

FINDING AND NOURISHING SPARKS: THE POWER OF FAMILIES

Dr. Peter Benson encouraged parents, educators and caregivers to redefine success in terms of *Thriving*, a state of being fully alive and in love with our lives. Our ultimate goal is to raise young people who possess a tremendous capacity for happiness, a strong sense of purpose and the courage to be their best self in the world. Often in midlife, adults can feel adrift and seek to rediscover their guiding energy and passion. Numerous self-help books aim to solve this “midlife crisis.” How can we help young people recognize and pursue their unique spark at a much earlier stage in their life? How do we guide a young person in creating a life of meaning and joy?

Young people tend to develop along four pathways in childhood and adolescence. Some children are pushed away or neglected; others become bored, disengaged or disconnected from people and opportunities; some play the game of pleasing, achieving based upon extrinsic rewards. The fourth and healthiest *Thriving pathway* assumes that in every child there is an animating force, a “spark” that motivates from within and ultimately generates school success, compassion and purpose.

Dr. Benson describes a three pronged formula for helping young people thrive. Children need to know their ‘spark’, own it, and have it affirmed by caring adults and peers. Ideally, at least three adult “spark” champions - an immediate family member, a school mentor and someone in the larger community – support them in putting their passions into play. Adults must help young people create the opportunities and find the environments where they can explore and develop their sparks.

Benson defines “spark” as “that quality, skill, talent or commitment that gives our lives joy, energy and purpose. It is the internal anchor for our identity. It is our very essence, the thing about us that is ‘good, beautiful, and useful to the world’.” There can be two major types of sparks. The first involves *taking action*, pursuing something you love to do like playing music, drawing, debating. The second type of spark involves *nurturing a special quality*, such as caregiving, listening, being generous, all attributes that make our world a better place to live.

One hundred percent of young people “get” the concept of spark. Sparks are “visible”; kids light up and their energy radiates when they talk about their sparks. According to Benson, two-thirds of middle and high school students can name their sparks. Thirty percent can be encouraged to name a spark when asked, “what’s going on with you when life is at its best?” For five to ten percent, the “light is out” and they are in dire need of our help. Benson shared the “Top Ten” sparks commonly named by American youth:

1. Being a leader
2. Welfare of animals
3. Being committed to living in a specific way (i.e. a life of compassion or kindness)
4. Spirituality
5. Helping, serving, volunteering
6. Reading in a specific area of interest (i.e. Russian literature, poetry)
7. Learning deeply about a specific subject (i.e. marine biology, medieval history)
8. Athletics

9. Being in nature
10. Creative Life (music, arts, writing, drama)

After interviewing thousands of young people, Benson has found a whopping fifty-two percent identify *Creative Life* as their spark. When we consider the third path of thriving – adults providing guidance and opportunities that nourish sparks – what are we doing as individuals and society to keep the door to creative arts open for our youth?

Sparks are transformative. In kids with active sparks, school achievement goes up, depression diminishes and young people grow up with a sense of meaning and greater generosity. Sadly, only thirty-seven percent of kids today can claim the necessary combination of knowing their spark and having three or more supportive spark champions. Why does America have a deficit of spark champions? How do we better organize ourselves to really know and guide our next generation of adults?

Individually and as a larger society, we are challenged to create a more “fertile soil” where “spark seeds” can flourish. At home and in schools, rather than “teach to the test,” we need to teach children to tap into their sparks. Currently, West St. Paul schools are experimenting with creating an online spark directory, accessible to all teachers, that identifies each student’s spark as they move through their school years. When we nurture our child’s daily spark journey, the rest of the picture with goals, grades, direction and focus, falls into place.

Finding and nurturing sparks is a life-long process. At home, building a dialogue around sparks, beginning to see each other through the lens of our spark, creates a real relationship with our child. It affirms their identity and honors the best in them. Knowing our own “spark biography” and sharing it with our children is an excellent first step. Invite your child to name your spark. Do they know you that way? If you feel like you’ve lost your spark, can they play a part in your “rediscovery?” Do you know their spark? When they name it, follow up by asking what it is about music, football or volunteering that means so much to them. Dr. Benson shared what he calls the “ultimate dialogue for families.” Ask your child these seven questions:

1. What is your spark? I’m dying to know.
2. When and where do you express your spark?
3. Who knows your spark?
4. Who helps feed your spark? (make a connection w/ these important people)
5. What gets in the way of nourishing your spark? (parents can run interference)
6. What can I do to help?
7. Now that you know your spark, how will you use it to make our world a better place?

Begin to create a relationship around spark and you nurture the ultimate hope we all have for our children: that they grow into living their best life, a life of purpose, joy and contribution to the world. Dr. Benson’s website www.ignitesparks.com offers additional materials including starter conversations, school suggestions and other ideas for helping your children pursue their sparks.