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The Mentor's Guide to Youth Purpose: The Art of Helping a Young Person Find Meaning, a Sense of Self, and Ways of Giving Back to their World

Meghan Perry
Portland State University

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THE MENTOR'S GUIDE TO YOUTH PURPOSE:

THE ART OF HELPING A YOUNG PERSON FIND MEANING,
A SENSE OF SELF, AND WAYS OF GIVING BACK TO THEIR WORLD

2019



Meghan Perry

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SECTION 1



Worksheets used in this section:

- **Worksheet 1:**
Deepening Understanding of Purpose
- **Worksheet 2:**
Unpacking Your Purpose Journey
- **Worksheet 3:**
Is Mentoring My Purpose?

UNDERSTANDING PURPOSE

We can all benefit from purpose—an intention that supports our engagement in activities, causes, or contributions that invigorate us, get us planning ahead, and thinking beyond ourselves. Some people experience a plethora of purpose—a mindset that reinforces their engagement in a range of meaningful experiences while contributing to others—while many others have never, or only occasionally, identified or experienced opportunities to explore purpose. Wherever you happen to be on this spectrum, you found your way to this resource because you care about young people. And as a caring adult, you can tend to both individual and communal wellness by helping young people connect to and explore their purpose.

As a mentor, your empathy, authenticity, and respect in consistent interactions with a young person is shown to support a wide variety of behavioral, socioemotional, and academic gains.^{1,2,3,4} And those close, enduring bonds with a young person can ripple far beyond individual outcomes. In this guide, we illustrate how caring adults can support interpersonal relationships with young people while nurturing their exploration of purpose. Throughout this guide we'll examine how purpose shows up in a host of contexts and communities—ways in which people around the world come to understand and value purpose as a path to individual and social growth.

While nurturing purpose is not requisite, or even recommended, for all mentoring relationships, modeling engagement in relevant, stirring experiences

of purpose has the power to strengthen relationships and extend benefits of mentoring to families, schools, communities, regions, and even the world. In the following pages you'll learn about the power of purpose, as well as tips to cultivating, engaging, and sustaining youth purpose over time. While this journey focuses on strategies that center the experiences of young people, as a mentor, your support of youth purpose will require your own exploration, reflection and participation. The more you can be aware of your own purpose journey or opportunities to begin such a journey, the better equipped you will be to support a young person as they explore purpose.

USING THIS GUIDE

Throughout this material you will find references to several worksheets designed to help integrate

IF YOU MENTOR a young person or group of young people in a specific program or youth setting, reach out to your program coordinator or liaison to talk about opportunities for supporting youth purpose. This guide also offers supplemental resource, *Staff Considerations for Using the Mentor's Guide to Purpose*, to help program staff review key considerations to using the information and materials found here and to thinking about purpose in the context of a program in general.



awareness of your own purpose journey, so you are better positioned to stand alongside young people on a similar journey. This material is intended as an iterative workbook, something you can come back to over time instead of reading quickly, cover to cover. Most of these worksheets are designed for your reflection, though, wherever possible, an asterisk and footnote within the worksheet indicate how you can also adapt the information to use in direct interactions with young people. If you are hoping for a step-by-step checklist to nurture yours or others' sense of

purpose, you won't find it here—supporting young people in attunement with what makes them who they uniquely are is necessarily continual, messy, and personal work. But it might be the most meaningful work a mentor can do. If you are up for the opportunity, read on to learn how to build your capacity to help a young person connect to their purpose. When's the last time you lost track of time while doing something you love? When you were so immersed in an activity that you could keep going for hours? Maybe you had this experience while reading a book,

cheering on a sports team, or practicing art. Whatever the activity, your full immersion in this kind of experience can be described as *flow*.⁵ Now consider, when's the last time you experienced flow while doing something that was not only enjoyable to you but also beneficial to others? When considering if something you enjoy is beneficial to others, keep in mind that contribution can be of any scale or significance, and is something that is experienced positively.

A CASE STUDY – VISUALIZING PURPOSE

Let's say you have a friend who really enjoys drawing. She has stacks of drawings she has made over the years, many sets of colored pencils, a sketchpad always in hand—you get the point. Drawing makes your friend feel good and she is really talented. She knows a ton about art, specifically drawing, and loves sharing this knowledge with others. She comes from a long line of artists—her mother creates sculptures, and your friend remembers drawing with her grandfather from an early age. Some of her most prized possessions are her grandfather's drawings. As your friend explains, from the time she was very little, her grandfather made her feel important when they drew together. He took great interest in what she drew, and commended her choices and vision, letting her know she had a knack for visually depicting her relationship to the world. This affirmation helped her lean into drawing as a strength. But drawing, she says, really started to click for her during a challenging period when her grandfather taught her to engage in this activity that she found meaningful to help herself, and by extension others.

As your friend recalls, her parents split up when she was three, and she and her mom stayed with her grandfather for a couple of years. For your friend this was a traumatic, stressful transition when everything that was familiar changed. During this time her grandfather had set up a table just her size in front of a large rectangular window in his living room. He lived in a neighborhood in a small community and from that table your friend could watch the goings on of neighbors and the changing seasons in the surrounding landscape. There was a roll of paper, pencils, and paint always waiting, and she was encouraged to help herself, whenever she was inclined.



During this difficult time, when she experienced emotions like sadness, anger, and confusion, her grandfather told her to listen to those feelings. And whenever she was tempted to stop listening or push those feelings aside, instead, her grandfather encouraged her to express them through drawing. So she did. On mornings when she found herself too angry to talk or when she really missed her dad, she sat at the table and drew and drew and drew. Your friend began to notice that drawing helped her feel better. A few years later she connected this coping skill to helping others when her cousin came by for a visit. As your friend explains, she's always been close to her cousin who's just two years older. But one day he came over after school too upset to talk. As your friend explains, she connects this seemingly small moment to a new, significant awareness for her: when, without interrogating her cousin or begging him for information, she gently grasped his hand, took him to the table, sat down with him, and said, "Let's draw." After about a half hour of drawing, as your friend recalls, her cousin opened up about getting in trouble for defending one of his friends on the playground. In his drawing he depicted the scene from the playground and said he wanted to take it to his teacher to help explain what happened from his perspective. Even as a small child, your friend explains she learned to see how drawing supported her and others to pay attention to and welcome how they were feeling. She says she realized at about that time that such a gift was important to share.

For your friend, the meaning she found while drawing was also deeply connected to wanting to support others in times of stress. She was not exactly sure how, but she knew some day she wanted to leverage her skill to not only draw for herself but to teach others how to use drawing as a source of healing. As was the case for your friend, **people can develop their sense of purpose through multifaceted aspects including supportive people (in this case through her grandfather), an awareness of contribution, a propensity or mastery of a specific skill, and meaningful experiences.**⁶

Today, your friend shares her love for drawing at a community center where she leads a host of workshops for people of all sorts of backgrounds, and across the lifespan. Most of her classes are just as much about supporting people to build community as they are about drawing. For example, one of her drawing circles involves little ones ages three to five who experience sensory challenges. Another engages elderly adults with dementia. In these sessions, your friend teaches principles of drawing, while also encouraging

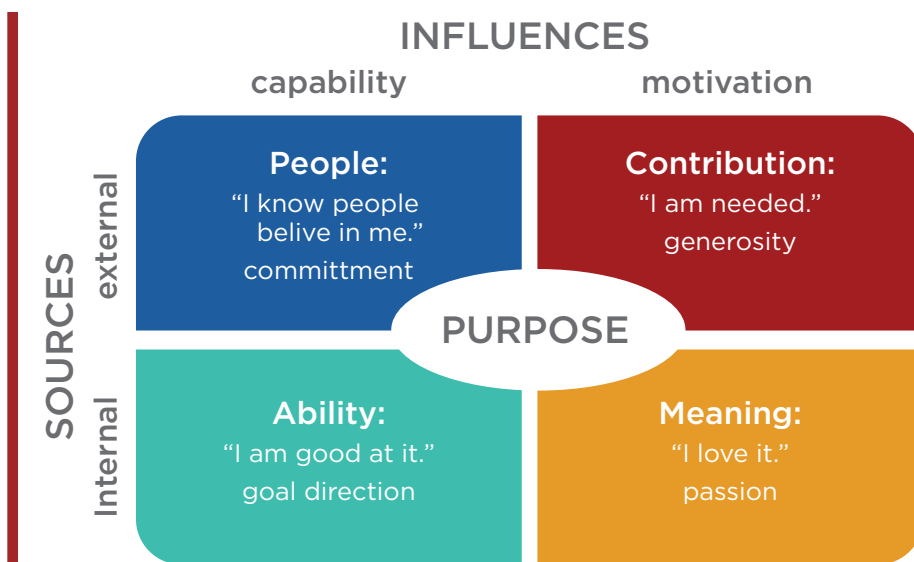


Figure 1: Multifaceted Aspects of Purpose Adapted from Liang., B. (2017). Proceedings from the 2017 Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring, Youth Purpose. Multifaceted Aspects of Purpose, Figure 1: Model of Youth Purpose. Portland, Oregon.



the incorporation of storytelling, supporting participants to embrace complex emotions and experiences. In these activities your friend is engaging purpose, an intention unique to her that brings meaning to her life while supporting others.

As figure 1 illustrates, purpose involves both a mindset and an engagement in related activities. This means mentors can support young people to explore purpose by nurturing both a young person's intentional mindset to contribute to others, and by helping them to plug into purposeful pursuits—those opportunities to support others in ways they find meaningful.

DEFINING PURPOSE

As the word implies, **purpose is planned intention and involves engaging in pursuits that are both personally meaningful and beneficial to others.** Kendall Cotton Bronk, a researcher devoted to studying this concept, describes purpose as a **long-term, forward-looking intention to accomplish aims that are both meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self.**^{8,9} Purpose comes from within, and is formed by an individual's experiences, interests, and worldview. Since purpose is personal, others cannot impose it. While no one can tell someone else what their purpose is, caring people such as mentors can help us identify pursuits that we enjoy, experience a sense of mastery in, and can use to make a meaningful contribution to the world beyond ourselves. To deepen your understanding of purpose, start by reflecting on your own purpose journey see [Mentor Worksheets 1 and 2](#).

Indigenous communities around the world have long understood the value of purpose to integrating individual and community well-being. For example, native societies across the Americas have incorporated above-mentioned components of purpose in iterations of the medicine wheel, also referred to as the Circle of Courage.¹⁰ These traditions acknowledge the integration of belonging, mastery, independence, and contribution as necessary elements of completeness.¹¹ Similarly, in Maori tradition, a community indigenous to Aotearoa (New Zealand), exploration of purpose is deeply integrated into processes by which young people learn to take on adult roles in the community.¹² In these traditions the integration of the following elements (see sidebar) are key to scaffolding youth sense of purpose.

ASPECTS OF PURPOSE IN MAORI TRADITIONS

Pukengatanga:

Mentorship characterized by young person's role as a "link between generations that ensured survival of critical knowledge about connections among people, places, and the natural world" (Stirling & Salmond, 1980 as cited in Baxter et al., 2016, p. 156).

Whare Wananga: Schools of learning where adults share specialized skills and knowledge in areas where young people show interest and propensity (Baxter et al., 2016).

Urungatanga:

Problem solving through experiential learning, or learning through exposure to real-life challenges (Baxter et al., 2016).

While these descriptions come from Maori culture, mentors are well advised to learn about similar frameworks or ways of understanding purpose that may be part of a young person's culture or ethnic background.



As these indigenous frameworks reveal, purpose has many elements that work together. This means aspects of purpose can come from a range of spheres to support a person's overall awareness, exploration, and engagement in purpose. For example, you may know a young person who is affirmed through multiple caring adults in a pursuit they enjoy, such as reading. You may also notice this young person has not yet been supported to connect their enjoyment and aptitude for reading to supporting others. As a mentor, you could help reinforce interrelated elements of purpose by supporting this young person to think about how they might explore leveraging their engagement in reading to benefit others—say by volunteering to read to young children or elderly adults.

Meaning and purpose are connected, and still important to distinguish. Something is meaningful when we experience personal satisfaction or enjoyment from it. Something is purposeful when it is personally meaningful, beneficial to others, and includes a far-reaching intention.¹³ From our earlier case study, we can see how your friend's contributions evolved over time from benefitting both her and her family, to benefitting others in her community as well. Similarly, contribution as a component of purpose can include benefits to others in immediate relationships (such as family, friends, and colleagues) and these contributions might extend benefits to larger spheres, such as organizations in the broader community, institutions, systems, regions, or even the world. **It's up to individuals to determine the focus and scope of their purpose.**

WHY PURPOSE MATTERS

With a better understanding of purpose, let's explore the benefits. According to Dr. Bronk (2014) engaging purpose promotes:

- Well-being
- Happiness
- Emotional health
- Physical health
- Academic growth

Take a look at the components of **psychological well-being** listed in the sidebar. Of these aspects to well-being, purpose is the most significant to **mental health**.^{14, 15} Literature suggests, that engagement in various experiences

as an expression of purpose helps reduce depressive symptoms. This may be because engaging purpose helps people experience and integrate multiple components to well-being like self-worth, positive relationships, as well as experiences of mastery and mattering. The relationship between purpose and improved mental and **emotional health** is particularly important in the context of mentoring, as some research suggests that nearly 40 percent of young people involved in formal mentoring programs experience symptoms of depression.¹⁶

COMPONENTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING:

1. Positive opinion of yourself (self-acceptance)
2. Being able to choose environments appropriate for you (environmental mastery)
3. Warm and trusting relationships, and capacity to love (positive relationships)
4. Continually developing your potential (personal growth)
5. Being self-determined (autonomy)
6. And having goals, aspirations, and direction in life (purpose)

(Ryff & Singer, 1988)



Beyond well-being and emotional health, leading a life of purpose also helps foster **happiness** and life satisfaction.^{17, 18} When we experience joy that motivates us to action and creates personal meaning, which inspires us to make a difference to others beyond ourselves, we are more likely to feel at peace.¹⁹ The enduring aspect of purpose, and a sense of contribution beyond our selves, helps sustain this sense of contentment over time.^{20, 21}

In addition to well-being and happiness, engaging in purposeful pursuits also supports a range of **physical health** benefits. Do you recall the description of flow? When we experience flow, we reduce stress, which leads to specific health benefits like improved sleep.²² Evidence also suggests that by engaging in purpose we can reduce the cumulative effect of stress over time, reducing the likelihood of a host of negative health outcomes including high blood pressure and heart disease.²³

Finally, research also suggests that purpose is associated with motivation (self-efficacy, self-control) and **academic benefits**, something that may be of significance in your own relationship with a young person.²⁴ When young people

experience purpose, they also experience increased sense of control, and research shows a positive relationship between a young person's sense of control over themselves in their environment and grade point averages, specifically among youth experiencing economic oppression.^{25, 26} The long and short of it is that identifying and leading purposeful lives helps all of us thrive.

PURPOSE AS A JOURNEY

Sometimes people assume that once you discover a purpose, you're set. But **scholars suggest that purpose is not stagnant; it is continually evolving.**²⁷ As a caring adult involved in the life of young people, this will be important to think about as your relationship with the young person changes.

Purpose evolves over time because it relates to *identity*, which also changes as the years go by. Associated with increased well-being, a sense of identity emerges for people through a flexible yet integrated sense of self, grounded in socially and culturally relevant values and beliefs.^{28, 29} Similar to purpose, aspects of identity are said to be developed through experiences of self-worth in associations with others.^{30, 31, 32}

Challenging traditional developmental theories that position identity as a process of discovery, scholar Jackie Regales (2008) suggests processes of identity are performed and negotiated as people exercise fluid yet integrated experiences of self.³³ From this vantage, identity involves experiencing personal significance both in the moment and over time.³⁴ A multiple, fluid sense of identity suggests that people engage purpose uniquely in varying domains, and are more likely to experience satisfaction, when experiences of self are congruent with experiences of self in relationship to community.^{35, 36} Like purpose, in Western societies, a sense of identity is often explored through processes related to identifying “a calling”—whether that is a calling to be a specific type of person or a calling toward a specific kind of activity.^{37, 38}

In other words, purpose and identity are mutually reinforcing as both are grounded in values. Engaging an underlying value to contribute to others helps people experience belonging and meaning, thereby allowing us to expand awareness of who we are and who we want to be. In turn, knowing who we are helps us to build intention to support ourselves and others over time. Supporting a young person's



experiences of identity and purpose necessarily involves reflection and integration of both individual and communal values. While exploring purpose is helpful to all individuals across the lifespan, research illustrates that it becomes particularly beneficial during periods of transition.^{39, 40}

In between childhood and adulthood, young people experience increasing responsibility, autonomy, and opportunities for belonging, all of which create a period of transition where patterns of wellness and emotional health come together.^{41, 42, 43, 44} During this time young people also encounter increasing responsibilities related to education, employment, housing, and interpersonal relationships.^{45, 46} Socioeconomic status, family environment, and individual considerations all combine to influence young people's navigation of these responsibilities.⁴⁷ For young people experiencing poverty, adult responsibilities often materialize earlier and often without social support and resources.⁴⁸

Exploring purpose can help young people navigate these transitions while simultaneously cultivating a strong, affirming sense of identity.

Due to their inherent capacity to empower youth voice,

The following glossary provides a review of theories and concepts that intertwine with purpose. Keep in mind, this is not an exhaustive list, but reviewing these related concepts may help you better understand purpose for yourself and others.

Glossary of Terms/Concepts Related to Purpose

Adulthood: refers to attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors grounded in the assumption that adults are better than young people. It is a form of oppression that leads to the systematic mistreatment and disrespect of young people.⁵²

Autonomy: Experiencing our behavior as directive, and under our control.⁵³

Belonging: Feeling like an accepted, valued, legitimate part of a group.⁵⁴ Belonging can be cultivated in relationships when participants recognize "living with and loving other human beings who return that love is the most strengthening and salubrious emotional experience in the world."⁵⁵

Competence: Believing that we can positively influence our environment.^{56, 57}

Critical Mentoring: Involves utilizing youth and adult relationships to address inequality—not to manage symptoms, but to address root causes.⁵⁸

Civic Engagement: Civic engagement is multidimensional, including involvement in both political and apolitical experiences. It encompasses individual participation in civic spaces including but not limited to institutions, involvement in community groups, or initiatives. Context and cultural experiences shape understanding of and engagement in community.⁵⁹

Hope: Understanding difficulties within a situation and believing it will improve.^{60, 61}

Identity: Being seen and accepted for who we are—which involves recognizing who we are and exploring who we want to be.^{62, 63} Identity and purpose are considered mutually reinforcing.^{64, 65, 66} Social identity theory suggests that people group themselves in associations with others as a form of self-preservation that helps create self-esteem and self-worth. ,

Meaning: A person's sense that their life experiences are integrated, reinforcing, and of significance.⁶⁹ Meaning implies something is fulfilling, or satisfying, but does not necessarily include a long-term aspiration or benefit others.⁷⁰ Meaning in life and meaning of life are distinct—here we refer to the former, a sense of meaning in life. Meaning has to do with personal fulfillment, while purpose includes personal fulfillment plus contribution, and forward-looking intention.⁷¹ For example, it may be meaningful for you to eat healthy, but doing so does not necessarily contribute to others.

Motivation: Involves a combination of abilities, drive, and situational context, and refers to, "internal forces that underlie the direction, intensity, and persistence of behavior or thought."^{72, 73}



mentoring relationships and supportive activities have the capacity to aid young people in the exploration of both identity and purpose.^{49, 50, 51}

PROGRAM FOCUS: CONSIDERATIONS FOR SUPPORTING YOUTH PURPOSE

If you are mentoring a young person in the context of a program, you will likely notice that the setting has specific goals and outcomes in mind for young people that also influence the kind of training and support you receive for engaging with youth.

Sometimes program goals align with aspects of identity and purpose for a young person, and oftentimes they do not. You may find that program goals and promised outcomes may even alienate a young person, or be at odds with their identified purpose and/or identity needs. Too often adults are constrained or coached to focus on outcomes of importance to other adults, while harming interactions with young people in the process. The good news is that this tension, though often presented as an oversimplified polarization, can be attenuated with awareness of the opportunity to support responsivity to unique needs and

Passion: Typically associated with a short-lived, intense emotion, passion involves “a strong inclination toward a self-defining activity that one likes (or even loves), finds important, and in which one invests time and energy on a regular basis.”^{74, 75}

Relatedness: The need to feel connected and close to others.⁷⁶ Relates to belonging and the sense that someone claims us and we claim them.⁷⁷

Self-Determination: The perception that one has some control or agency in determining one’s future. This idea relates to intrinsic motivation, or the desire to do something because we want to, not because we have to, or due to an external reward like money. We are said to build positive emotions, and internal motivation when we engage in experiences that contribute to psychological needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy.^{78, 79, 80}

Self-Efficacy: A person’s belief that they can do activities required to attain a specific level of performance.^{81, 82} Relates to goal direction and personal relevance components of purpose.

Self-Regulation: The process involved in attaining and maintaining goals.^{83, 84}

Sparks: Meaningful passions that bring us joy and positive energy. Like purpose, they come from within and can be thought of as initial flames of experience that lead to long-term interests, and talents, and even purpose.⁸⁵

Youth-Adult Partnerships: “Multiple youth and multiple adults deliberating and acting together in a collective [democratic] fashion over a sustained period of time through shared work, intended to promote social justice, strengthen an organization, and/or affirmatively address a community issue.”⁸⁶

Youth Voice: Involves supporting young people to actively engage in and influence decisions that shape their lives.^{87, 88}

circumstances of young people, while also supporting program sustainability and desired outcomes through prioritization of relational practice.

In other words, it is possible and beneficial to integrate connection and compassion inherent in interpersonal relationships in ways that reinforce intentionality and goal direction. As a caring adult, this requires recognition that

connection and relationship with a young person are the primary goals. With this awareness, the relationship becomes both the vehicle to desired goals and the end goal itself.^{90, 91} For more information on components of relational practice see section 3.

If you are mentoring within the context of a program, pay attention to how the goals of the program sit with young people and



their families. Try not to gloss over or ignore when aspects of a young person's purpose are in tension with broader program goals. When youth purpose and program outcomes are considered a "both/and" instead of an "either/or", caring adults can support young people to build the capacity to nurture themselves and others, while simultaneously rising toward outcomes that support a young person's thriving in various communities and contexts.

For example, let's say you mentor a young person in a program where a specific goal of the program involves supporting their positive connection to an academic environment. While engaging with this young person, let's say you learn that they find purpose in activism related to what they experience as systemic racism in their school culture. At face value, it may seem like the program goals and this young person's exploration of purpose are in tension. However, if we think about this situation from a youth-centered approach that honors the young person's experience and needs, and choose to view connection with this young person as the primary goal, we can start to envision how, as a mentor, we can support both the young person's exploration of purpose, as well as program priorities in the following ways:

1. Learning about, and supporting the young person to reflect on their experiences of discrimination in the school environment.
2. Without judging, blaming, problematizing or fixing; supporting the young person to build awareness of information regarding the situation including but not limited to:
 - a. History of racism in school, community, and broader social environment.
 - b. Dynamics of power including professional roles, responsibilities, laws, and policies at play in the school environment.
 - c. Descriptive information regarding demographics, outcomes and evidence of opportunities for improvement.
- 3 Supporting the young person to reflect on their feelings related to the situation. For adults who do not share identities central to a young person, particularly if this relates to a young person's sense of purpose as in the above example, this will likely require supporting the young person to connect with others who share positionalities and experiences that can help them surface the emotional weight of their lived experiences.
4. Through time, authenticity, and genuine compassion, support the young person to find ways they are comfortable and passionate about leveraging their voice and leadership to contribute toward change.

We'll continue to unpack these dimensions of supporting youth purpose throughout this guide. For now, it is important to remember that purpose is a right and capability for all young people. Supporting the exploration of purpose through a youth-centered approach in mentoring relationships can help youth identify and enact their purpose.

As supportive adults in the lives of young people, when we work to get out of the way, suspend our judgments regarding what is possible for youth, and remind ourselves of the vital capacities inherent in all young people as they are; we support the growth of people and communities through purpose.



A CASE STUDY – AN EXAMPLE OF YOUNG PEOPLE ENGAGING PURPOSE

In 2012, a white supremacist attacked a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. At the time, it was the largest shooting at a place of worship in the United States. Moreover, the attack left the Sikh community shaken, with many young people exposed to bigotry and violence for the first time. In an effort to ensure young Sikh Americans could feel comfortable and confident in their identities following the attack, Dr. Harminder Kaur mentored Sikh students in the Washington, DC, area. The young Sikhs explained that they wanted to educate their peers about the Sikh faith and identity. Many of the students had just completed middle school at the time, and though they learned about major world religions, they were disappointed to find that Sikhism was not included. Thus, with help from Dr. Kaur, they created a movie with young Sikhs explaining Sikhism to other youth.

Dr. Kaur arranged meetings with the curriculum coordinators for the school district, and soon the middle school students were able to directly express their concerns and distribute the movie across all middle schools in the district. In the following years, the young people noticed that though the curriculum had changed, many teachers were still unfamiliar and/or uncomfortable speaking about the Sikh faith. Thus, the students decided to create a teacher-training program in religious literacy. Soon, thereafter, this group of motivated young people formed an official nonprofit organization called Sikh Kid 2 Kid. Currently, the teacher-training program is in full swing. It started with two major religions, and has since expanded to cover six. Students from Sikh Kid 2 Kid facilitate the three-hour Sikhism workshop. The Maryland Board of Education sponsors the training program, and teachers earn continuing education credits through their participation. Since the program began in 2013, more than 800 teachers have been trained by young people.

We were thrilled to be able to involve the founder of this program, Hana Mangat, currently a student at Columbia University, as an expert contributor to this guide.

PURPOSE AND MENTORING

Prominent in cultures worldwide, mentoring is typically understood as a shared commitment to the education, socialization, and rearing of children through extended family members and others in a community.^{92, 93, 94} Characterized as a “caring guide, a wise adviser, a partner on the journey, a trusted

friend,”⁹⁵ the western conception of mentor typically involves a nonfamilial adult interacting with a young person in a community, school, or workplace setting often in a volunteer capacity through a formal program.^{96, 97, 98}

As a strategy to support the growth of young people, mentoring opportunities often include core features of purpose,

such as commitment over time, progression toward specific goals, and contribution to others through community engagement or service learning. Research illustrates that we all need mentors to explore and engage in purpose. Strong social support predicts youth engagement in purpose, and youth with purpose often report having long-term close relationships with mentors.⁹⁹



So why are mentors keenly positioned to help young people explore purpose? Mentoring opportunities often bring together and foster relationships among people from powered and contrasting social positions in at least one and often multiple intersecting aspects of identity, including but not limited to age, race/ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, gender, ability, experience, etc. Powered relationships—where people based on their personal experiences and social positions have unequal amounts of control and influence in their lives—create opportunities for power sharing. When such an imbalance exists in an interpersonal relationship, the mentor (typically the person with greater control and influence over their lives) can practice stepping back and creating opportunities for a young person to experience increasing influence by cultivating and voicing their own ideas. In this way, mentors can help youth explore purpose over time. When young people practice stretching their voice, skills, and ideas, they can find meaning in moments when their contributions are experienced as empowering. Dimensions of personal and social power inherent in mentoring opportunities

mean that by incorporating young people's exploration of purpose, these relationships become better equipped to not only support the youth individually but also to rise to the vision of reduced social inequality.

Unfortunately, youth often find limited opportunities to elevate their voice in the institutions in which they engage. While schools and other spaces create meaningful opportunities for youth that can support the cultivation of purpose, factors like instructional quality, classroom size, and support resources impact the quality of these settings and their subsequent engagement of youth.¹⁰⁰ This means under-resourced schools and communities do not have the same opportunities to support young people in cultivating purpose, and a lack of educational opportunities can hamper a young person's ability to pursue purpose.¹⁰¹ However, mentors both in programs and those found naturally in the community may be uniquely positioned to step into this gap and build additional opportunities for purpose exploration.

When mentoring includes youth purpose exploration and offers a space that other institutions and adult relationships cannot, it can help level the playing field for under-resourced communities and allow all young people, not just the privileged, to experience purpose.

Mentoring has the potential to weave together core aspects of purpose and identity exploration by helping young people both hone in on and identify meaningful ways of enacting purpose in their daily lives. This involves supporting young people to engage their passions, and build self-efficacy toward future aspirations, which may include challenging conditions that perpetuate inequality. Mentoring programs can nurture youth engagement and scaffold purpose-building experiences when mentors are supported to advocate on behalf of young people.

SECTION 2



Worksheets used in this section:

- **Worksheet 4**
Positionality and Purpose
- **Worksheet 5**
Understanding Cultural Responsivity
- **Worksheet 6:**
Supportive Communication Skills
- **Worksheet 7**
Interrupting Adultism
- **Worksheet 8**
Strategies to Engage Youth Voice

LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR PURPOSE EXPLORATION

The previous section emphasized the importance of strong, mutual relationships between youth and adults as the basis for supporting youth purpose, and it warrants further exploration here. A host of research illustrates that behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions of adults influence mentoring relationships.^{102, 103, 104}

Many resources exist to help adults build strong mentoring relationships, here we highlight a few elements to supportive interactions that can help young people explore purpose.

Through relational experiences of

mutuality and trust, mentoring relationships can contribute to a host of benefits for youth.^{105, 106} Research suggests elements of mutuality include authenticity, respect, and empathy.^{107, 108, 109} In one study, youth characterized mutuality as bonds with adults who they felt genuinely cared about them as they are instead of when they were performing a certain way.¹¹⁰

THE BASICS OF MENTORING THAT CAN SUPPORT PURPOSE EXPLORATION

If there is one piece of advice that is of primary importance in this guide, it is this: To nurture a young person's exploration of purpose, **there really is no substitute for building a genuine relationship that facilitates getting to know a young person at a deeper level—their values, interests, passions, skills, and hopes.** The following principles and approaches can help mentors support a young person as they explore purpose.

- **Developmental approach**
- **Mutual respect**
- **Reciprocity**
- **Youth-centeredness**
- **Cultural humility**

These features of strong youth and adult mentoring relationships show

up throughout mentoring literature. Beginning with a developmental approach, Morrow and Styles (1995) explored aspects of enduring mentoring relationships, as well as those that fizzled and disengaged early in the experience, coining the terms of *developmental* and *prescriptive* approaches to mentoring.¹¹¹ They found enduring relationships between young people and adults are more likely when adults support the development of the whole person, or are focused on a young person's holistic functioning. In this way, strong mentors focus on getting to know young people as they are and do not focus on transforming them.^{112, 113} A **developmental approach** requires both authenticity and empathy on the part of the adult. This means recognizing as an adult it is not up to the young person to become legible to you; it is up to you to get to know and seek to understand the experience of a young person. This may require you to educate yourself outside of your engagement with a young person to better understand elements of their life that they have indicated are important and you know little about.

For many adults, communicating authenticity and empathy is a tricky balance, particularly if



empathy and presence with a young person is confused for leniency. If as a mentor you plan to wait for a young person to prove their interest in engaging with you, you may never have an opportunity to show a young person you care. In other words, as the adult working toward building an interpersonal connection with a young person, it is up to you to acknowledge your power and responsibility, by modeling empathy and respect integral to strong bonds. This modeling also relates to power imbalances inherent in youth mentoring relationships, and the importance of **mutual respect**.¹¹⁴ Mutual respect is summarized in the side bar quote from a 2004 study of mentoring relationships.

Related to mutual respect, aspects of **reciprocity** and collaboration show up in descriptions of engaged as compared to tentative, task-focused, or disengaged mentoring relationships.^{115, 116}

Aspects of reciprocity include contributions of both youth and adults, such as in flexibility during activities and mutual sharing of emotions.¹¹⁷

Interactions characterized by respect and youth-centeredness include an explicit awareness of the inherent value in all young people as they are.¹¹⁸ Affirmed in

relationships and the use of power between youth and adults, **youth-centeredness** involves a central belief that young people are capable as they are. This means engaging with youth, not as empty vessels with potential but as inherently full beings complete with vital capabilities and agency.^{119, 120, 121} In supporting young people to explore purpose, being youth centered allows adults to help young people see and experience their inherent contributions.

A key element of mutual respect was the adult's capacity and willingness to allow the child to have a direct and open impact on him or her and to shape their relationship with each other. (Spencer, Jordan, Szazama, 2004, p. 360).

Scholarship also reveals that **cultural humility**—the ability of adults to support intersecting social identities of young people—is also associated with strong, enduring mentoring relationships.^{122, 123} To build cultural humility, mentors need to develop awareness of their own power in the relationship, as well as how their power or identities might

interact with a young person's identities, interests, and experiences of purpose. For example, if a mentor identifies as a woman with a learning disability, her experiences with a lack of power have likely contributed to some frustrating experiences in learning spaces throughout her life. For this reason, she might not enjoy and even reject certain learning environments. During her interactions with young people, if she reveals a lack of comfort in educational settings, her own beliefs can impact the experience of young people, particularly if youth are conflicted by contrasting experiences in this area.

Let's say, for example, this same woman mentors a young woman who excels in school and wants to become an engineer. This mentor cannot offer a youth-centered approach if she prioritizes her own feelings of comfort over the young person's need to explore their sense of purpose and identity. The mentor's feelings about learning environments, while valid for her based on lived experiences growing up in a system that stigmatized learning disabilities, influence her own behavior, and have the power to influence the behavior of others that she is close to. For this reason, it becomes important for adults interested



in supporting youth purpose to continually reflect on aspects of our identities, especially those that we do not share commonality with young people, to build awareness of how our own experiences and related assumptions can influence—even if unintentionally—and invalidate or limit the experiences of others.

As you support young people to explore purpose, it is important to reflect on and build awareness of how aspects of your identity, both the areas where you have power and those where you do not, influence your expectations and interactions with young people. Because identity is fluid, building this awareness is ongoing. See [Worksheets 4 and 5](#) to begin this process.

In the seminal book *ReClaiming Youth at Risk: Our Hope for the Future*, Brokenleg and

Van Bockern (1990/2002) explain, “Only adults who are secure in their own sense of personal power can exercise strong, yet noncoercive influence over children.”¹²⁴ This relational health model suggests interpersonal connections are the core of resiliency-boosting opportunities and highlights features of these relationships shown in the table below.^{125, 126, 127}

When mentors cultivate the above aspects of relational health, they are positioned to support young people to experience multifaceted elements (thinking, feeling, and experiencing) purpose.¹³⁰ As you establish a strong foundation in your interactions with a young person, you can continue to support youth to explore purpose when you engage with young people in intentional activities that help youth experience both be-

longing and independence. Of course this involves paying attention to interests, strengths, and opportunities unique to each person.

Other features of strong youth and adult relationships include the following principles, as summarized in the work of Thom Garfat (2012):¹³¹

- **Privacy that allows for openness and a perception of self and other as separate but related**¹³²
- **Approval and acceptance by other**¹³³
- **Appreciation of and respect for the way in which the other person perceives self and the world in general**¹³⁴
- **Genuineness**¹³⁵
- **Respect, honesty, availability/presence**¹³⁶

Basically, everything you can do to support continued engagement with a young person comes back to getting to know yourself as well as them, at a deep level.

Conflict Tolerance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ability to cope with conflict• To process and respond to relational differences
Mutual Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Commitment to engage• Sensitivity to the relationship
Authenticity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Freedom to be sincere and oneself
Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Capacity for action• Personal strength

Relational Health Model^{128, 129}

Adapted from Miller and the other sources



GETTING TO KNOW A YOUNG PERSON TO SUPPORT PURPOSE

Adults can support young people to experience multifaceted components of purpose by using supportive communication and actualizing a youth-centered approach. Two types of supportive communication skills that help people build rapport and trust in relationships include the use of open-ended questions and active listening. To review and practice applying these supportive communication tips, see [Worksheet 6](#).

As purpose is grounded in values, internal abilities, and interests, adults need to pay attention to when young people experience emotional safety, competence, and enjoyment. Using the above referenced communication skills, mentors can cue into how young people feel about certain spaces, activities, and experiences.

Nurture a youth-centered approach: Building on supportive communication skills, actualizing a youth-centered approach involves nurturing youth voice, continually checking adultism, and being strengths-based. Adults can engage youth voice through strategies from basic input to discrete choices

and shared decision-making. See Mentor [Worksheet 8](#) for examples of how mentors can engage youth voice.

Interrupt your adultism: Related to nurturing youth voice, the single most important thing a mentor can do to support a youth-centered approach is to build awareness of and capacity to interrupt adultism. Adultism refers to attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors grounded in the assumption that adults are more capable than young people. It is a form of oppression that leads to the systematic mistreatment and disrespect of young people.¹³⁷ In the United States, we have intentionally separated young people from adults over time, particularly in matters of institutional power. As with all forms of systemic oppression, such as racism, classism, and sexism, we all play a part in perpetuating or interrupting unjust patterns. In almost every aspect of our daily lives, we can find examples and consequences of adultism (such as underfunding schools in the name of lower taxes or discounting the voices of youth who have been the victims of school gun violence in conversations about school safety and gun reform). The prevalence of adultism requires that mentors continually build self-reflection skills to communicate inevitable

fallibility and continued responsiveness to young people. For more information on interrupting adultism, check out this helpful resource from Michigan State University on strategies to build strong [youth and adult partnerships](#). You can also take a look at [Worksheet 7](#) for practice and tips to checking your own adultism.

Focus on strengths: Beyond nurturing youth voice and keeping adultism in check, another important way mentors can support youth to explore purpose is by being kind, affirming, and strengths-based. Being strengths-based means recognizing strengths inherent in young people and working to reframe what we as adults might perceive as negative. This is true advocacy for young people in action and it's not easy for many adults to engage in without falling back on deficits. While doing this work, it is important to remember that resilience, or a young person's strengths, as applied to challenges, may present differently across cultures and contexts.¹³⁸ What may be considered risk in one culture, may be experienced as protective in other cultures. For example, when a young person tells you they did not finish their homework because they were working late, a strengths-based response involves



naming a way they are attending to their needs. This might look like:

“I can tell you are working really hard and it sounds like working part-time is helping you gain respect at your job and at home. I remember how much it meant to me to have a job when I was in high school, to help out my family, take care of myself, and build skills. At the same time, I know balancing your commitments can be challenging and sometimes feel overwhelming. Last week you mentioned you want to get your chemistry grade up, and you’ve said working at the grocery store is helping you think about why you want to finish school. How can you work toward balancing work and school commitments, so you can gain valuable experience, while also completing school? What do you need from me to support this balance?”

Being strengths-based involves affirming a young person’s experience, hearing what they have to share, and reiterating that you appreciate and see them as wholly capable as they are. It is the same level of respect any adult expects and appreciates in their interactions with others, and it is critical to building rapport.

A common misconception of being strengths-based is that it inhibits authenticity. Being affirming of a young person does not mean you need to agree with their behavior or information they decide to share with you, but it does require your commitment to demonstrating and communicating respect. This involves conveying empathy—and a willingness to stand with a young person in their experience of sometimes difficult or complex experiences. While there’s much about a young person’s experi-

ence that you likely cannot relate to, being strengths-based means seeking to connect, validating that you have and will continue to hear what they want to share, even or especially when you disagree with or cannot understand. Remember, it is not up to young people to be legible to adults, to help us understand why they think, feel, or behave the way they do. **It is up to us as adults to build our skills and capacity to pay attention to, respect, and express accurate empathy regarding a young person’s experience.**

SECTION 3



Worksheets used in this section:

- **Worksheet 9**
Boundary Considerations
- **Worksheet 10**
Purpose Exploring
Conversation Topics and Questions
- **Worksheet 11**
Intentional, Purpose-
Building Activity
Engagement
- **Worksheet 12**
Reinforcing Purpose
Exploration through
Encouragement
- **Worksheet 13**
Sample Conversation
on Reinforcing a Youth's
Social Network

EXPLORING PURPOSE TOGETHER

Identifying and Planning for Purpose

As you build rapport in your interactions with youth, one way to support their exploration of purpose is by modeling your own exploration or engagement in purpose. When youth ask about, or show interest in knowing more about your own sense of purpose, be ready to share what inspires you to support others. As you do, check in with yourself to continually reflect on your motivation or intentions for sharing your purpose with a young person.

When sharing aspects of your purpose with youth, remember the aim is not to persuade or suggest to a young person that the ways you find purpose should be the same, or even similar, to the ways they may experience meaning and a desire to contribute toward others. It is also important to consider how your examples of engaging purpose align with a young person's needs and/or the setting focus.

For example, you may experience purpose through engagement in a religious community. If a young person asks, you might be inclined to share what you do in this community and why it is important to you. You might explain how this relates to your own value system, and how individual and communal values influence your experience of purpose. And before doing so, it will be important for you to consider your reasons for sharing ethical and programmatic boundaries for your interactions with a young person, and the extent to which you are prioritizing the identity needs of a young person.

Inviting a young person to join you for a religious service, for example, could be inappropriate if doing so is beyond the scope of your program or compromises a young person's feelings of identity

safety or belonging. Identity safety refers to a person's belief that they "can function in [a given] setting without fear that [their] identity will evoke devaluation and interference."¹⁴⁰ Experiences of identity safety relate to an individual's unique background. This means it is not up to an adult to determine if a young person is comfortable in an activity or setting. Rather it is up to caring adults to affirm and honor any safety needs a young person communicates (verbally, physically, or emotionally). If you have not considered your own personal boundaries as they relate to the mentoring relationship, doing so is important to planning for purpose-building opportunities with youth. See [Worksheet 9](#) for more information on establishing boundaries for interpersonal relationships with young people.

When thinking through considerations for modeling your own sense of purpose, if you aren't sure how you cultivate purpose, be authentic. This transparency offers incredible learning opportunities for both you and a young person. Throughout this guide, we offer reflection questions and activities to help you explore your own sense of purpose. And because purpose is a journey, if you are beginning yours, consider what kind of reflection, activities,



and resources help you begin to explore your own understanding of purpose alongside a young person.

For example, a notebook might be a helpful way for both you and a young person to write down or collect reflections about things you both find meaningful or experiences that the two of you enjoy together. Art projects offer another opportunity to reflect on purpose. Creating an activity box could also help you collect memorabilia from a range of experiences—things like flyers, brochures, tickets, etc. Alongside a young person, you could collect examples from purpose exploring pursuits and routinely draw from your collection of materials to create reflection resources like posters, gifts, cards, affirmations, and so on. In this way, you could practice reflecting on the significance of specific experiences alongside a young person. By modeling purpose exploration, you can help bring the value and benefits of purpose to life for young people.

ELEVATING PURPOSE WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

In addition to drawing on supportive communication skills and a youth-centered approach, two basic ways mentors support youth purpose is through interrelated activities of

conversation, reflection, and connection to intentional and relevant activities.

When preparing for purpose-building conversations with young people, remember that relationships evolve over time. Mentoring relationships typically unfold through four phases: initiation, cultivation, transformation, and closure.¹⁴¹ And these phases do not typically evolve in a linear, convenient, or anticipated trajectory. For example, a mentoring relationship can carry on for several years in the cultivation phase. Before diving into purpose-building conversations, it is important to consider how well you and a young person know one another, where you are in the relationship building process, and how comfortable you are together.

When considering how well you know a young person, and the level of comfort you sense between the two of you, try to reflect honestly by paying attention to evidence of a young person catering to your needs or sense of power. For example, if a young person seems to like you, does what you ask, and has not surfaced any points of tension or conflict in your interactions, this does not necessarily mean you have established a solid rapport

from which to explore purpose. These observations can actually reveal a level of interaction that is not inherently deep.

These reflections are important as **purpose-building conversations necessitate vulnerability and familiarity**. If we force them before establishing trust, we can interrupt or inhibit the opportunity to build rapport with a young person. For example, if I am just getting to know a young person and I ask the all-too-common question, What do you want to be when you grow up? this adult-centered question could conjure up a number of feelings for a young person, such as:

- **I don't know, I'm just trying to survive middle school!**
- **Who are you to be asking me that?**
- **I don't want to grow up, really, because it's intimidating.**
- **Who says I have to grow up to be one thing?**

The ability to navigate through conflict is a good sign that you and a young person are establishing a strong connection for purpose exploration. For example, if you and a young person have been able to work through some challenging situations or interactions, from which you both come back to the table to continue building rapport, this is a good sign your establishing



levels of trust necessary for more vulnerable conversations. When you're ready, use Worksheet 10 to consider how you might draw from specific topics and questions to support purpose-building conversations with young people.

It is easy for the uninitiated adult to misconstrue an initially cooperative attitude as the beginning of a good relationship

- Bredntro (1969) as cited in Garfat 2012

PRINCIPLES OF PURPOSE-BUILDING ACTIVITY ENGAGEMENT

Another critical way mentors can support youth exploration of purpose is through **intentional, youth-led activities**. The first step to engaging youth in intentional activities involves nurturing their voice (see mentor [Worksheet 8](#) for more information). As you build your experience engaging youth voice and develop a sense of a young person's interests, you can also support purpose exploration by scaffolding youth learning and engagement in specific settings or activities. This involves communicating options or choices that youth may experience in the activity and helping them

understand opportunities, roles, and appropriate expectations (including how their engagement/behavior can impact others). This also necessitates taking time to answer questions (starting slow and/or adjusting engagement when necessary). See [Worksheet 11](#) for more information on supporting intentional, youth-led activity engagement.

Once youth are supported to engage in activities that align with their interests, while building skills in community with and contributing toward others—mentors have an important opportunity to reinforce purpose exploration by providing feedback in the form of encouragement.

PROVIDING ENCOURAGEMENT TOWARD PURPOSE-BUILDING PURSUITS

Let's face it, we all like to know when we are good at something or someone notices our efforts. As young people age and spend more time outside of the home building connections with others in incrementally larger communities like their neighborhood, school, or town, they become increasingly attuned to feedback. While all people constantly scan our environments for cues that we belong, for young people, this

implicit charting is on overdrive as nearly every moment presents new experiences.

Consequently, the way adults provide feedback regarding these new experiences has the potential to nurture a young person's sense of belonging and internal motivation—their desire to continue something because they want to. Conversely, we can also provide feedback that builds extrinsic motivation, or reward-seeking behavior, when young people are compelled to do something because it makes them look good and/or pleases others. **Since purpose is a personal journey, as supportive adults, we can help nurture purpose by providing feedback that bolsters a young person's internal motivation when we offer encouragement.** See mentor [Worksheet 12](#) for more information.

REINFORCING A YOUNG PERSON'S SOCIAL SUPPORT NETWORK

Mentors can also support young people to identify and plan for engagement in purpose-building pursuits by being an ally and advocate. This means helping young people reflect on what they need from supportive others (including other youth),



identifying purposeful pursuits, and connecting to others with whom they identify. Practically speaking, this involves supporting youth to establish connections to other adults and peers with whom youth are comfortable and interested in flexing their capabilities.

We support youth to build strong, social supports by recognizing ways that others empower and support youth skill-building. Further, we reinforce a young person's expanding social network when youth are supported to reach out and establish connections with others. If you have supported a young person to connect to another adult in your own network, it will be important to continually check in with the young person to help reinforce supportive engagement. See [Worksheet 13](#) for a sample youth-mentor conversation on supporting youth to establish initial connections and reflect on continued interactions with other supportive adults.





Worksheets used in this section:

- **Worksheet 14**
Troubleshooting Engagement in Purpose-Related Experiences
- **Worksheet 15**
Purpose Activity Self-Reflection
- **Worksheet 16**
Nurturing Youth Purpose through Values-Based Exploration and Critical Consciousness
- **Worksheet 17**
Backward Planning for Purpose*

ENGAGING AND SUSTAINING PURPOSE OVER TIME

Once you have a sense of a young person's purpose and are supporting them to engage in related pursuits, other ways mentors can continue to nurture a young person's exploration of purpose involve: troubleshooting logistics to engaging in purpose-building opportunities, supporting youth reflection, providing support through ups and downs, and deepening purpose exploration through integration with community or civic engagement.

TROUBLESHOOTING ENGAGEMENT IN PURPOSE-RELATED OPPORTUNITIES

Mentors can be really helpful connectors between young people and the settings or experiences they are invigorated to lean into and share their knowledge, strengths, skills, and abilities. And there are many different ways adults can do this, ranging from providing tangible support, like helping a young person get to and from certain opportunities, to more nuanced support, such as priming their engagement in specific activities, acting as a resource during activities, and advocating on their behalf to appropriate supports within purpose-related settings. See [Worksheet 14](#) for more information.

In priming a young person for their engagement in a particular activity, this might involve helping them process what they are thinking and feeling in preparation for engagement, practicing small aspects of engagement, and/or previewing interactions or encounters within a specific setting.

Acting as a resource while youth engage in purpose-exploring opportunities might involve being immersed in an activity or

experience, participating right alongside a young person. And if a young person is looking to practice more autonomy, being a resource might involve being nearby or on hand, but not fully involved. For example, if a young person is just starting to explore engagement in an open mic night, they may ask you to come and watch without participating. Your presence might help a young person feel emotionally or physically safe, or simply be the reinforcement they need to show up.

Related to being a resource during specific activities or experiences, if you pay attention to how a young person shows up in these experiences, you will likely start to notice allies or other opportunities to advocate for and reinforce their continued engagement.

Sticking with the open-mic night example, if you notice the young person has a natural connection to another adult in that setting, you might encourage them to get to know that person better. Or if they have an opportunity to strengthen projecting their voice, the two of you could practice before the next session. Maybe this young person says they enjoy the experience but often do not have the energy to perform. Your advocacy support might involve working with their



family, school, or other community partners to ensure they get some rest and fuel before performance opportunities.

We can advocate for young people by engaging their feedback and preferences—remembering it is possible to empower a young person to identify, learn from, and resolve their own challenges, while simultaneously scaffolding their success. If you are ever concerned about riding this line, you might explain what you’re noticing, offer a way you can provide advocacy that may reinforce their engagement, and garner the young person’s express consent to move forward.

“It seems like some people performing practice by themselves or with another person right before the show starts. What do you think about us trying to get here 20 minutes earlier to practice next time?”

SUPPORTING REFLECTION OF PURPOSE-BUILDING PURSUITS

At this point, you have probably noticed a central theme to supporting a young person’s exploration of purpose boils down to communication. All people benefit from others with whom they can talk, be themselves, and unpack what they are thinking and

feeling, particularly as it relates to foundational elements of purpose (experiences of belonging, independence, mastery, and contribution)—and youth are no exception.

The basic communication skills outlined in section 2 are central to supporting youth reflection and integration of a purposeful mindset. And when adults build trust and reciprocity in our interactions with young people, we can open up multiple opportunities for reflection. For example, if you notice that a young man takes his time assessing a situation, you might honor his processing style by giving him ample space to think about his experiences in a specific interaction, setting, or opportunity before checking in.

We can build responsiveness to a young person’s learning and communication styles, and authentic interactions through ways that help us naturally connect. For example, maybe you and a young person discover a natural rhythm in the car, over a game, listening to music, and so on. Supporting youth reflection involves creating multiple opportunities for a young person to think about and integrate what they might be experiencing as it relates to their

exploration of purpose. A challenge for many adults related to supporting youth reflection, involves being present in these moments and interrupting tendencies to problematize and/or to try and fix a young person’s experience. See [Worksheet 15](#) to practice reflecting on purpose-building experiences.

NAVIGATING UPS AND DOWNS

As we open the door for ongoing reflection opportunities, we also need to be prepared to sit with young people through challenging situations or setbacks. Part of cultivating purpose involves navigating conflict. Generative, healthy conflict involves being able to hold and respect our own as well as others experiences (attitudes, feelings, and beliefs) simultaneously.

Healthy conflict builds deeper understanding, sometimes this involves resolution, and often it does not. Navigating conflict involves modeling empathy, a willingness to hear, and coming from a place of curiosity to genuinely try to understand or stand in someone else’s experience. Too often we are socialized to feed divisive, over-simplified extremes where either we are right and others are wrong, or vice versa.



Modeling healthy conflict involves supporting young people to move from this “either/or” perspective, to recognize that there is validity in both their experience and that of others, and they can hold empathy for someone else’s experience and their own at the same time.

Of course we can all grow in our practice of these skills, so it helps to be honest and share where we have room to grow our capacity to navigate conflict. Maybe you tend to hold fast to your view in fear of being silenced by others. If so, let a young person know you’re building your capacity to listen and respect other people’s experiences. Maybe you tend to silence your own feelings and ideas. If so, let a young person know you’re building capacity to recognize and voice your experience. More than likely your capacity to navigate differences with others vacillates depending on the context and how safe you feel. Again, modeling vulnerability and self-awareness of our own opportunities for growth can help a young person build safety and capacity to do the same.

INTEGRATING PURPOSE WITH CIVIC AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

A guide on supporting young people to explore purpose



necessarily interacts with deep, complex questions regarding what it means to be an individual in community with others. While we have no intention of unpacking a broader purpose of humanity in this guide, we do want to offer ideas for how adults can support young people to love and be seen for who they are as they are, while simultaneously interacting with and challenging how they want to be seen and supported in communities with others over time.

If you mentor a young person that has big ambitions for changes they want to see in the world, you can support their integration of purpose by helping them take their experiences to scale and exploring a path to achieve what they aspire toward. When they suffer

setbacks, you can sit with them in the disappointments and frustrations and help them reconnect to their grounding values, or support them to problem solve what they might do differently in the future. As a caring adult invested in supporting youth exploration of purpose, one of your most important strategies involves helping young people not internalize failure. This includes helping youth build awareness of and capacity to interrupt, or re-frame, self-defeating tendencies. For more information on how to nurture a young person’s growth mindset, check out the [Growth Mindset Toolkit for Mentors](#).



Supporting young people to integrate their sense of purpose with civic or community engagement involves supporting them to hold awareness that they are both uniquely individual and products of their environments.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁵ This means helping young people build skills to exercise and be accountable to their own sense of agency and decision-making so that they can successfully navigate interactions in their environment, while simultaneously supporting them to name, challenge, and interrupt inequities in their environment.¹⁴⁶

Keep in mind, a young person's purpose exploration may or may not relate to broader civic engagement—and the young person gets to decide that. While you've helped them define and nurture purpose exploration, remember that young people are empowered when they show you where they want to go with their sense of purpose. The “contribution to others” component of purpose for some youth could relate to supporting their grandmother, for others it could mean changing their community or region. If you're interacting with a young person on the social change side of purpose exploration, consider how you can support them to plug into coalitions invested in related

activism. [Worksheet 16](#) can help you support your mentee in determining if their purpose activities are grounded in values that may lead them to a deeper civic engagement or activism.

Check out some of these organizations for examples and more information on supporting youth civic engagement:

[Dosomething.org](#), [Mikva Challenge](#), [Points of Light](#), and [Youth Service America](#).

A recent wave of neuroscience emphasizes the importance of socioemotional skills, such as self-management, growth mindset, and problem solving, to young people's navigation of their environments. While these skills are important, if a young person's purpose relates to social *justice* (while modeling and supporting the development of socioemotional skills), as adults committed to helping young people explore purpose, we have a responsibility to also support young people to simultaneously build awareness of conditions that lead to the isolation of people and communities. When young people build these skills in community with others, they can learn to integrate their own and the perspectives of others to create innovative, youth-led responses toward both personal empowerment and social change.

As a mentor this will likely involve supporting young people to build broad awareness of and capacity to interrogate their contexts, particularly as this relates to experiences of inequality so that they can challenge, rather than internalize, individual deficit orientations related to experiences of discrimination and stigmatization. When you do not share aspects of a young person's identity that are central to them, you can support them to connect to others who do, and advocate for their continual engagement in communities with others with whom they identify.

As a final planning tool around purpose, [Worksheet 17, “Backward Planning for Purpose,”](#) offers one approach to taking an initial idea or activity the young person has mentioned and then planning out a series of activities that will help them explore purpose around the topic. This worksheet can be used as a general planning tool in just about any purpose-driven activity.



CONCLUSION

Remember, purpose exploration is ongoing—the work is never done. Nevertheless, we are hopeful the information summarized here and the supporting worksheets offer fertile ground for young people and adults to begin exploring purpose alongside one another.

You can preach at them: that is a hook without a worm; you can order them to volunteer: that is dishonest; you can call on them—“You are needed”—and that approach will hardly ever fail.

-Richards (1981), adapted from Kurt Hahn as cited in Bredntro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern, 2002, p. 123

ADDITIONAL READING



Bloom's Taxonomy Teacher Training Kit – Framework and language for nurturing critical thinking.

Dosomething.org – An online platform inspiring youth-led worldwide social change.

Essentials of youth policy – Open, online course from the Council of Europe on engaging youth in policymaking.

Growth Mindset Toolkit for Mentors – Tips for mentors on how to nurture a growth mindset in themselves and young people.

Mikva Challenge – An action civics program model that integrates youth voice, expertise, reflection, and experiential learning toward a just and equitable society.

National Youth Leadership Council – Service learning resources and information for young people and educators.

PurposeChallenge.org – A comprehensive website with tools, activities, and resources for young people and adults to learn more about reinforcing purpose for high-school-age young people.

On the Media: Busted, America's Poverty Myths – A five-part radio series on the stories we tell ourselves about poverty in America.

O Net Online – An online platform for career exploration and job analysis.

Removedfilm.com – Short training films for adults involved in the lives of young people impacted by child welfare system involvement.

Right Question Institute – Resources and information for young people and adults on how to leverage youth voice and decision-making capacity within public institutions and systems.

Teaching Young Children about Bias, Diversity, and Social Justice – Tips and resources from Edutopia on how to teach young people about social justice issues and promote tolerance.

TedEd Clubs – Learn how to support students to cultivate a well-articulated idea to share with the world.

Ted Talks for Kids – A video library of illustrated TedEx talks designed to insight curiosity in young people.

Upworthy – An online platform inspiring community through the power of positivity.

UN Rights of a Child – Summary of the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child in child-friendly language.

Youth Communication – Curriculum and resources to support youth to contribute to others through writing and storytelling.

Youth Engaged 4 Change – Tips to support youth purpose, and ideas on how young people around the world contribute to others.

Youth Health Talk.org – Information, resources, and research on young people's real-life experiences of health issues.

Youth Service America – Resources, funding, and ideas to promote youth service worldwide.

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