TALK WITH TEENS ABOUT PURPOSE

Difficulty: MODERATE | Frequency: VARIABLE | Duration: VARIABLE

WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

Youth who have a sense of purpose tend to have greater coping skills, resilience, and well-being. And as they get older, more purposeful adults have better physical and psychological health, including better sleep, less chronic pain, less depression and anxiety, greater life satisfaction, and even a longer life. Despite these benefits, only a minority of young people report leading a life of purpose. Parents are in a unique place to help their children cultivate a sense of purpose so that they may reap its benefits.

TIME REQUIRED

Parents can try this practice regularly to help their children lay the groundwork for finding their sense of purpose. Individual components of this practice can take as little as five minutes or as long as 45 minutes.

HOW TO DO IT

Researchers describe purpose as an abiding intention to achieve a long-term goal that is both personally meaningful and makes a positive mark on the world. Parents can use the three research-based strategies below to talk to their children about purpose.

Discuss: Talk to your children about your experiences finding your own path to purpose. Show and tell them what you're doing right now toward that end. Stories from you or other close family members about what gives your lives meaning are relatable and relevant to them. Ask questions that will help them start thinking about purpose:

- What's most important to you in your life?
- Why do you care about those things?
- Do you have any long-term goals?
- Why are these goals important to you?
- What does it mean to have a good life and be a good person?
- If you were looking back on your life, how would you want to be remembered?

Seek input: Making a positive contribution to the world starts with a knowledge of your strengths. One way that children can affirm or discover their strengths is to solicit feedback from adults they are close to. Encourage your children to talk about their life purpose with at least five adults who know them well. These brief conversations (even as short as five minutes) can happen via email, over the phone, or in person. Questions like the following can help them start thinking about how they can touch others' lives:

- What do you think I'm particularly good at?
- What are my greatest strengths?

- What do you think I really enjoy doing?
- When do you think I'm most engaged?
- How do you think I'll leave my mark on the world?

Think far out: Help your children move from thinking about today to thinking about the future. For example, if they mention they don't like something about the world right now, ask them how they would change it. Or if they enjoyed an activity like hiking, ask them if there are ways they can help preserve the national parks. Ask your children to imagine their lives two, five, 10, or 25 years from now. Long-term thinking can help children consider what they may want out of life and what they can do that is meaningful to themselves and others.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Bronk, K. C. (2012). A grounded theory of noble youth purpose. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 27*, 78–109.

By interviewing nine adolescents with a strong sense of purpose, researchers discovered what they had in common: making commitments early in life, which allowed them to learn about a new topic; having mentors who supported their endeavors by providing feedback and modeling purpose; and identifying how their personal talents filled social needs.

Bundick, M. J. (2011). The benefits of reflecting on and discussing purpose in life in emerging adulthood. *New Directions for Youth Development, 132*, 89-103.

Adolescents who completed a 45-minute interview about their purpose in life with a researcher were more goal-directed and satisfied with their lives nine months later, compared to those who hadn't been interviewed.

Damon, W. (2008). *The Path to Purpose: How Young People Find Their Calling in Life*. New York: The Free Press.

Developmental scientist William Damon reviews the science of why a sense of purpose in life is crucial for thriving. He elaborates on research-informed tips for parenting for purpose.

WHY TO TRY IT

Research has shown that a sense of purpose can develop from early experiences that trigger ever-growing commitments in life. For example, a teen in one study, whose purpose became supporting and participating in cancer research, was inspired by her childhood experience of volunteering to help sell flowers at an American Cancer Society fundraiser. These initial commitments do not have to be particularly large, intense, or noteworthy; what's important is that children identify a cause that they are interested in, or ways in which their personal talents can be used for the greater good.

Research shows that mentorship is an important part of this process, as children often need inspiration. Adults can support children in identifying how to best use their talents and provide encouragement to motivate them to move forward with the commitments they make. As children make greater commitments and identify how to use their talents to have a positive impact on others, they will begin to develop a sense of purpose.

SOURCES

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Matthew Joseph, Ph.D. (formerly Matthew Bundick), Duquesne University
William Damon, Ph.D., Stanford University

This practice is part of Greater Good in Action, a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley and HopeLab.