

Helping Kids Discover What They Love to Do

“Sparks are the hidden flames in your kids that light their proverbial fire, get them excited, tap into their true passions.”—Peter Benson, author of *Sparks: How Parents Can Help Ignite the Hidden Strengths of Teenagers*

If you were to name the one or two things that really get your child excited, that get your child ready to jump out of bed in the morning, what would those things be? For one child, it might be running outside to kick a soccer ball. For another, it might be making up a fantastical story. Someone else might love to tinker with a computer. Every child has at least one unique, worthy, and passionate interest or talent. Search Institute calls this passionate interest or talent an individual’s “spark.” Everyone has a spark inside—a spark that is good and important. Helping kids find and develop their talents and interests is about helping them become the best that they can be. Helping to ignite the sparks within our children will allow them reach their full potential and contribute to making the world a better place for us all.

Try it...

For all parents

- Learn more about sparks. Search Institute has done extensive research on the topic and has also created practical ideas on how to identify and nurture your child’s spark. Start at www.ignitesparks.org.
- Begin talking about your child’s natural interests and talents. Every family member has a spark—or a set of sparks. Discuss what yours are and how they give meaning to your life. Ask other family members about their sparks and how they’re going. Make “sparks” a common conversation starter.
- Be careful not to push your kids. Your job as a parent is to provide lots of opportunities and support for your kids. Assist, don’t direct, in this process.
- Get to know other individuals who are pursuing their passionate interests and talents. Sometimes, it’s helpful to find people who have a similar spark to yours. Other times, you can learn a lot from people who have a spark that’s different, and you see how everyone shares similar ups, downs, and discoveries along their spark journey.
- Support and encourage the sparks of your kids—and other people’s kids. Some people do this by becoming an assistant coach, a club leader, or just by asking kids how their sparks are going when they see them.

For parents with children ages birth to 5

- Notice what your young child gravitates toward. Is it building with blocks? Paging through picture books and making up stories? Dressing stuffed animals? Making your living room into a jungle gym and climbing over everything? These activities all

give hints to what your child's interests and natural abilities are.

- Create a daily routine that gives your young child structure but also allows for creativity to explore new things. For example, do an art activity, something physical, a story activity, and an outdoor activity every day. These can be simple, such as taking a walk to find bugs in the summer and stop signs in the winter. Pay attention to what gets your child excited.
- As young children grow, their interests can change. Make room for that. If they were in constant motion at age 2 and then want to do lots of art at age 3, follow their interests and don't worry about the changes. These changes can be typical for some kids.

For parents with children ages 6 - 9

- Continue to expose your children to new things so they can continue to explore new potential sparks. For example, visit different types of museums in your area—a train museum, a children's museum, an art museum, a science museum, and a history museum.
- Give your children options for sports and arts activities. Sign up for one or two that interest them the most. Then have them stick it out for the duration of the scheduled season or activity and see what develops.
- If kids want to quit an activity, talk about their feelings and why they feel the way they do. Affirm their feelings but also teach kids that it's important to stick with things, even if it's for only eight sessions.

For parents with children ages 10 - 15

- Don't be surprised if your child begins to drop activities they've been doing for years. This is common for some young teenagers because of puberty and the rapid changes in their brains. For more information about this, see the book [*Magic Trees of the Mind*](#) by Marian Diamond, Ph.D.
- If your child does want to drop an activity, tell him he can do so only if he finds a replacement. This is an important boundary that also empowers kids to choose something new. Because of the changes going on in their brains, it's tempting for many kids to drop activities yet be too self-conscious to add new ones. Reassure your kids, but be firm about having them find a replacement.
- Continue to emphasize the importance of practicing and sticking with things, even when they get hard or boring. For example, tell your child she needs to practice her instrument 30 minutes a day before she can have computer or friend time.
- Support your kids' sparks by attending their concerts, games, and other events. Tell your kids that you're proud of them and of the progress they're making.

For parents with children ages 16 - 18

- Make it a habit to check in with your teenager about his spark on a regular basis (such as once a week or once a month, depending on what the spark is). Ask your teenager where he is with his talents and interests. Is he excited? Has he hit some obstacles? What difficulty has he just worked through? Who supports him best?
- Thank the adults who support and nurture your teenager's spark. Send them a card or an email and tell them how much you appreciate what they do.

- Continue to nurture your talents and interests as well. Teenagers not only learn about living the spark-driven life by experience, but also by observing the adults around them. Set a good example. When your journey isn't going well, talk about it and how you're dealing with the difficulty.
- Celebrate when your teenager hits significant milestones with her spark. For example, your teenager may be recognized at school or in the community newspaper. Or the milestone may be more personal, such as putting in 100 hours of volunteer work at the animal shelter. All these milestones are momentous and are important to recognize.