

How to Help Teens Find Purpose

by Patrick Cook-Deegan

When I was 14 years old, I boarded a plane for a weeklong backpacking trip in the Rocky Mountains. I had already been to the Rockies a few times with my parents, but this time I was headed out to a “primitive skills week,” run by the Aspen Center for Environmental Studies. For a week, we were to live as close to the land as possible. We crafted our own bowls and knives, made fires with bow drills, caught fish with our own hands, and stalked elk for hours.

I remember coming over a mountain pass and looking down at what looked like hundreds of ants moving around in a beautiful open meadow. As we started coming down the hill I realized they were elk—hundreds of elk scattered across the meadow. My mind stopped; my heart opened. I was experiencing awe—a feeling of deep wonder and connection to something bigger than myself.

This trip changed my life. As I came home, I felt more connected to the natural world. I understood its majesty and power in a way I never had before. And I had a greater inclination to protect it and be a steward of the natural world. I also became aware of how much I had changed in only 10 days. I became interested—addicted, you could say—in taking in new experiences that would transform my outlook on the world and provide those experiences to others.

Since that trip I have been interested in the question: What experiences transform people? And in turn, what experiences help people, particularly young people, discover their purpose in life? This question has guided my career as an educator: I started a program for low-income youth to volunteer in developing countries, organized mindfulness retreats for teenagers, and this summer will be leading wilderness retreats for young men. All of these trips were done with the aim of helping young people find their purpose.

These experiences are of clear interest to parents as well: Every parent wants his or her child to have a sense of purpose. But how can we actually help them do that?

What is purpose? How can teens find it?

Let’s start with what purpose means. According to Kendall Bronk, a leading researcher on youth development, purpose has four defining features: dedicated commitment, personal meaningfulness, goal-directedness, and a vision bigger than self. The development of purpose is intricately woven with the development of identity. Thus embarking on a voyage of discovering one’s purpose is critical to during the adolescent years. Research shows that teens and young adults that seek purpose report higher life satisfaction

and levels of happiness. New research even suggests that a feeling of purpose in young people is associated with better physical health.

The research on what specific experiences create a sense of purpose amongst youth is not that robust. However there are three critical components of an experience that make it a potentially “purpose-seeking” experience: an important life event, serving others in a meaningful way, and changes in life circumstance.

Over the past decade, I have interviewed peers, social change leaders, and others who had found their sense of purpose. These were people from all different types of nationalities, backgrounds, races, and socioeconomic upbringing. During my interviews, I wanted to know what experiences had transformed them? How had they discovered their purpose?

Everyone has their own story but there were a few experiences that were common amongst people who had discovered their purpose:

Traveling abroad Spending extended time in the natural world Getting involved in a meaningful social change project Establishing a contemplative practice

Each of the four experiences listed above has components of at least two of the three purpose-seeking experience factors. Each of these experiences could be a significant life event. A trip abroad and service trip (often combined) focus on serving others in a meaningful way. A contemplative retreat and wilderness trip intentionally change life circumstances for youth, giving them the space to create an opportunity for finding their purpose.

One other critical point is the role of technology. All of these trips give young people a chance to take a break from their constant use of technology; this alone is a powerful force for young people to re-connect with themselves and seek connection with their peers.

Young people do not usually develop a specific purpose and then go become an expert in that thing. Rather, they are exposed to something new that helps them develop their own sense of purpose. In short, in most cases experiences lead to developing purpose, not the other way around. This is why summer experiences that introduce young people to new ways of seeing the world and themselves are so valuable. If young people are exposed from 15-19 years olds to events to seek purpose, they will increasingly seek them out on their own until the end of their adolescence, giving them a higher likelihood of discovering their own sense of purpose.

Finding yourself, making meaning

Adolescence is the time to explore one’s inner and outer world. It is a time to seek new activities and experiences. As Dr. Dan Siegel says, teens seek novel experiences. This helps young people try something on for size, see if they like it, and then decide if they want to make it part of their life. Unfortunately so many young people today are not actually able to explore—teens are often either disillusioned from the banality of school or over achieving students are on the treadmill and cannot step off for fear of falling behind.

We have managed to create high school experiences that give students little time for self-reflection, meaning making, and diving deeply into what makes us come alive. I know so many friends and family members that felt like most of their high school was meaningless for them. As Bill Damon, the leading researcher on purpose and adolescence

at Stanford, succinctly puts it, “The biggest problem growing up today is not actually stress, it’s meaninglessness.” Without a sense of meaning and purpose students will either fall away, disinterested in school or continue to achieve without a sense of agency or excitement.

Creating a sense of purpose in education starts with basic “why” questions: why are we taking this class? Why are we in school? Why am I learning algebra? These are straightforward and educators often try to answer them. But most school settings fail to address the even larger questions: Why was I put on this earth? What do I want to do with my life? Why am I having trouble figuring out my identity? A real education of adolescents must start with these “why” questions and then begin to help young people develop their own identity, sense of purpose, and understanding of the world and their place in it.

If your teen is going to a potentially transformative experience, as a parent or educator, it is important to ask the why question: Why is your teen motivated to do this? What do you hope to get out of it? Or why is your teen not motivated at all? These are powerful questions to help shape your young person’s experience.

Of course there is no guarantee that if your teen goes on one of these trips, they will come back with a greater sense of purpose. Research shows that some teens that go on potentially transformative experiences change, others do not. There is an element of mystery in everyone’s journey. It is good remember as a parent and educator: you cannot give your child or anyone else their own sense of purpose. But what you can do is give them the experiences to help discover their own sense of purpose. You never know how these experiences will shape them down the road.

So where do you turn if you wanted to send your teen on one of these experiences this summer? How can my teen attend one of these programs if I am from a middle or low-income background? Although these experiences started off mainly for privileged teens, many programs have made a huge push to make themselves accessible to teens of all backgrounds. Ask about scholarships and sliding scales.

For more inspiration, join the Awakin Call with Patrick Cook-Deegan this Saturday: Re-imagining School and Wayfinding Purpose. RSVP and more details [here](#).