

## RESEARCH



A collaboration of Cornell University, the University of Rochester, and the Center for School Safety

## Purpose in Adolescence

by Anthony L. Burrow, Rachel Sumner, and Melanie Netter

It is well known that a purpose in life is a good thing to have. An abundance of research confirms that individuals who cultivate a meaningful sense of direction for themselves tend to live longer, experience better physical and mental health, and enjoy happier and more satisfying lives (Diener, Fujita, Tay, & Biswas-Diener, 2012; Hill & Turiano, 2014; Kim, Sun, Kubzansky, Park, & Peterson, 2013). Based on this particularly favorable array of evidence, many practitioners and researchers suggest that purpose promotes positive youth development (Scales & Leffert, 2004). Yet understanding how youth actually go about finding their purpose, and the consequences of doing so within the unique context of adolescence, remain targets for ongoing research. In this article, we examine evidence that purpose is an important resource that adolescents can use to successfully navigate challenges and even thrive during this period of the lifespan.



### What is purpose?

To have a purpose implies that one has a prospective and definitive aim for life. William Damon, a Stanford University researcher and author of several texts on youth development, defines purpose as “a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and consequential to the world beyond the self” (2008, p. 33). Accordingly, purpose is considered a personally significant, overarching objective that one continually strives to fulfill. Examples of purpose might include aspiring to produce creative works of art, or striving to make the world a better place. Purpose can, therefore, be distinguished from *goals* (e.g., finishing homework assignments, attending a party, or graduating

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October 2014

from high school), which are more readily accomplished and often serve as mere steps toward larger, further-reaching, and more desirable ends.

Purpose can also be differentiated from this concept of *meaning*, though the terms are often used interchangeably. Individuals may derive a sense of meaning when they are able to comprehend and make sense out of their own experiences (Heintzelman, Trent, & King, 2014). While purposeful individuals may certainly view their lives as meaningful, they are also motivated to generate goals and take actions that are congruent with this sense (McKnight and Kashdan, 2009). Thus, a purpose inherently orients one toward the future – due to its motivational emphasis on pursuing some ultimate aim – in a way that is not wholly captured by meaning alone. Damon, Menon, and Bronk (2003) refer to this motivational aspect of purpose as an *externally oriented quest*, which underscores why purpose is viewed as a developmental resource that helps youth aspire to something that ultimately matters to them personally and to the world around them.

## Where does purpose come from?

For many people, the development of purpose begins in adolescence. Figuring out one's life direction is closely tied to cultivating one's sense of self, or identity, and anyone who has interacted with an adolescent can probably attest to the self-focus and exploration that characterize this phase of the lifespan. Indeed, for decades psychologists have considered identity development to be the primary psychological task for adolescents (Erikson, 1968). More recently, research has demonstrated that youth often grapple with issues related to both identity and purpose, and that development in one of these domains tends to be associated with development in the other domain (Bronk, 2011).

Like identity, purpose is thought to develop as the result of two processes: exploration and commitment. Exploration entails considering one's options for purpose, usually by following one of three pathways:

- **proactive exploration**, or actively seeking out experiences and information related to one's potential purpose;
- **reactive exploration**, or considering a particular purpose after having a formative experience, such as a loved one being diagnosed with an illness; or
- **social learning**, through which one mimics the kinds of behaviors done by purposeful others (Hill, Sumner, & Burrow, 2014).

Ideally, the experience of exploring one's options for a life's direction leads to commitment to a particular purpose. Researchers assess individuals' level of purpose commitment using a variety of self-report measures such as the Purpose in Life Test (Crumbaugh, 1968), the Life Engagement Test (Scheier et al., 2006), or a subscale from a broader measure of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989), all of which ask participants to rate their level of agreement with statements

### Applying what we know: Existing programs and initiatives

These resources may be useful to those interested in promoting purpose development among youth:

#### Educational Services

**Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations**  
Offers integrated services and research-based products to schools that support the implementation of the "Aspirations" framework.

[www.qisa.org/services](http://www.qisa.org/services)

#### Search Institute: Developmental Assets Profile

Offers assessments for measuring the Forty Developmental Assets for adolescents that influence their success in school and in life.

[www.search-institute.org/surveys/DAP](http://www.search-institute.org/surveys/DAP)



about themselves (e.g., “I enjoy making plans for the future and working to make them a reality”).

## What does purpose do for those who have it?

While a more substantial body of work has documented the benefits of purpose during adulthood over the past 30 years, an impressive number of studies focusing on purpose among adolescents has emerged within the past decade – and their results have been no less promising. For the most part, findings from these youth studies have pushed against the common narrative of adolescence as a time of intense emotional turmoil, engagement in risky behaviors, and inability to self-regulate. Recent research, for example, indicates that teenagers who score higher on measures of purpose engage in safer driving behaviors (Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2014), report greater life satisfaction and positive moods in daily life (Burrow & Hill, 2011; Bronk et al., 2009), have a stronger sense of their identity (Burrow, O’Dell, & Hill, 2010), and are more psychologically mature (Hill & Burrow, 2012).

Phenomenological approaches – or scientific strategies that capture experiences that are narrated by participants – have also shown purpose to be an important resource for youth. A study involving interviews conducted with middle and high school students found that those who possessed *purposeful work goals* (career aspirations that were motivated by the opportunity to contribute to others) viewed studying and doing homework as more meaningful (Yeager & Bundick, 2009). There is also phenomenological evidence to suggest that opportunities to engage in brief conversations (approximately 45 minutes) about one’s sense of purpose can increase goal-directedness and life satisfaction many months later among youth making the transition to adulthood (Bundick, 2011). This is important as it suggests that navigating the sometimes murky transition to adult roles and careers can be made easier for those with purpose.

### Research Institutions

#### Thrive Foundation for Youth

Developing a database of research, conducted by former grant recipients, around the role of youth purpose in promoting thriving among students.

[www.thrivefoundation.org/research/](http://www.thrivefoundation.org/research/)

#### Stanford Center on Adolescence

Collection of resources, including publications and presentations, that represent the center’s aim to promote youth character and competence.

<https://coa.stanford.edu/activities>

#### New Paths to Purpose (Chicago Booth Center for Decision Research)

Three-year multi-million project aimed at transforming how humans think about and experience purpose in life.

<http://newpathstopurpose.org/about#Project-Themes>

## Unanswered questions and future directions for research

Youth who have a stronger sense of purpose appear to manage better than their counterparts lacking this sense. Yet, important questions remain regarding how and under what conditions purpose confers its discernible benefits. For example:

- Can in-class lessons and homework assignments become more effective learning tools if they are designed to align with students’ sense of purpose?
- How can activities that students engage in outside of the classroom (e.g., athletics, part-time work, or leisure reading) be structured to facilitate exploration of purpose, both in breadth (by considering different kinds of purpose) and in depth (by thoroughly exploring one kind of purpose)?



- What role does the content of a given purpose play in shaping youth outcomes? For example, are youth who aspire to more prosocial purposes happier than those whose ultimate aspirations are motivated by financial reasons?
- How much commitment to a purpose is necessary in order to realize its benefits? That is, do the benefits of having a purpose emerge only after long-term sustained engagement with it, or are there some advantages that appear immediately, even after brief consideration of one's ultimate aims?

## Parent Interventions

### Life Purpose and Career

Introduces 14 steps that youth can take to identify and pursue their purpose through the lens of professional development.

<http://parentingteenagersacademy.com/life-purpose/>

### Tips to Help Your Teen Find Purpose

Advice for helping youth discover what matters to them and how to pursue those interests.

[www.education.com/magazine/article/purpose-program/](http://www.education.com/magazine/article/purpose-program/)

The current state of research on purpose during adolescence makes three things clear. First, across a broad range of adjustment domains, youth who cultivate a sense of purpose in life tend to fare better than those who do not. Second, purpose does not appear to be a particularly elusive resource, but rather one that all youth have the capacity to foster. Third, a sense of purpose may be leveraged to help youth successfully negotiate many challenges during the adolescent transition. By creating opportunities and spaces for youth to explore their sense of purpose, stakeholders will promote this developmental asset and thus contribute meaningfully to positive youth development.★

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