



PURPOSE

# THRIVING INDICATORS

Stepitup<sup>2</sup>  
**THRIVE**

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# Purpose

*The message that young people do best when they are challenged to strive, to achieve, to serve—a message that I still hold with conviction —fails to address the most essential question of all: For what purpose? Or, in a word, Why?.....Dr. William Damon*

**Frame:** This Purpose Conversation concludes the self-reflection portion of the indicator conversations. A discussion about purpose acts as a bridge that connects the self-reflection process with planning for a hopeful future. There is a scientifically proven, powerful link between pursuit of a positive purpose and life satisfaction.<sup>1</sup>

## Definition of Purpose

Purpose is a calling to contribute to the world that inspires wholehearted dedication to something larger than oneself. Purpose counters self-absorption. Purpose is oriented at a future direction of “contributing something new, accomplishing something on one’s own, or contributing something to others.” To qualify as a worthy purpose, the course of action must be worth doing, but most importantly, it must also be done in an honorable manner. Dr. Damon refers to this concept as *noble purpose*.<sup>2</sup>

“Purpose is an ultimate concern. It is the final answer to the question Why? Why are you doing this? Why does it matter to you? Why is it important? A purpose is a deeper reason for the immediate goals and motives that drive most daily behavior. A person can change purposes, or add new ones over the years; but it is in the nature of purposes to endure at least long enough that a serious commitment is made and some progress toward that aim is achieved.”<sup>3</sup>

## The Fit

The Thriving Conversation began with a youth reflection about his or her spark(s), those inner passions that can catalyze growth in all of us, by age ten. Purpose may play a

part in one’s personal search for meaning, but it expands beyond personal meaning.

Purpose evolves through pursuit of the inner spark and arises from balanced growth in key indicators of thriving — competencies, confidence, connections, caring and character (the 5 Cs). Dr. Rich Lerner, of Tufts University, names purpose in his label of the 6th “C” of contribution. In a longitudinal study of 4,000 adolescents, Dr. Lerner discovered that fifth graders had high levels of the five Cs were more likely to contribute to their family and community in sixth grade, regardless of socio-economic status or ethnicity.<sup>4</sup>

## The Gap

Dr. William Damon and Stanford University’s Center on Adolescence developed and tested questions to assess whether youth are purposeful or not, in U.S. communities as diverse from each other as inner city Trenton, New Jersey, high-tech Silicon Valley and rural Montana. This research demonstrated that the overall purpose construct is universal —there are no differences in youth demographics when identifying whether a youth profile is purposeful or purposeless. However, obstacles and inspiration for purpose development do differ by community. For instance, the Damon team found that purpose often had a spiritual focus in rural Montana, and more of a career-oriented focus in Silicon Valley.

Dr. Damon's research shows:

- Almost a quarter of U.S. youth have no aspirations at all. In some cases, they claim that they see no point in acquiring any.
- Close to 60% may have engaged in some potentially purposeful activities, or they may have developed vague aspirations, but they do not have any real commitment to such activities, or any realistic plans for pursuing their aspirations.
- One out of five have a clear vision of where they want to go, what they want to accomplish in life, and why.<sup>5</sup>

"Most Eighth through High School youth have ambitions they would like to achieve. Yet few have the real prospect of realizing ambitions because they lack clear life plans for reaching them. They are motivated but directionless."<sup>6</sup>

## Recommendations

In preparation for adult life, Dr. William Damon recommends that adults help youth develop a sense of calling through:

- A realistic self-appraisal of abilities,
- An awareness and interest in how these abilities can serve some aspect of the world's needs, and
- A feeling of enjoyment using one's abilities in this way.<sup>7</sup>

The job of adolescents is to develop a self-identity and a set of skills that leads to a firm commitment to take on adult roles. This journey can naturally take years of reflection and exploration, and adult guides should be asking essential questions about purpose all along the way. "Unless we make such questions a central part of our conversations with young people, we can do little but sit back and watch while they wander into a sea of confusion, drift, self-doubt, and anxiety--feelings that too often arise when work and striving are unaccompanied by a sense of purpose."

"Youth is a time of idealism, and young people take advice about seeking fulfillment and passion in life seriously. But such advice, given only at the margins of their daily experience, tends to be rich in generalities and sparse in useful details." Youth need assistance in drawing explicit connections between what they are expected to do in a math lesson, or in home expectations, and some purpose that the youth may wish to pursue in life.<sup>8</sup>

"When youth fully dedicate themselves to a focus that stems from a serious purpose, academic research confirms that they "become strongly motivated, full of energy, optimistic, and they have realistic plans to accomplish their potential."<sup>9</sup>

### Footnotes

1. Damon, William. (2008) *The Path to Purpose*. New York: Simon & Schuster. p. 8.
2. Damon, William. (2008) *The Path to Purpose*. New York: Simon & Schuster. p. 33.
3. Damon, William. (2008) *The Path to Purpose*. New York: Simon & Schuster. p. 22.
4. Lerner, Richard. (2007) *The Good Teen*. New York: The Stonesong Press. p. 195.
5. Damon, William (2008) *The Path to Purpose*. New York. Simon & Schuster. p.8.
6. Damon, William (2008) *The Path to Purpose*. New York. Simon & Schuster. p.15.
7. Damon, William (2008) *The Path to Purpose*. New York. Simon & Schuster. p. 46.
8. Damon, William (2008) *The Path to Purpose*. New York. Simon & Schuster. p. 14.
9. Damon, William (2008) *The Path to Purpose*. New York, p. 7.