

Majority of Youths Found to Lack a Direction in Life

Researcher Calls on Schools, Communities to Address Malaise

By **Debra Viadero**

A majority of young people are struggling to make the leap into adulthood, and educators, parents, and communities should make a more concerted effort to help rudderless youths find a clear direction and overarching sense of purpose, according to a new book.

In *The Path to Purpose: Helping Our Children Find Their Calling in Life*, Stanford University psychologist William Damon shares the first wave of findings from a study in which he and his graduate students have been surveying 1,200 young people between the ages of 12 and 26 over a period of five years.

"There have always been kids that drift," Mr. Damon, a noted scholar on children's moral development and contemporary child-rearing practices, said in an interview.

"But I do think we have a special problem today in the numbers of kids and the kind of trouble they're having in finding a sense of direction."

For the study, Mr. Damon's team has conducted in-depth interviews with a quarter of the youths surveyed, and compared the responses with those from other surveys taken of earlier generations of young people.

One-fifth of the survey participants said they had found something meaningful to which they wanted to dedicate their lives—whether that meant raising a family, pursuing a career that

mattered to them, starting a business, or choosing a religion, according to Mr. Damon.

At the other extreme, the researchers identified a quarter of the young people as “disengaged,” meaning that they expressed no particular wider purpose for their lives and were not involved in activities that might help them find one.

“Apart from the kids on either end of the spectrum,” Mr. Damon said, “there’s a majority of kids who are looking for something but haven’t found it. They’ve either tried something that doesn’t work, or they have some big dream but they haven’t pursued it in a practical sort of way.” Mr. Damon classified those young people as either “dabblers” or “dreamers.”

Mr. Damon’s findings speak to a wider body of evidence showing that young people around the world are putting off marriage and parenthood until well into their 20s, longer than their parents and grandparents did. The trend has spurred some psychologists to coin the term “emerging adulthood” to describe the period from 18 to 25 as a new transitional phase between adolescence and adulthood.

The popular media also use “failure to launch” and “boomerang generation” to characterize the phenomenon and the increasing numbers of young people returning home after college, rather than charting a more independent life course.

“People are beginning to look at this and figure out what is going on in this period when young people seem to be in a holding pattern, waiting for something to happen,” said James Youniss, a professor of developmental psychology at Catholic University of America, in Washington. “[Mr. Damon is] opening a new line of research that’s very valuable to the field.”

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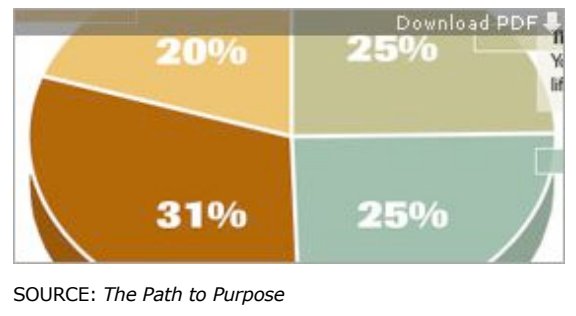
Mr. Damon was prompted to study adolescents’ developing sense of purpose after working with two other prominent psychologists—Harvard University’s Howard Gardner and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi of Claremont Graduate University in Claremont, Calif.—on a 10-year project to investigate adults and institutions doing “good work,” in the sense that their professional output was of high quality, socially responsible, and meaningful to them.

Curious to see how a sense of mission develops earlier in life, Mr. Damon set out to survey and interview young people in five different communities, which he does not name. They include: an inner-city community on the East Coast, an affluent suburb on the West Coast, a small Southern town, and two diverse cities set in agricultural regions. The John Templeton Foundation of West Conshohocken, Pa., and the Thrive Foundation for Youth, based in Palo Alto, Calif., are underwriting the 10-year study, which began in 2003.

Failure to Launch?

William Damon led a study that involved surveying 1,200 young people ages 12 to 26 in five U.S. communities and conducting further, in-depth interviews with about a quarter of the group. Based on that research, Mr. Damon classifies adolescents and young adults into four categories, which he believes can be applied across the board to students in that age group.

Among the disconnected youths the researchers came across were people like Tommy, an 18-year-old from Pennsylvania, who tosses a coin to select his college courses and is candidly unbothered by his lack of goals or ambition. (Mr. Damon does not give many of his subjects' last names in the book.)



Mr. Damon places Jessica, now 27, somewhere in the middle of the spectrum between disengagement and leading a purposeful life. An academic and athletic standout, she cannot escape the feeling that "everything I've been doing my whole life has been for someone else," and she shrugs off job offers to travel and find herself.

While young people in the 1960s may have exhibited similar feelings of alienation from society, their dissatisfaction was also tinged with optimism and idealism, Mr. Damon said.

One study he cites, for instance, shows that, from 1966 to 2002, interest in political affairs among college freshmen dropped from 60 percent to 30 percent.

Mr. Gardner of Harvard agrees with Mr. Damon's assessment. He said rapid societal changes, the "defrocking of heroes by the media," the new digital media, such "shocks" as the Watergate scandal of the 1970s and the 9/11 attacks, as well as other trends and events may have exacerbated the difficulties young people face in finding a life's passion.

"My own impression is that, particularly in the 21st century, many young people have extreme difficulty in 'identifying' [in the psychological sense] with their elders, and this makes the spark to which Damon refers more elusive," Mr. Gardner wrote in an e-mail message.

That's not to say that committed young people don't exist. Apart from the general survey, the researchers identified and interviewed 12 young people with an unusually strong sense of purpose in life in an effort to ferret out factors that made a difference in their development.

One of those people described in the book is Nina Vasani, a 19-year-old West Virginia woman who was inspired, at age 5, by a throat-cancer victim to launch a lifelong campaign against the disease. She founded and became president of a teen-oriented offshoot of the American Cancer Society, won a national science competition, hosted a radio show, and became West Virginia's Junior Miss, among other accomplishments.

Implications for Education

Mr. Damon concludes from his study that schools, communities, and parents can do much to reverse the malaise that plagues many young people. In the classroom, for instance, he said teachers can show students how the skills and content they are learning are useful and share stories of how they found their own callings.

But the author's main target in education is the current emphasis in schools on testing

students, exemplified in part by the federal No Child Left Behind Act. He criticizes that trend for narrowing the curriculum and imposing what he sees as shortsighted educational goals on students.

"Unfortunately, all the emphasis on high-stakes testing has squeezed out time for guidance, the time that teachers can take to impart the usefulness and meaning of the skills they teach, activities like writing for the school newspaper or joining the French club," Mr. Damon said in an interview. "Not every kid is going to find meaning in the three R's. We are single-mindedly focusing on test scores as if the test scores in and of themselves are some kind of important goal for education."

Outside of schools, Mr. Damon offers praise for youth-building efforts like the Search Institute, a Minneapolis-based nonprofit organization that works with schools and communities to identify and strengthen community assets that can promote healthy psychological growth for children and adolescents.

He says parents can contribute at home to children's developing sense of purpose by listening closely to children's expressed interests, fanning the flames of those sparks, discussing their own careers, and introducing their children to outside mentors for career guidance.

"This is giving policymakers the tools for looking at young people with a different lens," said Richard M. Lerner, a professor of applied developmental science at Tufts University, in Medford, Mass., who shares Mr. Damon's orientation toward young people's strengths.

"I say the glass is not four-fifths empty," he added, referring to the proportion of young people that the book identifies as lacking purpose. "It's one-fifth full," he said. "Imagine what we could do if we were intentional about this."

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