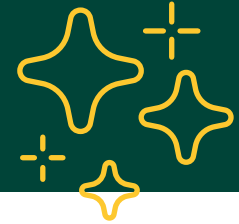




BACKGROUND INFORMATION



What is needed is a widespread conceptual shift from thinking that youth problems are the principal barrier to youth development to thinking that youth development is the most effective strategy for the prevention of youth problems.

- KAREN PITTMAN

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Positive Youth Development (PYD) came into focus in the early 1990s as society struggled to address risk behaviors in teens. Among the earliest leaders in PYD is Karen Pittman. She coined the phrase “problem-free isn’t fully prepared” (Pittman & Fleming, 1991). Using research from Dr. Peter Benson (founder of the Search Institute) and others, Pittman began the paradigm shift from fixing behavior deficits to building and nurturing assets and skills. Pittman defined PYD as “an ongoing, inevitable process in which all youth are engaged, and all youth are invested.” She further defined that youth seek “ways to meet their basic physical and social needs and to build the individual assets or competencies (knowledge, skills, relationships, values) they feel are needed to participate successfully and fully in adolescence and adult life” (Pittman, 1993). From this early definition to today, most of those important components are engrained within the Thriving Model and are considered critical aspects of program quality.

The Positive Youth Development approach recognizes that all young people have interests, abilities, and

strengths and when engaged in the context of supportive adults, youth voice and other program quality standards, can grow and thrive, having a positive impact on the whole child. Research continued to advance the field of PYD with Dr. Richard Lerner’s longitudinal study that was completed in the early 2000s. This led to the 5C’s Model of PYD that provided insight on the outcomes youth gain. The Five Cs Outcomes of PYD are: Competence, Confidence, Character, Connection, and Caring. These five Cs are based on the adolescent development literature (Lerner, 2004) and represent language used by families, clinicians, and researchers for describing characteristics of thriving. Most recently, the 4-H Thriving Model was developed by Dr. Mary Arnold to provide a framework for understanding the processes that drives outcomes and translates the theory into PYD practices. The foundation of the 4-H Thriving Model is the Developmental Context of Sparks, Program Quality Principles with a focus on belonging, and Developmental Relationships. Youth Programs that incorporate these elements into program delivery set the stage for youth growing, learning, and thriving.



The field of positive youth development focuses on each and every child's unique talents, strengths, interests, and future potential.

- WILLIAM DAMON

SPARKS

The identification and development of **sparks** is one of three foundational components of the developmental context of the **4-H Thriving Model** (Arnold, 2019). A spark is a passion or interest that youth are enthusiastic about. The other two key components of the developmental context of the 4-H Thriving Model are **developmental relationships** and **program quality**.

All youth have **sparks**. The term “**spark**” is used as a metaphor to describe something that is internal to each of us; something that gives us meaning or joy. By the age of ten, all youth understand the concept of **spark**; however, one-third of adolescents in the U.S., or millions of young people, do not know their spark(s). An even greater number do not have **spark champions** – the caring adults who know and support youth in pursuit of their sparks. There is a direct correlation to two elements of **developmental relationships**. These elements are **express care** and **challenge growth** (Pekel, 2018).

So, how do I know what a spark is? It's a spark if it:

- Is intrinsic, originating from inside a person, rather than being imposed from the outside.
- Serves as a source of motivation, meaning, and self-directed action that can help drive young people to put forth effort in other areas of their lives.
- Helps (or has the potential to help) make the world a better place.

More specifically, sparks can be skills, talents, or interests that go deeper than activities (e.g., going to a mall, playing a game, or watching a movie). For some, a spark is a way of being in the world—showing kindness or being a peacemaker. According to Benson (2010), the most common sparks reported by U.S. teens in 2010 were:

1. Creative Arts
2. Athletics
3. Learning (e.g., languages, science, history)
4. Reading
5. Helping; serving; volunteering
6. Spirituality; religion
7. Nature, ecology, environment
8. Living a quality life (e.g., joy, tolerance, caring)
9. Animal welfare
10. Leadership

Benson's research also indicates that inner passions, interests, and talents catalyze the drive for personal growth and put young people on the road to thriving. For youth to pursue their spark and thrive, it must be noted that this does not happen instantaneously. It usually requires hard work over longer periods of time. To this end, **perseverance** and **resilience** are important attributes to develop when pursuing sparks. It is important that adults avoid sending the message to young people that a spark is a fixed identity and recognize that sparks can change over time.

It should be noted that sparks are not inherently connected to a career path. It's important to encourage youth to pursue their sparks in whatever path makes sense to them. Sparks can be something that helps make a difference in the world through volunteer efforts, financial contributions to a cause, or to help find joy in everyday life.

SPARK CHAMPIONS

Youth's sparks can shine brightly or dimly, depending on whether they have spark champions – individuals who support and encourage them to discover and pursue their spark. In 4-H, we would also support that older youth have the capacity to also be spark champions to their peers and to younger youth. Only 37% of youth who have a spark say their parents know of and support their spark, and most teens say that there are very few adults outside their families who affirm and nourish their sparks. We have a large societal challenge when so few youths have spark champions in their lives.

Adult volunteers, junior and teen leaders, camp counselors, school aged care staff are easily identifiable as potential **spark champions**. The role that **spark champions** can play may include:

- Helping youth identify a spark by pointing out moments when you observe them exhibiting joy and positive energy.
- Affirming youth's spark(s) by asking questions, listening, attending games, performances, and presentations, and providing encouragement.
- Helping youth identify opportunities to express their spark(s).

- Modeling your spark.
- Helping youth overcome obstacles in the way.

The influence of spark champions during adolescence can be deeply transformative for youth. Champions give the message that there is something good and beautiful within youth that is useful to the world.

Exploring sparks can be a process of revelation that is highly relevant to the youth's self-identity, shaped during this time of life. Research by Dr. Peter Benson (2008) and the Search Institute shows that youth who find and develop a spark exhibit:

- A greater sense of purpose.
- Social competence.
- Positive health benefit.
- Contribution by volunteering to help others.
- Higher grades in school and better attendance.

WHY SPARKS AND SPARK CHAMPIONS?

There are benefits of knowing and spending time on sparks (Benson, 2008). Learning about one's sparks is a form of self-discovery; it helps youth set aside external pressures and distractions and focus on something that brings meaning or joy. Engaging in identifying sparks helps youth increase their motivation to grow and develop; sparks also help youth feel alive and useful and help them draw on their best potential. Having meaning, self-directed action, and purpose in life are other important benefits. Further, youth who know their spark, spend time on it, and have spark champions may experience long-term positive impacts (Adar, Rhodes & Scales, 2014).

BARRIERS, OPPORTUNITIES, AND GAPS

Barriers and opportunities and gaps exist that either impede or promote sparks from being identified, developed, and championed. Barriers may include social inequalities that exist in the community.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943) demonstrates that youth who are hungry and feel unsafe will likely be unable to focus on identifying and developing their sparks. This includes youth experiencing or who have experienced trauma. While some youth have an inner strength and can develop a spark, even if unknowingly, that helps them overcome their traumatic or challenging experiences, other youths' sparks may be difficult to identify and develop.

There are many opportunities for youth to identify their sparks and develop them. One way is when they are asked to think about what their interests and talents are. Youth development professionals and

community volunteers can be the ones to ask and provide opportunities for developing their sparks. Youth clubs, camps, and other activities/events are great for promoting and growing sparks. Great educators get to know each youth and provide an atmosphere and opportunity for them to express and explore their sparks.

Opportunity gaps exist when youth do not have the **social capital** to develop their sparks. Youth development professionals and community volunteers can help fill opportunity gaps by being aware of inequities in program accessibility. Once aware of who and where the underserved youth are, opportunities for identifying and developing sparks can be created. This is best done with these communities' voices to ensure inclusive and equitable approaches and practices.

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT SPARKS, SEE THE REFERENCES AND RESOURCES SECTION.

CURRICULUM DETAILS



Competencies

Professional Research, Knowledge, Competencies (PRKC):
Youth Development Domain: Youth Development Theory

Volunteer Research, Knowledge, Competencies (VRKC):
Positive Youth Development Domain: Developing Life Skills and Empowerment of Others



Time Required
Approximately 1.5–2.5 hours

Learning Objectives

At the conclusion of this module, participants will be able to:

- 1 Understand the concept of sparks.
- 2 Explain the key components that define a spark.
- 3 Describe attributes of spark champions.
- 4 Develop an individual plan that supports youth to identify and develop their sparks.
- 5 Identify barriers, opportunities, and gaps that promote or prohibit youth to identify and develop their sparks.
- 6 Describe potential solutions that create pathways for youth to overcome barriers to identifying their sparks.

Materials Needed

Copies for each participant:

- Copies for each participant:
 - Venn Diagram handout (2 pages; Appendix A)
 - Keep in Mind...Sparks Messages handout (Appendix B)
 - Sparks Conversation Starters (2 pages; Appendix C)
 - Sparks Champion Plan handout (Appendix D)
 - Facilitating Youth Sparks handout (2 pages; Appendix E)
- Flipchart and markers or Whiteboard (electronic or physical)



Facilitator Tip

Think about how to distribute materials if lesson is delivered virtually.

Concepts and Vocabulary

- **4-H Thriving Model:** The 4-H Thriving Model illustrates that youth who participate in 4-H programs that provide a high-quality developmental context will thrive, and thriving youth achieve key developmental outcomes.
- **Challenge Growth:** encourage youth to learn, grow and get better through practice and effort in supportive and helpful ways.
- **Developmental Relationships:** secure attachments between youth and caring adults that are reflected in mutual warmth, respect and trust.
- **Express Care:** demonstrate to individual youth that they matter to you.
- **Extrinsic:** actions are driven by external factors, such as praise, fame, money, awards and/or honors.
- **Intrinsic:** actions are driven by internal desire, such as enjoyment, interest and/or passion.
- **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs:** a motivational theory comprising a five-tiered model of human needs: physical needs, safety, love & belonging, esteem and self-actualization.
- **Perseverance:** continued effort to do or achieve something in spite of challenges, failure or barriers.
- **Resilience:** can be a process or a result of working through stressful events and a return to normal functioning and the presence or development of protective factors.
- **Social Capital:** network of relationships, that often present opportunities, among people within a community (family, friends, neighborhood, school, work, etc.).
- **Spark:** a passion for a self-identified interest or skill, or a capacity that metaphorically lights a fire in a young person's life, providing positive energy, joy, purpose and direction .
- **Spark Champion:** an individual who encourages/mentors a young person in developing their interests, skills or qualities that gives purpose and meaning to that young person's life.
- **Thriving:** a forward, purposeful motion towards achieving one's full potential .

Getting Ready

- Review background information and understand main lesson concepts.
- Review the full activity (Opening Questions; Procedure; Reflection; Term/Concept Discovery/Introduction; Application) and its flow.
- Make copies of handouts or distribute electronically in sequence.
- Establish small groups sizes based on number of anticipated participants.
- Adapt the lesson to virtual delivery as needed.

Facilitator Tip

Opening questions/prompts are key to beginning inquiry-based activities. To be effective, these questions/prompts need to be:

- *Open-ended and broad (no single "right" answer).*
- *Encourage learners to focus on their own thinking rather than trying to provide a "textbook definition" (e.g. Explain what you understand about....).*
- *Know your audience. Do you need to use different language (e.g., translated materials, different examples for understanding).*



ACTIVITY



Opening Questions/Prompts

The 4-H Thriving Model (Arnold, 2019) recognizes the development and identification of Sparks as a key component that creates a developmental context, when done well, help youth to thrive. Identification of Sparks works in concert with the concepts of developmental relationships and program quality.

Asking opening questions helps participants frame their thinking, as well as provides educators with some understanding of participants' prior knowledge and experience. Opening questions for this activity include:

- When we say "youth sparks" describe what comes to your mind? Explain a meaning or quality you place on that word or description.
- Based on your understanding of this term, describe one or more of your sparks.
- Talk about a person or people that helped you develop your sparks. Explain specific ways in which they helped you.

Facilitator Tip

[Optional opening questions for teen volunteers] Let participants know you'll be asking them to reflect on some questions to themselves and to jot down their answers on the paper you handed out. After each of the following questions, pause for a few moments to give the participants time to think and write before moving on to the next question:

- If you woke up one morning and were told you could do one activity for as long as you wanted, describe that activity.
- Describe times in your life when you feel happiest and what you're doing during those times.
- Remember a time when you were so involved in an activity that you lost track of time, describe what you were doing.



Engage the participants! Ask them to record their thoughts on flip chart paper or a white board. Subsequently, ask them to share their responses with the larger group to help generate a discussion.

Alternatively, have a full group discussion and record answers to the questions/prompts on the flip chart paper or white board. Have participants compare similarities and differences among the responses. Breakout groups may take less or more time and may also be affected by venue (in-person or virtually). Build timing into your implementation plan!

Procedure

1. Distribute the Sparks Venn Diagram (Appendix A) to each participant.
2. Using the prompts in each quadrant of the Venn diagram, ask participants to make a list for each prompt.
3. Ask participants to independently review the lists of each quadrant and make a list of ideas that show up in all quadrants. The words in each quadrant do not have to be the same, rather, they are looking for ideas that converge in the center. What larger idea, thing, people, place, etc. could categorize intersections?
4. In small groups of 2-3 people:
 - a. Share your ideas, paying particular attention to the intersection of your ideas.
 - b. Seek ideas and viewpoints of others in your group about connections and intersections that they see.

- c. Talk about how the items in the intersection make you feel and the emotions that they evoke in you.
- d. Discuss the similarities of the emotions evoked in all group members.

Reflection

1. Ask each group to share out their similarities.
2. Record these on a whiteboard (digital or physical).
3. Facilitate the discussion, add value, address any misunderstandings, and help participants make meaning that directs the conversation to the characteristics of a spark: a) something you feel intrinsically passionate about, and b) can be used to make a positive difference in the world.

Concept/Term Discovery/Introduction

1. After the reflection discussion has concluded and not before, distribute or share electronically "Keep in Mind...Sparks Messages" (Appendix B) and "Sparks Conversation Starters" (Appendix C).
2. Facilitate a discussion. Ask: What do you notice about the Sparks Keep In Mind Messages? Describe the kinds of things you wrote or reflected on individually or in the group.
3. Introduce the concept of a Spark Champion. Ask: "When we say Spark Champion," what comes to mind?
4. Ask participants to discuss how an individual might use the information in Sparks Conversation Starters in their practice with youth in a group setting.
5. Ask participants to discuss where they see barriers for youth to identify a spark, or where there might be equity and opportunity gaps for young people. Identify solutions to reduce or eliminate barriers and opportunity gaps that can be provided by a Spark Champion.

Facilitator Tip



The goal is to have participants develop an understanding of the concepts through their exploration and define the terms using their own words. If specific terms or concepts are not discovered by the learners on their own, the facilitator may introduce them at this point.

The following section of the activity can be very robust so be sure to provide adequate time for discussion and exchange of ideas.

Concept Application

Concept application is when learners apply their new knowledge and skills in authentic ways (e.g., service learning; community engagement), understanding is deepened and strengthened.

1. Distribute the "Sparks Champion Plan" (Appendix D) and the "4-H Thriving Model Tip Sheet: Facilitating Youth Sparks" (Appendix E).
2. Ask participants to complete the plan and to consider barriers and opportunity gaps for youth they serve and solutions to reduce them. They can work independently, in small groups or a blend of both.
3. Ask participants to identify ways to be more intentional helping youth identify and practice their spark, over the next two months.
4. Encourage and challenge participants to continue to use this tool to build their skills to encourage sparks.



Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.

- ETIENNE AND BEVERLY WENGER-TRAYNER

Community of Practice

This curriculum is designed to be used in conjunction with a community of practice of 4-H Youth Development practitioners. The term “community of practice” was coined in the 1990’s by cognitive anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger when studying apprenticeships as a learning model (Smith, 2009). The term referred to the community that acts as a living curriculum. Essentially a peer-to-peer professional-development activity organized by a leader, coordinator, or facilitator. Wenger used the following formula to explain key elements within a community of practice:

Competence + Experience + Engagement = a Community of Practice

Characteristics associated with a community of practice includes practitioners:

- Taking responsibility for the knowledge they need collectively.
- Serving as the direct link between learning and intentionally implementing new knowledge and strategies.
- Learning with and from each other.
- Developing a shared repertoire of resources.

INVITE TO COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE:

Invite educators to participate in a follow-up community of practice. The community of practice will be an opportunity to share successes, receive support from others and continue to develop actions and applications to practice being spark champions. Participants should complete “Sparks Champion Plan” prior attendance at the follow up meeting.

COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE MEETING:

- 1.** Ask participants to share what successes they had in implementing their plan.
- 2.** Ask participants what challenges they had in implementing their plan.
- 3.** Ask participants to discuss barriers and opportunity gaps they discovered, overcame or still struggle with.



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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The Developmental Relationships Framework and the conceptualization of Sparks as a feature of thriving were developed by Search Institute and are copyrighted by Search Institute. They are included within this curriculum as part of the 4-H Thriving model, and used with permission. These rights cannot be transferred to third parties or used in other contexts without the expressed permission of Search Institute. We are grateful for this collaboration with Search Institute and invite anyone who is interested in understanding and practicing developmental relationships further to explore additional training materials and opportunities available through Search Institute at: searchinstitute.org.

AUTHORS



The 4-H Thriving Model Curriculum consists of independent activity-based modules designed to introduce each concept of the 4-H Thriving Model using guided inquiry and experiential learning as the pedagogy. The purpose of this curriculum is to provide 4-H professionals and volunteers with an in-depth understanding of the concepts of the 4-H Thriving Model. We believe it is important for 4-H educators to understand the model well before they teach it to others. Inherent in all modules is a community of practice design that helps educators and volunteers reflect on their youth development practices as part of a learning community.

This curriculum was developed by the Program Leaders' Working Group (PLWG) Committee on Positive Youth Development.

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SUGGESTED CITATION:

Miner, G., Smith, M. H., Jepsen, A., Knutz, M., Campbell, K., Garcia, Z., & Ealy, P. (2023). *4-H Thriving Model Training Curriculum - Understanding Sparks*. Washington DC: National 4-H Council.

The production of this curriculum was made possible through generous financial support from National 4-H Council. Council's support of the Helping Youth Thrive project has been instrumental in helping advance the practice of science-based PYD across the 4-H system.

For more information please visit: 4-h.org



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