

Sparks



Five Tips for Making Their Summer Spark-le!

Summer can be long and boring or fun and productive—depending on how your children spend their time. If you want their summer to “sparkle” with fun and learning, try using these three months to help your kids discover and identify their “sparks”!

A person’s spark is what they are really passionate about doing, an activity that unleashes their energy and joy, one they can imagine doing for a long time, one that may allow them to make their own unique contribution to the world. It might be anything from playing a musical instrument to rebuilding an antique car, from leading their student senate to caring for animals at a nearby shelter.

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 most of us discover our sparks over time, through multiple opportunities and experiences, and we often need the help of caring, observant adults to point them out to us.

Why is it important? New research from Search Institute shows that when young people know their spark(s) and have adult support in nurturing them, they are more likely to have a sense of purpose, to be socially competent and physically healthy, and to do better in school. In short, they are more likely to thrive.

Want to do that for your kids?

Here are five quick tips to get you started.

1. Set aside your agenda and focus on their unique interests.

It’s easy to fall into arranging your kids’ summer by what you think is best for them or by what works with adult needs and schedules. Commit to making an effort to arrange for each child to do at least one thing this summer that is all about discovering what he or she might be passionate about.

2. Observe them.

Ask yourself these questions as you look for clues about your children's sparks: What is the activity you have to make them stop doing to get them to eat or go to sleep? What activity are they doing when they seem most engaged and alive? When they get to choose what to do after a long day of school and chores and work, what activity do they choose?

3. Ask, then listen, listen, listen.

Start some "spark conversations" with your children. Tell them about what a spark is, then ask whether they have one and what it is—you might be surprised at the answers! And notice especially if there is something new they would like to try; many of us learn and grow into our sparks.

4. Provide opportunities to explore different activities.

Whether your kids already know at least one spark or not, exploring possibilities leads to a richer life of involvement in multiple activities. Check out community education classes, local park and recreation offerings, and city or town Web sites to find new options for your kids to try, from circus acrobatics to glass blowing.

5. Support and connect them.

As a parent or caregiver, you have great influence on helping your children be confident in her or his identity and strengths. Encourage them intentionally with language that acknowledges their interests and efforts; avoid focusing solely on accomplishments. But also remember that connecting a child with other caring adults, especially those who are experienced in their areas of interest, can open for them new worlds of opportunity and learning.