages for many lives.

Wishful thinking or politically correct — but unstructured and situationally and functionally unsupported — optimism will not turn that tide. Blaming anyone will also not turn that tide.

Hoping that things will get better also very clearly will not turn that tide.

The only thing that will turn that imminent tide to save more children from difficult and under advantaged futures is interactions — one at a time — with each child on those key months and years when those interactions change and shape each child’s brain. We need the courage and the insight to do what needs to be done now to make those interactions happen.

### **We Need Trusted Messengers To Teach Those Realities**

### **And Opportunities**

We need to support parents and families in their efforts to help and support each of their children. We need to teach those issues very clearly to every family and we need to help every family help every child. More than half of the births in America this year will be affected very directly by how well we handle those issues.

This book deals with those issues and those opportunities in every chapter. Parents are critically important. We need to support parents.

We need parents to provide needed levels of support to each child. Parents need to be a key part of the solution set and the strategy for success for our children.

We also need families who are committed to the children in their families and who are working to provide those effective and direct levels of support for each child.

We clearly need our caregivers — our doctors and nurses who work directly with each child — to be part of the care system and be on the team that helps each child with that key set of issues.

We need trusted messengers of many kinds who understand these issues and who are giving those messages to all parents.

We need to create “surround sound” on those issues.

We also need people in support roles who can go to each family where support is needed to help with the interactions and interactions that are needed by each child.

We need volunteers to do that work and we need trained professionals to help with that work for families and children who need the help of professionals in that key window of time for each child.

We need all of our day care settings to function as an asset for brain exercises and neuron connectivity levels for each child. We spend billions of dollars on day cares, and we need those settings to be reading, talking, and interacting with their youngest children in ways that support this entire process for each child — with approaches happening in those settings that build billions of neuron connections in each child.

### **We Need Child Centered Education Strategies**

We also need the people who run our education systems to be thinking of the full education process for each child to involve and include the full continuum from birth to college, not just K-12. We need to replace K-12 with B-C.

If we want to increase the number of students who do not drop out of school — and who avoid ultimately going to jail — we need our educators

to be supporting the earliest childhood education efforts across the full spectrum of child development as an anchor for that continuum.

In the same way that health care gets much better and more effective when it transforms from provider-centered care to patient-centered care, we need our education systems and our education agendas to transfer from provider-centered education to child-centered education.

Parents, families, communities, and childcare settings can all change the life of a child. Each community needs to build its own strategy that fits the needs of that community and that setting for its children.

Communities that do not do that work for their children are communities who will face bleak futures of collective dysfunction and collective failure. Far too many people will be in jail in those settings.

Communities who do actually do that brain development support work for each child will create a future where all children can succeed and where the communities will prosper because the learning levels are strong.

We all need to support the teams for each child that help each child thrive.

The tides we face today with all of today's births are fairly clear. The time frames we face are painfully clear as well.

We need to create a future for all children that will increase learning readiness and learning skills, and reduce the rate of future dropouts, future unemployment, and future incarceration.

Everyone in society — and particularly the children — will benefit when the pattern for each child is positive and when each brain gets the exercise it needs to create life pathways that lead to success.

As part of that agenda, we should decide as a nation and as individual communities to do what we need to do to cut the number of people who go to jail by at least half.

The path we are on now of putting millions of Americans in prison should be unacceptable to all of us. We need the people who lead each of our communities to understand those issues and we need each of those leaders to very intentionally make a difference now so that we have a very different future.

Our leaders can leave legacies of great value if they go down those paths. We need to encourage that to happen and we need to encourage it to happen now.

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