

Sparks



Try a New Conversation: Helping Youth Find Their Sparks

For the past five years at Search Institute, we've been studying young people who are thriving—not just surviving, not just getting by, but truly doing well. Young people who are aware of and using their interests, talents, and abilities, achieving their goals, and living up to and beyond their potential.

We've discovered three things that, when they are all present in young people's lives, almost guarantee that they will thrive:

1. Young people know their "sparks," the special interests and abilities they are passionate about
2. They pursue their sparks and use them to contribute to a better world
3. Their parents and other adults support, encourage, and help them with their sparks.

A young person's spark is what he or she is really passionate about—the activity that unleashes energy and joy, one he or she can imagine doing for a long time, one that will allow him or her to make a unique contribution to the world.

As a caring adult, you can help young people with all three of these important factors in one simple way: by talking with them. We mean having real, person-to-person conversations with them, talks that help them discover their own abilities and possibilities, talks that guide them to try new things and take next steps, talks that reveal your own struggles and dreams.

When adults have tried this and have intentionally cultivated sparks conversations with a young person they care about, they tell us it really deepens the relationship and helps the young people move forward. Anyone can do it, provided they listen first, talk "with," not "to," and are nonjudgmental.

Starting the Conversations

We recommend a simple, three-step process for having spark conversations with young people. The steps are: find the right moment; use questions, probes, and ideas; and follow through. Here are several conversation starters to guide you on your way.

Conversation 1: “This Seems to Make You Happy.”

Observing the Moment

The key to finding this moment is to notice when a young person is having a “flow” experience—that sustained “time doesn’t exist” thrill. For example, when a young person spends hours editing video footage and then shows others the resulting 5-minute clip.

Questions, Probes, and Ideas

- Do any of your friends like doing this, too?
- Let’s figure out a way for you to do more of this!
- What are the things you like about it?

Follow-through

Noticing a young person’s enjoyment affirms that this spark is something special about her or him. Point it out may help the young person take a new look at his or her identity.

Conversation 2: “You’re Really Interested in That!”

Observing the Moment

Catch a young person really engaged in something, and then comment about it! It could be anything from spelling to soccer to singing to taking apart an old disk drive.

Questions, Probes, and Ideas

- How long have you been involved in this activity?
- Have you ever thought about how this interest could become a career?
- What are you doing to learn more about this or get better at it?
- Do you have any goals around this interest? Anything I can do to help?

Follow-through

No matter what the spark, there are places to go with it. Good spellers can compete in spelling bees. Great soccer players could become coaches to teams of younger players. Help the young person think about where he or she might take it next.

Conversation 3: “Have you ever heard about sparks?”

Observing the Moment

Notice when your young person seems restless, bored, or out of sorts—when he or she seems dissatisfied with everything: school, part-time job, friends, all of it. The young person might need your help even to begin the process of finding what he or she loves to do.

Questions, Probes, and Ideas

- Did you know that Grandpa Evan was a terrific mechanic?
- Have you noticed what kinds of experiences make you the happiest?
- Take a look through this community education catalog; are there any classes or activities that sound interesting to you?

Follow-through

Encourage your young person to try at least one new activity, and soon! Try to make it easy and appealing by offering to do some of the legwork to find a class or by suggesting he or she find a friend to try it with. Check back in a few days and ask whether there are other things he or she would like to try.