

Five Ways to Foster Purpose in Adolescents

Research suggests that young people rarely have a sense of purpose—but we can take steps to help them cultivate it.

By Kendall Cotton Bronk

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My research over the past fifteen years has focused on young people's purposes in life. My colleagues and I have explored the things that inspire purpose in the lives of youth; we've studied the way purposes develop; and, we've investigated the difference it makes for youth to lead lives of purpose.

Over a decade and a half of work, at least two important findings have emerged. First, we've learned that leading a life of purpose is beneficial in more ways than one. Purpose is associated with physical health, including better sleep, less chronic pain, and longer lives; and psychological health, including hope, happiness, and life satisfaction. The second thing we've learned is that the experience is rare. Only about one in five high schoolers and one in three college-aged youth reports leading a life of purpose.

Taking these findings together—that leading a life of purpose is a beneficial but rare experience—members of my Adolescent Moral Development lab and I began to explore ways of fostering purpose among young people. In the process, we learned a lot about how young people identify meaningful, long-term goals that allow them to contribute to the broader world. Below I outline five empirically based approaches parents and mentors can use to help youth discover a personally meaningful direction in life.

1. Model purpose

Have you ever told your teen or twenty-something what gives your life purpose? Have you tried explaining how raising children fills your life with meaning, or how doing a job that has a positive impact on the lives of others gives your life direction? Rarely do we share the things that give our own lives purpose, but doing so is critical. Not only does it help introduce adolescents to the language of purpose, but it can also help them begin to think about the things that give their own lives purpose.

RAISING KIDS WITH CHARACTER

2. Focus on youths' strengths and values

Help young people identify their strengths and consider the values that are most central to them. Purpose emerges when young people apply their strengths to effect personally meaningful changes in the broader world. For example, a young person who cares about the environment and is equally a good writer may find purpose in promoting conservation through journalism.

3. Foster gratitude

It may seem counterintuitive to foster purpose by cultivating a grateful mindset, but it works. Helping young people reflect on the blessings and the people who have blessed them naturally inclines young people to consider how they want to give back. At dinner each night, ask each family member to share at least three things from their day for which they're grateful. Or use holidays, such as Thanksgiving, as a way of starting an ongoing conversation about gratitude.

4. Encourage youth to reach out to friends and family members

Young people may not know what their purpose is, but the adults in their lives may have a pretty good idea. Encourage youth to send emails to or have a conversation with at least five adults who know them well, asking: (1) *What do you think I'm particularly good at? What are my greatest strengths?* (2) *What do you think I really enjoy doing? When do you think I'm most engaged?* (3) *How do you think I'll leave my mark on the world?* You can help by encouraging the recipients of these emails or other friends and family members to respond. They don't need to spend more than five minutes; what you want are their gut reactions. The responses youth receive can be very eye-opening. Youth learn quite a bit about their purpose when they hear what others think it might be.

5. Focus on the far horizon

All too often, our conversations with adolescents focus on the here and now. Did you finish your homework? Which colleges are you applying to? Are you ready for your physics test? Instead, broach conversations that focus on the bigger picture. Ask youth to imagine things have gone as well as they could have hoped, and now they're 40 years of age. *What will they be doing? Who will be in their life? What will be important to them? Why?* This long-term thinking helps youth focus on what it is they want out of life. And don't forget the *whys*; purposes often appear in the *whys*!

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