

Sense of youthful purpose driven by action, passion, says researcher

April 15 2015, by Clifton B. Parker



Stanford students plant trees on campus in 2013. Professor William Damon sees such activities as leading to a sense of purpose.

Encouraging a sense of meaning and purpose in young people often comes down to a "beyond-the-self" way of orienting to the world, a

Stanford expert says.

Yet while service to others can build a capacity for purpose that endures into later life, said William Damon, an education professor and director of the Stanford Center on Adolescence, those activities should be something that a [young person](#) truly enjoys and finds appealing – not just obligatory work.

Damon's research explores how [young people](#) develop purpose in their civic, work, family and community relationships. The Stanford News Service recently interviewed him about this topic:

What does your research show about how to encourage a sense of purpose and meaning among young people?

There are a couple of key insights that lead young people to start their search for purpose. First is the realization that there is a need in the world that calls for action. It could be a problem or a deficit of some kind – such as, for example, some people die from cancer or some people go hungry from lack of food – or it could simply be that there are things that could be improved or created by new efforts. The second realization is that young people believe they are capable of making such efforts, and in fact would enjoy doing so if given the chance.

Do young people struggle with purpose and meaning?

Of course, as do many people later in life. Purpose requires both a personal desire to accomplish something meaningful to the self and a commitment to take the actions needed to do so. Some people struggle because they feel their lives are full of obligatory actions that have no personal meaning. Others struggle because they have trouble developing

an action plan they can commit to. These difficulties can arise at any age, but young people in particular may struggle with them – some if they feel forced to engage in activities that lack meaning and others because they have not yet learned how to follow up aspirations with appropriate actions.

What are some of the most popular purposeful interests for young people?

Many are motivated by family purposes (raising a family, caring for an extended family); others by vocational purposes (becoming a doctor, teacher, army officer, and so on); others by faith (serving God or some transcendent cause); and others by the arts, sports or civic duty. In our studies, we have found a number of young people with civic purposes such as fighting for a particular cause or contributing to the betterment of their communities; but we have found few who aspire to civic leadership. If this is a trend among today's youth, it bodes a problem for the future of our democracy, since a thriving democratic society depends upon strong leadership in every new generation.

Is encouraging purpose and meaning a worthy educational goal?

Purpose is the pre-eminent long-term motivator of learning and achievement. Any school that fails to encourage purpose among its students risks becoming irrelevant for the choices those students will make in their lives. Schools that encourage purpose will see their students become energized, diligent and resilient in the face of challenges and obstacles.

Why is "beyond-the-self" thinking important for

young people?

Especially in these days of intense focus on individual performance and status, a real risk in the development of today's young is self-absorption. For the sake of both their mental health and their character development, all young people need to hear the message "It's not about you," every now and then. Finding a purpose that contributes to the world beyond the self is a premier way of tuning in to that message. Consider a common example: As early as age 4 or 5, a child can be asked to help out in the home, such as by watering the plants or feeding a pet. When children help out with such tasks, they acquire a sense of service to their families. Eventually, this sense of service generalizes to other sectors of the world beyond the self.

Children take pride in what they accomplish. Service to others, even in the form of childhood responsibilities, can build a capacity for purpose that endures into later life.

How can adults, teachers and parents help educate the young about purpose and meaning?

Parents, teachers and other [adults](#) can nurture sparks of realization. We also found that purposeful youth had chances to observe admired people in their lives who themselves were pursuing purposes they believed in. Parents can model for the child a dedication to a purposeful goal. Rarely, however, did we find that purposeful youngsters found their choices in direct instructions from parents or other adults. Rather, young people tend to choose from the menu of options that they are exposed to by parents, teachers, and other adults. One thing, therefore, that adults can do for young people is to present them with a full palette of possibilities that align with the "sparks" that the young people express. To be of help, adults must be good listeners when young people discuss their interests.

Also, adults can be supportive of the choices that young people make on their own – all the purposeful youngsters that we studied said that their parents eventually supported and encouraged the purposes that they chose.

Is it more challenging in today's world for young people to focus on purpose and meaning?

It is a challenging time for young people to find purpose. Choices about where to live, what sorts of careers to pursue, how to spend one's time, and what kinds of interpersonal arrangements are possible and desirable have expanded enormously from earlier eras in our own society. While the availability of so many choices can be liberating, it also can be confusing for a young person first facing them.

Also, choices create uncertainty, which can be frightening. In prior times, when the major choices about vocation, family and community location were settled by age 20 or so, there was less room for agonizing about what to do in life than exists in our time, in which many young people are still searching at age 30 or later. But my sense is that such delay is not itself a problem, as long as there is learning and forward movement during this extended period of choice-making. In fact, for many, such delay offers the opportunity to make sounder and more interesting choices for the kinds of lives they want to lead and the kinds of people they want to be.

More information: "The Path to Purpose: How Young People Find Their Calling in Life," on the topic of young people and their search for purpose and meaning: www.williamdamon.com/pathtopurpose.html

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