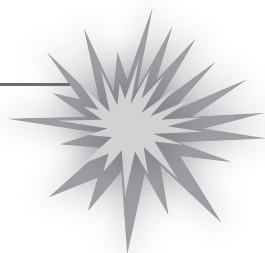


PART ONE



Five Steps to Help Ignite Your Teen's Sparks

STEP ONE



Recognize the Power of Sparks

***spark** n 1: an incandescent particle 2: a glistening particle 3: a flash of light 4: a vital, animating, or activating factor*

Every teenager has a spark—something inside that is good, beautiful, and useful to the world. Sparks illuminate a young person's life and give it energy and purpose.

Sparks come in many forms. Interviews with thousands of American teenagers tell us that their sparks include writing poetry, making music, helping people, leading, being a peacemaker among friends and peers at school, making one's community better, and taking care of the earth. When our sparks glow, we feel whole. We feel useful. Life has meaning. It feels good to get up in the morning.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT SPARKS

Sparks are akin to the human spirit. The word *spirit* comes from the Latin *spiritas*, and is used to convey the concept of breath put into

the world with vigor and courage. Spark, spirit, breath. The very essence of a person, put into play with energy and conviction.

As parents, we know when our children have a spark. You can tell by looking in their eyes. You can feel the energy, the electricity. It's wonderful to be around young people who know their sparks and put them into play.

Sparks: The Keys to Unlocking Our Purpose

So many people—teenagers and adults—live locked-up lives. They meander through life, sometimes checking things off their to-do list, but often not knowing why they are here or why they matter. When you do this too long, you get a nagging sense that something's missing, and what's missing is discovering and expressing your spark.

As noted by Stanford psychologist William Damon, one of the most prominent trends of our times is a feeling of emptiness among adolescents and young adults. Commitment and sense of direction are at risk for too many of our young. We even see it now in the burgeoning numbers of twenty-somethings living at home with their parents while they wait for something to commit to. As Damon says, we are raising teens in “a society in which purposefulness among young people is the exception rather than the rule.”

Adults need to know and act on their sparks, and so do teenagers. If we can encourage young people to discover their sparks, they won't need to go through what too many of us adults go through: that wandering state of longing for something more and yearning to follow what you care about instead of doing what someone else says you should do or care about.

Sparks describes a five-step plan to help ignite your teen's spark. The plan is based on interviews with thousands of teens and parents from all walks of life: rich and poor, urban and rural, two-parent and one-parent families.

The first step is to recognize the power of sparks. Through our research, we discovered that a spark has these characteristics:

- It gives us energy and joy. We look forward to exploring it.
- When it is expressed, we feel alive. We feel useful. Life has purpose. We feel we are drawing on our best potential.
- When we are in a spark mode, we lose our sense of time. We are in the moment.
- A spark originates from inside a person. It is not imposed from the outside.
- A spark can be a skill, a talent, an interest. For some, it's a way of being in the world. And when we express it, we're not worried about how good we are or how it looks to others. Just doing it (or being it) is enough.
- Some people think of their spark as a gift, or as "the reason I am in the world."
- A spark is not just about things we like to do, like watching movies or going to the beach or working out. It is deeper than this. It is a prime source of meaning, self-directed action, and purpose in our lives.
- This is important: a spark does (or has the potential to) make the world a better place for others.

A Powerful Research Base

Through a variety of major studies of youth and families all across America, we've learned a great deal about sparks, their role in helping youth navigate through adolescence, and their impact on the health and well-being of teenagers. We've also learned about young people's *spark champions*, adults who are there for them. To create this portrait of youth, we sponsored or commissioned the following

three national studies, in which we listened to the voices of more than thirty-five hundred teenagers and two thousand parents of teenagers:

- A Gallup Poll of two thousand twelve- to seventeen-year-olds and two thousand of their parents (one per teenager). This is a nationally representative sample of teenagers, with oversamples of African American and Hispanic youth.
- A twelve-question online poll of one thousand eleven- to seventeen-year-olds, conducted with the assistance of the Louis Harris polling firm.
- Interviews with 405 teenagers ages fifteen to seventeen. This was a three-day Internet-based bulletin board conversation on sparks and thriving, during which young people described their sparks, how their environments (such as family, school, and neighborhood) helped or discouraged them, what they sacrificed in order to pursue their sparks, and the ways they could tell when a teenager was thriving.

Our studies document seven major lessons about sparks, lessons that really need to become common knowledge. These lessons have the capacity to energize our families, schools, and neighborhoods to see the potential in each young person. You'll find these lessons cited throughout this book.



KEY LESSON 1

Kids Understand the Idea of Sparks and Want Them

There's no question that America's teens and young adults get the concept of spark. It is as though the idea is hardwired into their very being.

When asking about sparks, we frequently heard something like, “Oh, you mean something I am passionate about,” or “Something about me that I love to do.” These teens also express a desire to have sparks and can identify what having sparks looks like among their peers. The universal ease with the concept of sparks is an important discovery, one that can help generate new ways of helping teenagers grow to their fullest potential.

HOW YOUNG PEOPLE VIEW SPARKS

Young people are articulate about the characteristics of kids with sparks versus those without sparks. They have much to say, and what they say is often insightful and inspiring.

The Rich Vocabulary of Teens

When describing their own sparks, young people frequently use words like “relish,” “love,” “reason to smile,” “passion,” “sacrifice,” “emotion,” “commitment,” “focus,” “lights my fire”—the kind of vocabulary one might expect to hear from someone describing a love interest or another really important relationship. These are right-brain words of emotion more than left-brain words of reason.

There seems to be a palpable level of energy within these words. This energy has a push and a pull. The push is the named and affirmed spark. The pull is the vision of what one can be.

Examples of Teenagers with Sparks

Ask a teenager about his spark, and often he will have a lot to say. Here’s how some teens from across America who have embraced their sparks describe them in an anonymous survey:

“My spark is art. I love to paint and sculpt and make things. I can take junk and make it into art.”

“I love to work with disabled youth. I love seeing them be so happy at the smallest things.”

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

“I love helping people with their personal problems. When one of my friends is having trouble with her family, I will sit there and listen to her and help her come up with a solution.”

“I am pursuing my spark by staying focused on going to school every day. Keeping my grades up. Staying away from areas that can get me pulled into trouble. I come home. I practice my music. I write lyrics all the time. I get together with the rest of my music group three to four times a week and we practice four to six hours. This is important to me because this is my spark. This is what I love. What I need to do. This will one day allow me to take care of my brothers and sisters.”

“The one spark in my life that most fires me up is my love for archeology.”

“I actually have more than one spark. I have loved soccer since the moment I touched the ball. It is a great way to make new friends and the thrill of playing it is so amazing to me it makes me want more. My other passion is acting. When I was younger, my dad would follow me around with a camera and I would do the funniest things. To be or to create your own perception or interpretation of a character is something I’ve always loved to do.”

Notice that none of these statements is merely about what young people like to do. Rather, they are about what young people *need* to do. This highlights a common theme in the way young people think about sparks: a spark isn’t something you go outside yourself to find. It’s something deep inside you.

Teenagers with spark have an enthusiasm and passion that are almost infectious. Once teenagers get started talking about sparks, they often become philosophical and almost evangelical.

“You can try to like something because someone else wants you to, but how can you really love something if it’s not something you want to do? Follow your heart and do what you love. Find your passion and go for it. It’s your life and you only have one life to live.” (Jamie, 14)

“If you have a spark, follow what you love and just don’t give up.” (Ronaldo, 13)

“A spark can be developed by finding one thing you love to do. You begin to put your all into that thing and allow it to motivate you to do bigger and better things.” (Ellie, 15)

“You can find something that you love or that you are good at. Just keep trying different things until you find that spark.” (Max, 17)

How a Spark Opens a New Path

A spark is about developing yourself from the inside out. It’s about discovering what’s deep inside you so that you’re less blown around by external pressures and distractions.

Too many of our teenagers are caught up and mesmerized by what’s going on outside them. They jump with every call on their cell phones. They rush home from school to see what’s new on YouTube. They are dazzled by the glitter of the rich and famous. Too many are wandering aimlessly in search of things that don’t connect with the deepest part of their being.

Our society promotes unrealistic expectations for young people: “You can be anything you want to be.” “Anything is possible.” People say these things without recognizing each individual’s spark, capacity, or skills. Thus a lot of young people become discouraged because they’ve built their dreams on fragile foundations. They’ve been misled to have unrealistic or inauthentic expectations.

Not everyone can be president—or wants to be. But to pursue such a goal, you need more than desire: you also need the motivation,

the deep interest, the temperament, the physical stamina, and the skills to do so. You also need others around you saying yes and helping build momentum to get you there.

The truth is, sparks often show up in places where someone finds them puzzling, or even offensive or threatening. A parent who is apolitical may find herself with a son who is emerging as an ardent Republican or Democrat. A grandparent who struggled during the Depression may have a granddaughter who volunteers at a homeless shelter and isn't interested in making money. The student who doodles and draws cartoons may baffle a parent who is a business entrepreneur.

Put a spark into action and see how it can lead a teenager to risk curiosity, wonder, and spontaneous delight. The story of Adanna does this—and more. It also provides a corrective to the too-common notion that young people are empty vessels that have to be coerced into becoming responsible, engaged, and committed human beings. Much to the contrary, we are active agents in our own development. Here's how Adanna tells it.

When I was younger, I wasn't sure what was good and special about me.

Then one day, a music teacher pointed out that there was something I really loved: singing. I sang in the choir at church and in the chorus at school, and even when I was just walking down the hallway.

When I was thirteen I realized I had another spark: writing songs. I listened to all kinds of music, all kinds of songwriters, and that taught me how to write songs. For me, writing songs and playing my guitar was a way to really express myself and who I am and what I can imagine.

When I was a junior in high school, a tiny cafe called the Nook caught my eye. It held open microphone

nights once a month. It was right near my school, so I'd pass it on the bus. Since this cafe was in my own neighborhood, I was curious.

So I went in to the Nook one day after school. I was sort of nervous, but something inside of me became brave, and I asked about the open mic. A guy told me to call during the day to reserve a place on the list.

When the day came, I called. There was a place for me. When I got to the Nook, I sat down. I didn't know anybody, and I began to wonder what I was doing here. The room was small, but the place was packed.

As the night went on, I found myself feeling more relaxed. The songs people sang were really good. Some were funny. Some were sad. Some were short, some were long, in all different styles.

But even with the long ones, I didn't want to leave. I was anticipating my turn. The crowd was pretty supportive.

Then they called my name.

Talk about having butterflies! But I picked up my guitar, walked away from the corner I'd been hiding in all night, and stood in front of the mic. I began to play and sing what I thought was my best song so far.

When I finished, everyone applauded. I was so happy. People came up to thank me. I felt good. I decided right then to write more and to be brave and do more performances.

A lot of people don't step out of the hidden corners of their lives. They stay in the dark because they feel they aren't good enough. Standing up in front of an audience isn't easy. Every time I do it, I get butterflies and wonder if I'm brave enough. But afterward, I know it was worth it.

This is a story of possibility and potential. It's also a story of how spark changes a life. What we see in Adanna's story is a motivation to grow and develop. And it comes from inside her, compelling her to take responsible risks, even if this means embarrassment or falling on her face. How lucky she was (and we are) that her community provided the Nook, a place hospitable to her budding talent.

Does America have enough Nooks or other settings for young people to stretch their wings? Not really. In this case, however, it was exactly this venue that enabled Adanna to step out of the shadows and let her spark shine.



KEY LESSON 2

*A Majority of Young People Have a Spark
and Can Describe It*

About two-thirds of American teenagers can name their spark and paint a picture of what it is that brings them energy, joy, and direction. Those who know it are passionate about their spark and see how their spark makes their lives richer. However, nearly twelve million young lives are waiting for the light bulb to go on.

GOOD NEWS AND BAD NEWS ABOUT THE STATE OF SPARKS TODAY

In conducting our national studies, we asked teens about their sparks in several ways. Here's one of the questions we used:

Do you have a special talent or interest that gives you joy and energy, and is an important part of who you are? When people feel that joy and energy, we sometimes say they have a “spark” in their lives. It might be writing, or science, or learning about nature, playing an instrument, being an artist, a leader, or helping others. The sparks are not just about things you like to do, like being with friends or riding a bike. The sparks give a

person a sense that his or her life has a purpose or direction. Do you have sparks in your life?

What We Learned from Teenagers Who Have a Spark

How many teenagers have sparks? Among the teens we surveyed, 69 percent say they do. In the same sample, 62 percent can actually describe what their spark is; the other 7 percent can't. These numbers are both good and bad news.



SPARK FACT

The Difference by Age

The percentage of kids who say they have a spark (by age):

- 79 percent of 10- to 12-year-olds
- 65 percent of 13- to 15-year-olds
- 65 percent of 16- to 18-year-olds

The good news is that almost seven out of ten teenagers seem to have a spark in their lives. That's an incredibly important message, one that runs counter to the more common headlines about teenagers. The bad news is that 31 percent don't think they have a spark. That's a lot of kids. There are about forty million ten- to nineteen-year-olds in the United States; 31 percent translates into twelve million lives waiting for the spark in them to ignite.

How Sparks Need Help to Shine More Brightly

Here's another piece of important news. We know that teenage sparks can shine brightly or be very dim. Their brightness depends, to a large extent, on the encouragement and support the children get from the adults in their life, the *spark champions*. Yes, it's up to each individual teenager to discover and pursue her spark, but

teenagers need support. They're more likely to succeed when parents and other adults encourage them and follow the ups and downs of their spark journey. Sadly, according to teens, only 37 percent of parents know and actively nourish teenagers' sparks. This is true across all demographic and socioeconomic groups.

Even though it appears that teenagers are doing well in understanding their spark, knowing doesn't always lead to action—or direction. The following stories are far too common:

“My family is not really playing a part in helping me find my spark. And I bet that when I find it, they won't help it get going without some big-time conditions—like it has to help me be accepted into a good college or get a good job. So I'm kind of lost right now.”

“My parents are divorced, and my dad makes fun of things I do—like writing. So I don't bring it up to him.”

“My parents are so busy with their jobs. They aren't very happy. They need to find their sparks. Then maybe they could help me with mine.”

“I live in a foster home. My dad is in jail, and my mom killed herself about six months ago. In school there are some teachers who try to help, but they're too busy, so I'm usually just on my own.”

To make matters worse, most teenagers tell us that there are few, if any, adults *outside* their families who affirm and nourish their sparks. No advocates, no teachers, no neighbors, no coaches, no mentors who are on their team.

We all know too many young people walking through life with too little direction and purpose. Yes, many seem busy with their MP3 players, cell phones, school activities, and video games, but busyness is not the same as pursuing a meaningful spark. Adolescence can be so much richer if sparks are kindled and nourished.

Knowing your teenager's sparks can make the time of adolescence exciting and fruitful, rather than a time to dread.

This quotation, attributed sometimes to the poet e. e. cummings, pretty well nails the power of sparks in these two sentences: "We do not believe in ourselves until someone reveals that deep inside of us there's something valuable, worth listening to, worthy of our touch, sacred to our touch. Once we believe in ourselves, we can risk curiosity, wonder, spontaneous delight, or any experience that reveals the human spirit."

So remember: this step is all about appreciating what a spark is and how valuable it can be. We parents should be searching for and listening to sparks in all our teenagers. For when our teenagers discover their spark, they discover themselves, and the world can open up to them in new ways.

Now let's go on to Step Two and learn how important it is to know our own children, so we can eventually identify and nurture all their potential sparks.

