

What's Next?

Broadening and Deepening Your Support

Working with kids to discover and develop their sparks can result in numerous benefits for young people. When caring adults put their energy into young people's sparks, they are making a great contribution to their development.

But maybe you're the kind of person who wants to do more. If you are, let us reassure you that through continuing and deepening the spark relationship, you can go even further in helping a young person grow into a caring, responsible, healthy adult.

Our kids develop in multiple environments—and they need more than a spark to reach their full potential. They need encouragement from caring adults outside their families as well as positive communication within families; they need to learn empathy, caring, and other strong values; they need to know their community cares about them and be given important roles to play as they mature. They need social skills and positive activities.

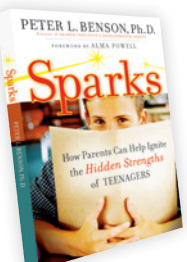
At Search Institute, we have a name for this larger web of experiences, supports, skills, and values that help young people thrive; we call them "Developmental Assets," and we call the intentional effort to help young people have more of them "asset building."

No adult can provide to any child all that child needs. But we can all do asset building for the young people we are in contact with each day. Here's how it looks on a small scale:

One of Search Institute's trainers had been working with a new group of community people about asset building. As the morning came to a close, the trainer gave an assignment to all the participants to be intentional about asset-building opportunities over lunch.

Standing behind some of those participants in the deli counter line, he was able to observe as the trainees made a special point of speaking with, calling by name, and complimenting the busy, somewhat surly teen behind the counter.

But what he really noticed was that when the counter person turned to him, the next person in line, she was in a much better mood, and the trainer benefited from both her friendliness and her extra-good service. An increase in the civility of one community was achieved through one simple act of asset building.



Joy to the World, Joy to You and Me

As Peter Benson, author of *Sparks: How Parents Can Help Ignite the Hidden Strengths of Teenagers*, puts it, "When young people find their spark and their center, their lives become generous, committed, passionate, purposeful, and responsible." Surely that is what we all want for each of our world's young people.

Whether you take the small step of talking with your own child about spark, or you infuse the idea of sparks into your workplace or classroom, or you go further and begin asset building as well, you'll be making a positive difference in young people's lives, and in your community, and, by the way, bringing untold joy and fulfillment into your own life.



When young people's level of assets increases, their likelihood of thriving (choosing healthy behaviors, doing well in school, volunteering, leadership) also increases.

Credits

The concepts of thriving and sparks owe much to the generous support of the Thrive Foundation for Youth.



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Sparks

It Starts with a Single Spark

Change What You're Doing a Little So You Can Change Their World a Lot



With all the hoopla about new technology—the internet, cell phones, texting, e-mail—you'd think modern relationships would be closer, that we'd all know more about each other's unique personalities, interests, and passions.

But in our research studies, young people tell us that only 35 percent of them are connected with caring adults at school who know them and their interests well. They tell us no one at their congregation knows them, and that the people in their youth organizations don't know them, either. In this age of more access, more "connection," our young people are more disconnected than ever, especially from caring adults. Without those caring relationships, the support, guidance, and encouragement young people need can't get through.

It doesn't have to be this way. Parents can build a positive relationship with their kids. Mentors, neighbors, and teachers can start meaningful conversations with the young people near them. We can help our young people find their sparks.

It Begins with a Spark

So, what is *spark*? **It is a special quality, skill, or interest that lights us up and that we are passionate about. A spark comes from inside of us, and when we express it, it gives us joy and energy. It's our very essence, the thing about us that is "good, beautiful, and useful to the world."**

Each of us—young or old or in between—has (or can have) at least one spark. A few people seem to know their spark from an early age, but for most of us, our spark is revealed or discovered over time, through many opportunities and experiences, and we often need caring adults to point them out as we grow from from ages 10 to 20.

Sparks come in many forms. Search Institute’s national studies of 12- to 17-year-olds provide many examples: leading a group, playing an instrument, restoring old cars, dancing, advocating for animal rights, helping people who are injured or abused, writing, making movies, learning, inventing, acting. Others in the research were still searching, trying things, and volunteering as they looked to discover a spark. Clearly, for all of us, the possibilities are wide open!

Why does spark matter? Because when young people know and develop a spark, with the support of several adults, they present a strong picture of health and wellbeing. Our new research shows that they:

- Have higher grades in school
- Have better school attendance
- Are more likely to be socially competent
- Are more likely to be physically healthy
- Are more likely to volunteer to help other people
- Are more likely to care about the environment
- Are more likely to have a sense of purpose
- Are less likely to experience depression
- Are less likely to engage in acts of violence

But in our national surveys, we found that while 65% know their spark, only about 37% of young people could both name a spark and claim the adult support they need to develop it. Our work is cut out for us: we’ve got to start and nurture caring, supportive relationships with young people so we can help them find and nurture their sparks.

Ten Most Common Sparks among American Teenagers (National Data)

- Creative arts (writing, music, art, drama, dance)
- Athletics
- Learning (e.g., languages, science, history)
- Reading
- Helping, serving
- Spirituality, religion
- Nature, ecology, environment
- Living a quality life (e.g., joy, tolerance, caring)
- Animal welfare
- Leading



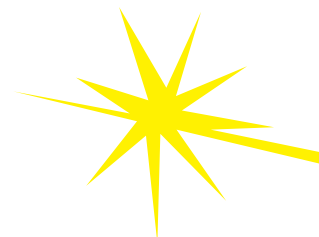
What happens when young people can’t name their spark and do not receive the support they need to nurture it? Young people themselves, in our national samples, were both clear and adamant about the difficulties faced by young people who don’t find a spark:

“If kids have nothing [i.e., no spark] to pursue, nothing that they can be passionate about, then they are more likely to hang with the wrong crowd and potentially get into drugs or alcohol.”

“One can drift through life aimlessly, never accomplishing anything, if one doesn’t have a spark.”

“A spark gives you the drive to pursue what you care about. Without a spark, you just wander through life like an old country road. Just as a car needs a spark to go, a teen needs a spark to go. Without that spark, he just sits around on blocks.”

People often view the problems young people have with drugs, alcohol, teen pregnancy, and dropping out of school as social ills that need fixing. Let’s try viewing them as what happens when kids are disconnected from their sparks and lack relationships with caring, responsible adults who could help them. From this point of view, any adult helping a young person find and nurture his or her spark is helping not only that young person, but also potentially the whole community.



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Getting to Know Them, Really

So what will we do differently? We can start small and start personally with spark, and the bigger change for young people’s lives will grow out of the changes we make in how we interact with them.

Because when adults change our behavior toward young people, the relationship between us changes. When we change how we listen and how we talk, we change the relationships between adults and young people. When we begin not by telling them what they should do, but by asking them who they are and what they love to do, our message to young people is: you are unique, you are valuable just the way you are, and I’m interested in knowing the real you. That is a strong opening for a healthy new relationship, and a good, deepening direction for an existing relationship.

In fact, that’s the beginning of everything good that we want to happen for our children and youth. Because it is **through good relationships** that young people

- get support and encouragement
- learn values and know their identity is affirmed
- become courageous about trying new things
- learn to persevere through difficulties
- come to have all the resources that not only help them survive, but lead them toward thriving.



Follow these steps

First Observe

Getting ready for a spark conversation means being a spark detective rather than a behavior monitor. You’ll be discreetly looking for clues to your children’s sparks, looking with fresh eyes. As you look, ask yourself:

- When do they seem the happiest? Are they alone or with a group?
- When are they most absorbed in an activity?
- What activity do I have to tear them away from for meals?

Ask and Then Listen, Listen, Listen

After you have observed and begun to notice more about your children’s interests, passions, and how they spend their time, you can start a spark conversation. What you’re after is having talks that help them discover their own abilities and possibilities, talks that empower them to try new things and take next steps. The key to that sort of talk is to listen much more than you speak.

Follow Through:

Being Part of a Kid’s Spark Team

Supporting and nurturing a spark is not just saying, “Oh, so you like motorcycles.” Nurturing a spark calls you to take another step. Maybe you suggest a visit to the local Harley store. Maybe you call your brother or sister who has been riding for years. Maybe you walk together to the library to learn more, or you check online for community ed classes in motorcycle safety. Whatever it is, the main point is to take another step.

Remember, there are kids who can name their spark, kids who have identified and are working on their spark, kids who have not yet explored or discovered their spark, even kids who sort of know but can’t yet claim a spark due to discouragement and a lack of self-confidence. Some may need more assistance from you—you may need to draw them out, offer extra encouragement, even go along to an unfamiliar place so the young person can shyly watch a new activity from the safe sidelines.