

# Sparks

## 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 adults at their congregations and their youth organizations don't know them, either.

In this age of more "connection," our young people are more disconnected than ever, especially from caring adults.

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.**

### Finding a Spark

So, what is a spark? It is a special quality, skill or interest. A person's spark is what they are really passionate about, an activity that unleashes their energy and joy, one that may allow them to really express their personality and perhaps make their own unique contribution to the world.

Each of us has (or can have) at least one spark. For most of us, our spark is revealed or discovered over time, through many opportunities and experiences, and we often need caring adults to help us see and develop it. Take a look at the list here of the top ten spark categories named by American teenagers ages 12–17. (The percentages add up to more than 100% because teens, on average, report 1.4 sparks.)

- **Creative arts (painting, writing, dance, music, acting) 54%**
- **Athletics 25%**
- **Learning a subject matter (like science or history) 18%**
- **Reading 11%**
- **Helping, serving, volunteering 10%**
- **Being a leader 10%**
- **Caring or advocating for animals, or protecting endangered species 8%**
- **Living in a specific way (with joy, caring, tolerance, compassion) 7%**
- **Nature, ecology, the environment 6%**
- **Spirituality or religion 2%**

### 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 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 nearly two thirds know their spark, only about one third 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.

### Getting Started

Three simple steps can help you start your spark work with a young person. First, spend time discreetly looking for clues to their 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?

After you have observed and begun to notice more about their 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.

Finally, find a way to follow through with what you find out. If they love motorcycles, maybe you suggest a visit to the local Harley store. Maybe you call your brother or sister who has been riding for years. Maybe together you check online for community education classes in motorcycle safety. Whatever it is, the main point is to take another step.

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, and putting them on the path to a positive future.

As Peter Benson, author of *Sparks: How Parents Can Help Ignite the Hidden Strengths of Teens*, 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 young people.