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Of Human Bonding
By DAVID BROOKS

If I had \$37 billion to give to charity, I'd give some of it to a foundation that would invent an Oxytocin Meter. That way we could predict who is headed for success and who for failure. We could figure out which organizations are thriving and which are sick.

Oxytocin is a hormone that helps mammals bond. Female rats injected with oxytocin nurture newborns placed in their cages, which they would otherwise attack. Prairie voles with oxytocin receptors form lifelong monogamous bonds, whereas other varieties of voles without the receptors mate promiscuously.

In humans, oxytocin levels rise during childbirth, breast feeding and sex. **Humans with higher oxytocin levels are more likely to trust other people. They are more resistant to stress and social phobias. Humans seem to experience delicious oxytocin floods in the brain after being with someone they love. It's no wonder neuroscientists — displaying the branding genius for which they are famous — have nicknamed oxytocin "the affiliative neuropeptide."**

I figure if we can hang Oxytocin Meters around people's necks, we can tell who is involved in healthy relationships and who isn't. If you walked into an office where nobody is having an oxytocin moment, then you'd know you're in a dysfunctional organization and it's time to get out of there.

Now I'm not really trying to reduce all human relationships to one hormone. But ***I am trying to emphasize the importance of human attachments.*** We in the policy world debate education, incarceration rates, poverty, productivity and competitiveness, and we try to figure out which qualities individuals need to thrive in the new economy. ***But often it's the space between individuals that really matters, the nature of their attachments.***

Attachment theory has been thriving for decades, but it's had little impact on public policy. ***That's because the policy world is a supermagnet for people who are emotionally avoidant.*** If you go to a Congressional hearing and talk demography, you are treated like a serious policy wonk, but if you start talking about relationships, people look at you as if you're Oprah.

But everything we're learning about the brain confirms the centrality of attachments to human development and the wisdom of Adam Smith's observation that the "chief part of human happiness arises from the consciousness of being

beloved." (Brain research rarely reveals anything new about human nature; it just tells you which of the old verities are most important.)

And so maybe it's time to focus a little less on individual capacities and more on nurturing attachment. Let me give you an example of what I mean.

Over the past few decades federal and state governments have spent billions of dollars trying to improve high schools. Much of the effort has gone into trying to improve individual math and reading scores. But the effects have been modest and up to 30 percent of students drop out — a social catastrophe.

The dropout rates are astronomical because humans are not machines into which you can input data. They require emotion to process information. You take kids who didn't benefit from stable, nurturing parental care and who have not learned how to form human attachments, and you stick them in a school that functions like a factory for information transmission, and the results are going to be horrible.

The Gates Foundation recently sponsored focus groups with dropouts. The former students knew how detrimental dropping out would be. Most were convinced they could have graduated if they wanted to. **But their descriptions of school amounted to a portrait of emotional disengagement:** teachers were burned out and boring; discipline was lacking; classes weren't challenging; there weren't enough tutors and wasn't anyone to talk to; parents were uninvolved.

If school is unsatisfying but having a child or joining a gang seems as if it would be emotionally satisfying, then many students, especially those with insecure attachments at home, are going to follow their powerful drive to go where the attachments seem to be.

If I had \$37 billion, I would focus it on the crucial node where attachment skills are formed: the parental relationship during the first few years of life. I'd invest much of it with organizations, like Circle of Security, that help at-risk mothers and fathers develop secure bonds with their own infants, instead of just replicating the behaviors of their own parents. I'd focus on the real resource crisis that afflicts the country. It's not the oil shortage. It's the oxytocin shortage.

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