



Facilitating Youth Sparks

Youth sparks are an essential ingredient of thriving. Having a spark or sparks gives a young person a sense of direction and encourages goal setting. Sparks are different from mere leisure activity in that:

1. **Sparks create actions** that not only contribute to the benefit of the young person, but also society at large;
2. **Sparks provide the intrinsic fuel** for a young person's growth in knowledge and skill;
3. **Sparks enhance a young person's networks** as he or she encounters others with similar sparks, particularly adults with expertise who can facilitate learning and opportunities for engagement.

A spark is a passion for a self-identified interest or skill, or a capacity that metaphorically lights a fire in a young person's life, providing energy, joy, purpose, and direction .

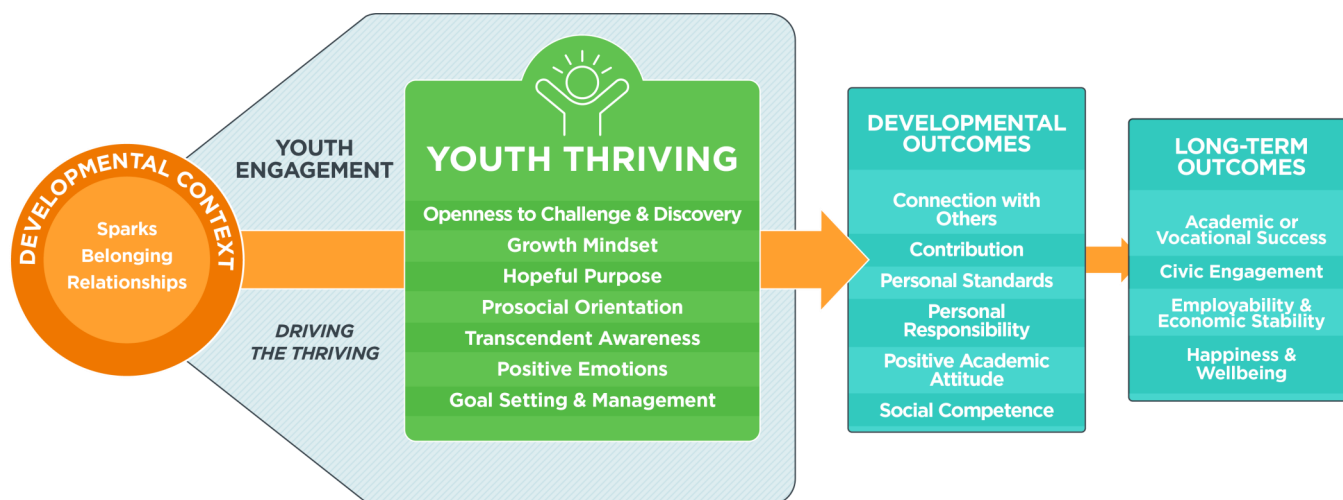
Furthermore, sparks appear to be a protective factor for young people, keeping them out of trouble because of the young person's intense focus on the source of their spark. Sparks, in turn, motivate youth to succeed in other areas of their lives, such as personal, social and academic.

Every young person has the potential to have a spark, and 4-H plays an important role in helping young people discover and pursue their sparks. In some cases, it is a matter of helping youth recognize their spark when the spark has already found them!

Because of its emphasis on learning that is driven by a young person's interest, 4-H programs provide a rich context for youth to identify, explore, and sustain their personal interests, often resulting in the development of a young person's sparks. High quality youth program contexts, like those provided in 4-H, are key for facilitating youth sparks. When sparks are encompassed by positive 4-H programs, youth are supported to grow and encouraged to overcome obstacles. In this way, youth are empowered to develop their sparks and to use them to make the world a better place for all.

4-H is Positive Youth Development

4-H is based on a positive youth development (PYD) approach that recognizes all youth have interests, abilities, and strengths that can be enhanced by participation in 4-H programs. Research shows that participation in high quality 4-H programs increases thriving in youth, and thriving youth achieve important developmental outcomes, such as academic motivation and achievement.



References

- Arnold, M. E., & Gagnon, R. J. (2019). Illuminating the process of youth development: The mediating effect of thriving on youth development program outcomes. *Journal of Human Sciences and Extension*, 7(3), 24–51. <https://www.jhseonline.com/article/view/901>
- Arnold, M. E. (2018). From Context to outcomes: A thriving model for 4-H Youth Development Programs. *Journal of Human Sciences and Extension*, 6(1), 141-160.
- Benson, P. L. & Scales, P. C. (2009). The definition and preliminary measurement of thriving in adolescence. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 4(1), 95-104.
- Benson, P. L., & Scales, P. C. (2011). Thriving and sparks. In R. J. R Leveque (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Adolescence* (pp. 2963-2976). New York: Springer.
- Lerner, R. M., Dowling, E. M., & Anderson, P. M. (2003). Positive youth development: Thriving as the basis of personhood and civil society. *Applied Developmental Science*, 7(3), 172-180.
- Scales, P. C., Benson, P. L., & Roehlkepartain, E. C. (2011). Adolescent thriving: The role of sparks, relationships, and empowerment. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 40, 263-277.

Additional Resources

[Sparks: How Youth Thrive](#) (Dr. Peter Benson TED Talk Video)

Learn more about the 4-H Thriving Model at: <https://helping-youth-thrive.extension.org/>