

How are the Children?



Suburban Ramsey  
Family Collaborative

*Tips for Parents & Caring Adults:*

## **Nurturing “Sparks” in Children and Young People**

Peter L. Benson, founder of the Search Institute, and author of *“Sparks: How Parents Can Help Ignite the Hidden Strengths of Teenagers”*, speaks of sparks as authentic passions, talents, assets, skills, and dreams that can be musical, athletic, intellectual, academic, relational: from playing the violin to working with kids to running to making people laugh.

Benson’s research shows that 100 percent of teenagers understand and seek “sparks”, 62 percent can clearly name their spark, and 37% say they both know their spark and have one or more adults who are their “spark champions”.

Benson believes sparks can provide an anchor for a teen’s identity during adolescence when young people are forming their identity. A spark reminds them that there are things about them that are unique, special, and part of who they are and always will be. He believes sparks can provide an anchor to help ground them during a time when they could be getting their identity from more fleeting qualities such as popularity, power, status, or material possessions.

### **What Parents Can Do:**

- **Talk to your child or teen about sparks.** Sometimes parents can be out of touch with their child’s sparks. We may see them through the lens of what we want or expect. Ask them what they think their sparks are and listen to what they tell you. If they don’t think they have a spark, suggest sparks you may have noticed in them.
- **Ask yourself:**
  - What are my child’s current or potential sparks?
  - When did I first understand or see these sparks?
  - Who are the adults who know and support my child’s sparks? What do they do to help the spark shine?
- **Teens say they want their parents to be their spark champions. Ask:**
  - What can I do to help you with your spark?
  - Who else could be a spark champion for you? What do you wish that person would do?
  - Which places or programs would help your spark grow?
  - How can we create a schedule to help foster your spark?
  - What else would help your spark?
- **Sparks shine more brightly when there are multiple spark champions.** Build a team of spark champions for your child or teen by recruiting several adults you and your child admire and trust. In addition to professionals like coaches, tutors, and teachers, think about adults you know who have the same interests as your child. Ask them to spend time



with your child. Even adults who know nothing about the subject matter, can still encourage and support sparks by showing up at recitals, games, performances, contests, etc.

#### What Other Caring Adults Can Do:

- **Children and teens do better with more adults in more settings who know, affirm, celebrate, encourage, and guide the expression of their sparks.** Anyone can be a spark champion for a child or teen. All it takes is being willing.
- **Only 43% of young people say they receive support and encouragement from three or more non-parent adults.** Think about the children and young people you know and ask yourself how you can be a supportive, encouraging, consistent presence in their life.
- **Be a spark champion for kids.** Point out and affirm the sparks you see. Encourage them to explore and express their sparks. Model sparks in your own life. Teach and mentor, not only specific sparks but the many ways that you express your sparks in your life.
- **Help them eliminate obstacles that may get in their way.** For example, if they love sports but don't make the school team talk about other ways to incorporate their sport in their life. Show up and help them celebrate.

#### Additional Resources:

*Sparks: How Parents Can Help Ignite the Hidden Strengths of Teenagers* by Peter L. Benson. To download information on how to talk about sparks, visit: [http://ignitesparks.org/sparks\\_conversation.html](http://ignitesparks.org/sparks_conversation.html)

*Connect 5: Finding the Caring Adults You May Not Realize Your Teen Needs* by Kathleen Kimball-Baker

#### For more information:

To learn what you can do to support the health, learning, safety and security of all Suburban Ramsey County children and young people, contact:

Yvonne Cournoyer, Coordinator, How are the Children?  
An Initiative of the Suburban Ramsey Family Collaborative

[yvonne.cournoyer@isd623.org](mailto:yvonne.cournoyer@isd623.org)  
651-604-3586 OR 651-855-8469  
[www.howarethechildren.org](http://www.howarethechildren.org)

This tip sheet was created with funding from a Safe Schools/Healthy Students grant from the U.S. Departments of Education, Health, Human Services and Justice.

How are the Children?



Suburban Ramsey  
Family Collaborative