

DISCOVER YOUR SPARKS

# SPARKS



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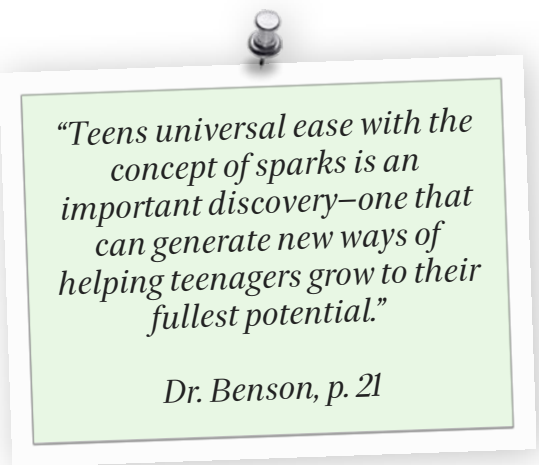
# Discover Your Sparks

*"It takes a spark to ignite the flame, that burning desire to succeed. We must ignite the spark that glows in our children, so it sputters and comes to life."*

Alma Powell  
Chair, America's Promise Alliance <sup>1</sup>

Sparks are the passions, skills and strengths that are discoverable in all youth.. Research tells us that inner passions, interests and talents are the catalyst for driving personal growth along a trajectory of thriving. As the adult guide explores the array of indicators of thriving, and helps youth set and achieve goals for growth, this catalytic force should stay central to the dialogue and the youth-driven effort.

Discover Your Sparks questions are derived directly from Dr. Peter Benson's research at the Search Institute, a non-profit think-tank in the field of Positive Youth Development. Search Institute identifies what young people need to become caring, healthy, and responsible adults.

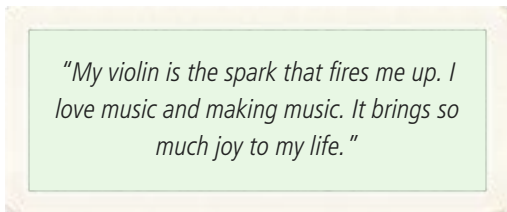


*"Teens universal ease with the concept of sparks is an important discovery—one that can generate new ways of helping teenagers grow to their fullest potential."*

Dr. Benson, p. 21

## What are Sparks, and who has them?

"Every teenager has a spark - something inside that is good, beautiful, and useful to the world. Some youth may not be able to describe their spark, but all youth are able to understand the concept by the way of ten, and can see sparks in others. Sparks illuminate a young person's life, and they provide energy, joy and purpose."<sup>2</sup>



*"My violin is the spark that fires me up. I love music and making music. It brings so much joy to my life."*

## Sparks

- Can be a skill, talent or interest. For some, it's a way of being in the world.
- Originate from inside a person, rather than being imposed from the outside.
- Are a source of motivation, meaning and self-directed action that go deeper than activities, such as going to the mall or watching a movie.
- Make (or have the potential to make) the world a better place. <sup>3</sup>

## Sparks Research

Search Institute used a Gallup Poll, online surveys and interviews to survey several thousand diverse 11-17 year olds and their parents in the United States. From this research, Search learned that:

- 💡 100% of America's teens understand and want to have a spark. <sup>4</sup>
- 💡 62% of teenagers can name their spark, while 38% cannot; this means that 12 million youth don't know their spark. <sup>5</sup>

- 54% of youth have sparks in the creative arts; 29% in learning or reading; 25% in athletics; and 10% in volunteering. <sup>6</sup>

Youth who know their spark(s) and have adult support in developing them, are less likely to:

- Experience depression,
- Engage in acts of violence against others,

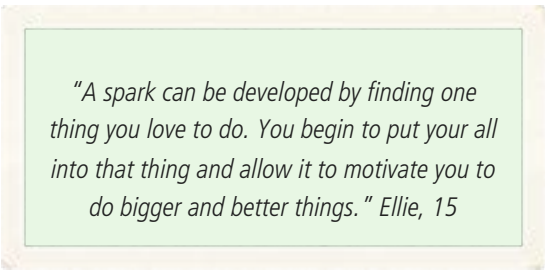
And they are more likely to:

- Have higher grades and school attendance rates
- Be socially competent and physically healthy
- Volunteer to help other people and be good stewards of the earth and its resources
- Have a sense of purpose <sup>7</sup>

## Spark Development in Adolescence

Adolescence is a critical period for brain development. During the teenage years, there is significant pruning and hardwiring of circuits in the brain, particularly in the prefrontal cortex, the area responsible for planning, organization, impulse-control and decision-making. Teenagers also experience significant hormonal changes. The result of these simultaneous occurrences is that teenagers are often = impulsive and emotionally volatile, as well as extremely passionate. Dr. Ronald Dahl, a renowned psychiatrist specializing in adolescent development, describes adolescence as “an emotional tinderbox in which passions - both negative and positive - are ignited.” <sup>8</sup>

During this period of identity formation, when youth are struggling with independence and seeking to find life’s purpose, adult guides have a key opportunity to help youth identify and express their passions. An important role of the adult guide is to channel youth’s natural energy towards the pursuit of positive passions that contribute to the world, instead of a direction towards danger and risk-taking.<sup>9</sup>



## Youth Experiencing Trauma

For youth growing up in situations of trauma, they have learned that the world can be unfair and they may be angry about it. Their sparks might appear in disguise, often exhibited in disruptive behavior or other forms of expressions that are not socially acceptable. Psychologists would say that these youth are expressing an expectation that they are entitled to more.<sup>10</sup> Others may have given up hope and they internalize failure and blame themselves for not being good enough. Some do not believe they have the power to change, which leads to depression and self-hating behaviors.

Caring adult guides are essential to helping these young people move to positive aspirations, realistic self-reflections and a belief that they can grow and change. All those who care for vulnerable youth need to develop the ability to see sparks in these youth, and help the youth identify and develop them. This is the fundamental foundation for love of learning.

## Spark Champions

“Sparks alone are not enough.”<sup>11</sup>

Search’s research demonstrates that a youth’s sparks can shine brightly or dimly, depending on whether they have spark champions— adults who support and encourage them to discover and pursue their spark. Unfortunately, however, only 37% of youth who have a spark say their parents know of and support their spark, and most teens say that there are very few adults outside their families who affirm and nourish their sparks. <sup>12</sup> We have a large societal

challenge when so few youth have spark champions in their lives.

You can play the role of spark champion for your youth, and help them identify other adults who can be their spark champions. This role may include:

- Helping youth identify a spark by pointing out moments when you observe youth exhibiting joy and energy;
- Affirming youth's spark(s) by asking questions, listening, attending games/performances, providing encouragement, etc.;
- Helping youth identify opportunities to express their spark(s);

- Modeling the spark;
- Helping youth overcome obstacles in the way. <sup>13</sup>

"The influence of spark champions during adolescence can be deeply transformative for a youth. Champions give the message that there is something good and beautiful within the youth which is useful to the world. Exploring sparks can be a process of revelation that is highly relevant to the youth's self-identity, shaped during this time of life." <sup>14</sup>

From this research, it's clear that sparks, when illuminated and nurtured, give young people joy, energy, and direction. They have the power to change a young person's life from one of "surviving" to "thriving," and can put them on a path to a hopeful future. <sup>15</sup>

#### Footnotes

1. Benson, Peter L., (2008) Sparks. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. p. ix.
2. Benson, Peter L., (2008) Sparks. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. p. 17.
3. Benson, Peter L., (2008) Sparks. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. p. 19.
4. Benson, Peter L., (2008) Sparks. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. p. 88.
5. Benson, Peter L., (2008) Sparks. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. p. 88.
6. Benson, Peter L., (2008) Sparks. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. p. 61.
7. Benson, Peter L., (2008) Sparks. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. p. 12.
8. Benson, Peter L., (2008) Sparks. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. p. 44.
9. Benson, Peter L., (2008) Sparks. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. p. 44.
10. David Dan, Friends of the Children, 4.7.09.
11. Benson, Peter L., (2008) Sparks. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. p. 84.
12. Benson, Peter L., (2008) Sparks. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. p. 88.
13. Benson, Peter L., (2008) Sparks. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. p. 84-85.
14. Benson, Peter L., (2008) Sparks. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. p. 85.
15. Benson, Peter L., (2008) Sparks. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. p. 13.