

Anchor Activity**Category:**
HEART

Identifying Sparks

Background

Sparks are skills, talents, or interests that a young person finds deeply motivating. They are hidden flames in students that light their proverbial fire, get them excited, and tap into their true passions (Benson, 2008). When sparks are known and acted on, young people come to the life-changing insight that “my life has purpose.” Young people who have sparks in their lives, who have adults who support those sparks, who get joy and energy from using their sparks, and who learn valuable life skills from their sparks are significantly more likely to do well in school, be more engaged, and be more hopeful about the future (Benson & Scales, 2009).

Objective

Students identify their deep interests and talents—their *sparks*—and reflect on the meaning of their spark in their lives. Teachers can then use the information to build relationships and adapt the curriculum.

Related Anchor Activities

Sharing Sparks
Core Values

At a Glance

Students complete a questionnaire that helps them identify and better understand their sparks. The teacher reviews it, notes key information, and returns it to students with affirming comments.

Resources Needed

- The Sparks Questionnaire

Activity Steps

Ask students to close their eyes while you ask a series of questions that help them think about their sparks.

Opening Activity

1. Tell students to close their eyes for a moment and silently think about the questions you are about to ask them. After each of the following questions, pause for a few moments to give students time to think before moving on to the next question:
 - a. If you woke up one morning and were told you could do one activity for as long as you wanted all day, what activity would it be?
 - b. When in your life do you feel happiest? What are you doing at those times?
 - c. Are there times when you lose track of time because you are so absorbed in an activity? What are you doing then?
 - d. Is there something you are really interested in?
 - e. Is there an activity you are really good at?
2. After students have heard these questions with their eyes closed

and had some time to think about the answers, ask them to take out a piece of paper and jot down what they thought about. (They only need to use a word or two to summarize their thoughts because this sheet will not be turned in to anyone.)

3. Ask students to look at the list on their paper and circle the things that they think are their *sparks*. Explain:
 - Sparks are interests or passions that give people great enjoyment and often a sense of purpose.
 - Sparks can be sports, performing arts, technology, reading, caring for brothers and sisters, math, animals, and more.



Students complete the Sparks Questionnaire.

Main Activity

4. Tell students that you would like to get to know them better by their sparks, and so you are asking them to complete the Sparks Questionnaire. You may also want to tell students that you will use the questionnaire to find ways to include their sparks in what you talk about and do in class.
5. Give students the Sparks Questionnaire. Ask students to choose one of the sparks they put on their list to write about on the Sparks Questionnaire.
6. Give students time to complete it, working alone. Circulate while students are working and talk with students who may be uncertain about their sparks to help them identify an actual or possible spark.

Do not have students share their questionnaires at this point, as it would lessen the impact of the Sharing Sparks Anchor Activity.

7. Collect the Sparks Questionnaires. Tell students you will review them in order to learn more about their sparks. You will return the forms to them during a later session.



Close by sharing your spark with students.

Closing Activity

8. Tell students about your own spark, highlighting what you love about it and what you do to nurture it.

Activity Follow-Up

It is essential that you read, comment on, and return the Sparks Questionnaires to convey that you are aware and supportive of the students' sparks.

It is also a good idea to keep a copy or record key ideas from the Sparks Questionnaires so that you can integrate sparks into your curriculum and your relationships with students.

REACH Technique: Get to know students' sparks

Get to know students for their sparks. Recognize the intrinsic motivation and competence that many students feel when they are doing things that connect with their sparks.

Suggestions for Getting Started

1. Check in on students' sparks from time to time. It reinforces that you care about things that are important to the studies.
2. Pay attention to students' world and interests. When you show interest in the things that matter to students, you show them that you care about their choices and activities.
3. Some students develop sparks that are harder for adults to understand or embrace. Honor those sparks as unique and important interests to the students, even if they don't resonate with you.
4. Notice when students achieve significant milestones in or recognition for their sparks. They may get a new opportunity to express their sparks, or their sparks may connect them to new people and opportunities. Or they might be recognized at school or in the community newspaper. Celebrating these milestones reinforces the value of cultivating sparks.

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Sharing Sparks

Background

When adults express genuine interest in young peoples' sparks and ask probing questions about them, young people feel deeply seen, cared for, and empowered (Scales et al., 2011). When young people know that adults not only care about their sparks but are also keeping track of them beyond occasional conversations, it lays the groundwork for a truly developmental relationship.

Objective

Students deepen their understanding of their sparks and the sparks of others in their class or group.

At a Glance

Students each write a spark on a Post-It Note, then place all the notes on a wall. Classmates discuss the diversity of sparks in the class and conclude by trying to guess who wrote down the different sparks.

Related Anchor Activities

Identifying Sparks
Core Values

Resources Needed

Post-It Notes

Activity Steps



Use a Post-It exercise to help students deepen their understanding of sparks.

Opening Activity

As an expansion of (or alternative to) this Opening Activity, schools can hold a Sparks Show and Tell. Students select objects that represent their sparks and share them with the class. This approach can be an effective way to help younger students share their sparks.

1. Begin by giving each student a blank Post-It Note.
2. Have students write a spark (or the closest thing they have to a spark if a student says he or she doesn't have one) on a Post-It Note in the least identifiable handwriting they can manage.

Students should not put their names on the Post-It Notes.



Post students' sparks on the walls around the room.
Discuss students' experiences with sparks.

Main Activity

3. After everyone has filled out a Post-It Note, collect them and affix them to the walls around the room. Then put the following questions on the board or the screen or on a worksheet that you hand out to each student.

4. Ask the students to go around the room and read the types of sparks and answer the following questions:
 - a. Which spark besides your own would you enjoy doing the most?
 - b. Which spark would you enjoy doing the least?
 - c. Which spark surprises you the most?
 - d. Which spark do you think would be most difficult to do?
 - e. Which spark would you like to watch someone do the most?
 - f. Which spark would you like to learn more about?
5. After students have had a chance to answer these questions, talk through the students' answers as a full group, inviting individual students to share their responses to the various questions.



Have students guess which student has the spark written on each Post-It Note.

Closing Activity

6. At the end of the session, walk around the room and as you take each Post-It note off the wall, invite students to guess which of their classmates wrote each note. Eventually identify the owner of each spark.
7. Reinforce the value of the diversity of sparks in the class.

REACH Technique: Tap students' sparks to ignite learning

Integrate students' sparks into curriculum, instruction, and school activities.

Suggestions for Getting Started

1. Give students regular opportunities to bring their sparks into what they are learning and doing in your class. Students might, for example, write a paper related to their sparks in English class. A student who loves digital media could make a video for a class assignment in social studies.
2. Expose students to people whose sparks are connected to the subject matter of your classes. Bring to life key people in your field by showing how their sparks and passions drove them to keep going, even in the face of difficulties, setbacks, and resistance from others.
3. Keep nurturing your own sparks and talk about them with students. Show how sparks continue to be energizing, while highlighting that sparks can shift throughout life.