

# BE A SPARK CHAMPION YOUR TEENAGER NEEDS YOU!

As a parent or caring adult, you play an important part in helping your youth reach his or her dreams of success! One of the first steps is to support your youth to find and grow what scientists call a "Spark."

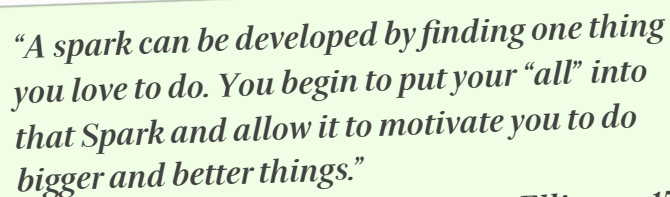
## What are Sparks?

Sparks are passions and skills that we feel deeply and help us grow. Sparks come from inside a person, rather than being forced from the outside. A Spark is more than just a passing interest or talent. Sparks bring us energy and joy. They can grow into a life purpose, and allow a person to make a contribution to the world. Examples of Sparks include dance, journalism, training animals and student government. Sparks are what make youth light up inside!

## Who has Sparks?

### We all do!

"By age eleven, every person has a spark - something inside that is good, beautiful, and useful to the world." Some youth may not be able to describe their spark. However, all youth are able to identify the concept and describe the spark in others.<sup>1</sup>



*"A spark can be developed by finding one thing you love to do. You begin to put your "all" into that Spark and allow it to motivate you to do bigger and better things."*

*Ellie, age 15*

While people discover Sparks at any age, the teenage years are an ideal time to explore Sparks. Teens undergo major physical and emotional changes. As they form their identity, youth want independence and are looking for life's purpose. Parents and caring adults have a key chance to help youth find and show their passions.

- **Could your teen have a Spark?** Definitely! 100% of America's teens understand and want to have a spark.<sup>2</sup>
- **What kind of Spark does your teen have?** There are hundreds of different Sparks, ranging from caring for animals to acting, to electronics repair. In the United States, half of youth have Sparks in arts; One-quarter in learning or reading; one quarter in athletics; and 10% in volunteering.<sup>3</sup> People can have more than one Spark at the same time!

Note that Sparks can stay the same, or they can change over time. Our Sparks today are often not our Sparks tomorrow. This is natural!

- **How have your Sparks changed since you were a teen?** You can be a great role model for your teen by finding and growing your own Sparks!

## Why are Sparks important?

There are great benefits for teenagers who know at least one Spark and have adult support in growing it:

- Higher grades in school and better school attendance
- Better social skills
- Better health
- More likely to volunteer to help others and to take care of the earth
- More likely to have a sense of their life's purpose <sup>4</sup>

Also, teenagers who know their Spark(s) and have adult support in growing them are less likely to have depression and be violent against others<sup>1</sup>. Finding and growing Sparks is an important step on the road to a hopeful future!

## How can I help my teen find and grow his or her Sparks?

A youth's Sparks can shine brightly or dimly, depending on whether the youth has Spark Champions. These champions are adults who support them to find and grow their Spark. Unfortunately, only one-third of youth who have a Spark say there is a caring adult that supports their Spark.<sup>5</sup>

### There are many ways you can help!



**Notice** when your teen "lights up" and shows joy and energy. Point out these moments to help your youth find a Spark.



**Talk** to your youth about what gets them excited. Ask questions like, "What do you love to do? Why do you like it? How do you feel when you are doing it? What is something you do that you are proud of?" Help your teen think creatively. Use the "Spark Ideas" chart to explore different Sparks with your teen.



**Listen** carefully for ways to support your teen. Ask, "What can I do to help you find your Spark? What can I do to cheer you on?"



**Help** your youth find chances to practice their Spark(s). Are there classes they can attend, library books to check out, or people to mentor them? Where could your teen volunteer to gain Spark experience? Go to the public library with your teen and "google" his or her Spark on the internet to find new ways to explore. Reflect on resources you have to help your teen. Do you know people who share the same Spark as your youth? Introduce your teen to them!



**Attend** your teen's games, shows, and public demonstrations of his or her Spark(s). Make it clear that you are there to support your youth whether or not they do well.

With your help, your teen will move toward his or her full potential!

### Footnotes

1-5. Benson, Peter L., (2008) Sparks. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. p. 12, 17, 61, 88.

# CONCERNS & FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

## ***1. “My teen’s Spark isn’t practical. She feels passionate about creating visual art, but she won’t be able to use it to make a living.”***

It is natural to feel concerned about your teen’s ability to make a living someday. All parents and caring adults want the best for the young people in their lives. The good news is that the process of finding and growing Sparks helps young people build skills that can lead to a hopeful future. For instance, a teen who practices her Spark of painting can develop hand-eye coordination, knowledge of color and how to observe. These skills can be used in careers such as fashion marketing, graphic design, or running a museum. Also, the joy and energy she gets while following her interest helps her be balanced and happy. The life skills, energy, and motivation that are grown while following an artistic Spark often lead to success in other areas.

## ***2. “My teen keeps changing her Spark when it gets hard. I want her to stick to something!”***

It’s hard to help teens finish what they start and make room for Sparks to change over time. After all, maintaining effort is an important life skill. Sometimes your teen may need support to complete the work needed to follow a Spark, such as finishing a class. But, you don’t have to make him or her sign up for another class about the same thing. Help your teen stick with a Spark long enough to learn about his or her interests and build skills. But, support your teen at the right times if he or she feels it is time to explore a new Spark.

## ***3. “My teen’s Spark is dangerous and risky. He says drug dealing is his Spark!”***

As a parent or caring adult, you have an important role in guiding your youth’s natural energy. You want to support positive passions that make the world better, instead of dangerous directions or risk-taking.<sup>1</sup> If your teen has a passion in drug dealing or another risky behavior, look under the surface for positive Sparks that can be grown in a safer way. For instance, negotiation and sales are both a part of drug dealing. Those skills could be grown in other ways such as a summer job at a call center, department store, or car dealership.

## ***4. “My teen doesn’t seem to be demonstrating Sparks of any sort.”***

About one third of teens in the United States do not know their Spark yet.<sup>2</sup> If your teen has not found his or her Spark, there are ways you can help! Start by asking these questions, “What makes you want to jump out of bed in the morning? What is your favorite day of the week? What do you look forward to doing that day? Forget about money and resources. If you could spend a whole day doing anything you wanted, what would you do? Why? What makes you feel really happy?”

Try to listen to your teen and talk less. Help your youth understand the “why” behind his or her answers. Have your teen try at least one new thing based on his or her interests. Develop a plan of action with them. Praise your teen’s efforts. All young people have Sparks, whether they are visible or not. With your help, your teen will be able to find his or hers!

It is important to note that sometimes a youth not having a Spark is a cry for help. There are many barriers that can hide Sparks, including poverty, violence, and drugs. Young people facing these challenges sometimes give up hope, feel depressed, and blame themselves. As a parent or caring adult, you can help your teens to turn to you and others for support.

## **5. “All my teen wants to do is watch television and go to the mall. Are these Sparks?”**

Sparks are talents or interests that are deeper than primarily passive activities, such as going to the mall or watching television. Sparks offer more and more chances to build life skills. Youth find value in doing their Sparks, and the community values the youth’s Spark too. This being said, there is a chance that there may be hidden Sparks in these passive activities. For instance, a teen who loves to go to mall, may have a Spark in fashion design or sales.

### **Footnotes**

1. Benson, Peter L., (2008) Sparks. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. p. 44.
2. Benson, Peter L., (2008) Sparks. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. p. 88.