

SPARKS VENN DIAGRAM



KEEP IN MIND...SPARKS MESSAGES

OBJECTIVES

- Youth understand the concept of sparks.
- Youth identify sparks in themselves.
- Youth understand the benefits of having spark champions.
- Youth develop a plan for identifying or finding their own spark champions.

KEY MESSAGES

- Sparks are the passions, ability, skills and strengths that are discoverable in all youth. Sparks are a catalyst for thriving.
- Sparks are a source of motivation (come from within a person).
- Sparks often change over time.
- Sparks are deeper than activities (e.g., watching TV).
- Spark champions help you identify and grow your sparks.
- It is best to have at least three sparks champions.

AVOID

- Using Sparks as a label (i.e., a “natural” ability, talent or attribute).
- Excessive matching of sparks to “career goals”.
- Referring to a spark as “something you’re REALLY good at” (they may be passionate about something that needs effort and persistence before they’re “good” at it).

HELP YOUTH FIND THEIR SPARKS

Help a young person feel comfortable exploring his/her sparks by acknowledging that some youth may already know their sparks, some youth may change their sparks, while others need time to discover theirs.

- Notice when a young person lights up and shows joy and positive energy toward something. Talk to a young person about what excites him/her (e.g., asking questions like: “Tell me, what do you love to do in your spare time? Why? How does doing what you love make you feel?”).
- Listen carefully for a way to support a young person.
- Help youth find ways to practice their spark(s).
- Attend a young person’s games, performances and public demonstrations of her or his spark(s).

SPARKS CONVERSATION STARTERS

This is a resource for 4-H project leaders asking that timeless question: *How do I get youth excited about the 4-H project I am responsible for leading?* There are no easy answers, but promising research published by Peter Benson of the Search Institute of Minnesota suggests that adults could be more actively, intentionally engaged in helping young people find their **spark**, or the inner passions and interests that motivate and inspire youth towards the path to thriving. First, here are some basic guidelines for starting this conversation in your project.

Can you hear me now? Youth-adult partnerships require practice. Is it possible to take more time to practice listening to youth as opposed to “telling” youth? In the project setting, project leaders are **spark champions**, or the adults that champion the development of sparks in participants. Starting a conversation on finding one’s inner passions and interests is just that—a two-way dialogue. Consider infusing individual as well as group discussions into project meetings and events that have potential to help participants reflect on their sparks.

Let’s agree on something. Creating a safe space is critical for project meetings, especially when encouraging young people to openly talk about their dreams, hopes, and innermost aspirations. Consider devoting time during the first meeting or two to draft **group agreements** that the group designs and agrees to adhere to in order to be ensure that meetings are a safe place for all members to share, discuss, learn, and grow.

Remember your audience. Consider the personalities, abilities, ages, and stages of development in your project group. You may have 4-H members ranging from 5-18 years of age. Some members may be active participants from the very beginning, others waiting to feel comfortable enough to talk aloud. Project members shouldn’t feel forced to converse but should definitely be encouraged to engage and be involved, even if that means reserving the right to pass in the meantime. Sparks can look very different for such a diverse range of youth. Leaving the door open for an ongoing conversation can allow for a sparks discussion to evolve over time.

Try it out. Try and identify early indicators of something in your project that might be a spark for individual members. Start off sparks conversations with phrases like:

- “You could be really good at this...”
- “This looks like it makes you happy...”
- “It seems like this is something that really excites you...”

Don’t be afraid to ask questions. Asking the right probing questions regarding inner passions and interests might help clarify exactly why a young person is drawn to a particular activity. For instance, an animal science project might appeal to a member’s interest in entrepreneurship,* a rocketry project might reveal a spark for problem solving,* and a sewing project might be more interesting to a member for the opportunity it provides to teach and instruct*.

Take it to the next step. Lastly, consider ways to build concrete, intentional steps for members to engage with their sparks more actively. Could a member that likes to teach be trained to take on peer leader responsibilities for the coming year? Could a youth that has a spark for writing be engaged in spearheading the development of marketing materials for the project group? Also, think about posing the following types of follow-up questions directly to 4-H members:

- “How can we, as a group, help you do more of what excites you?”
- “What part of this project is most fun for you?”
- “What else makes you feel like this?”

SPARKS CHAMPION PLAN

Over the next 2 months....

What strategies will you use to help youth learn about sparks?

What specific things will you look and listen for related to spark identification and development when working with youth?

What barriers or opportunity gaps are present for youth that you serve to identify and develop their sparks?

What are some solutions that you will facilitate to reduce or eliminate those barriers and opportunity gaps for youth that you serve? Who might you ask for help?

What specific phrases or sentences will you practice using when communicating with youth, that will help them understand the meaning of sparks?

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.

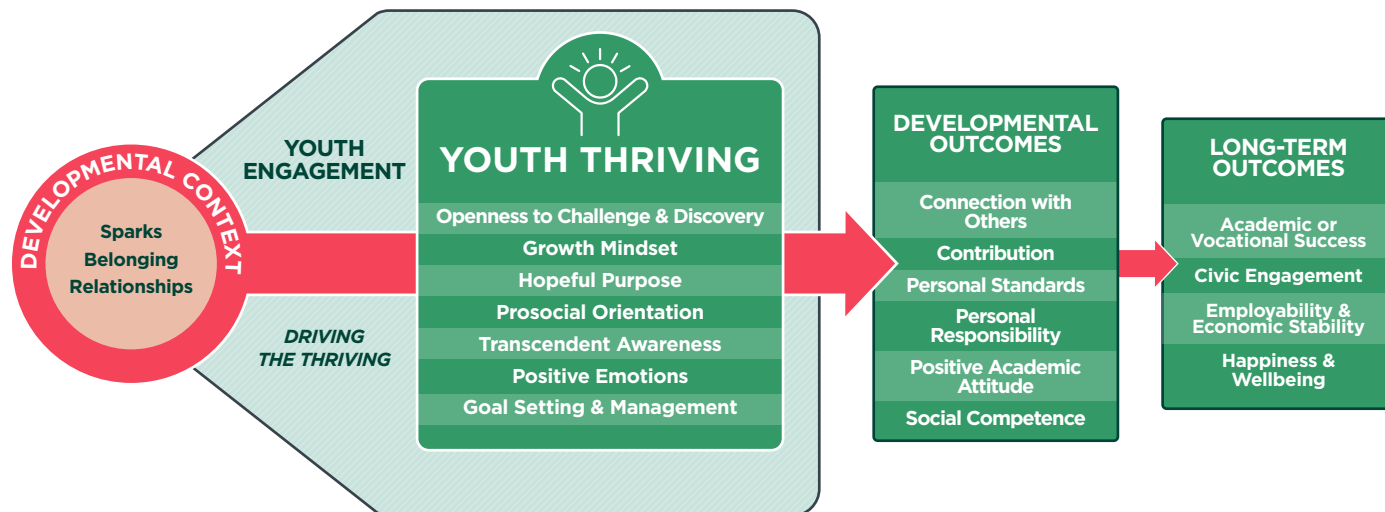
Every young person has the potential to have a spark, and 4-H plays an important role in helping young people discover and pursue their sparks. In some cases, it is a matter of helping youth recognize their spark when the spark has already found them!

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.



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