

PETER L. BENSON, PHD.



SPARKS  
*How Parents Can Help  
Ignite the Hidden  
Strengths of Teenagers*

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# SPARKS

## OTHER BOOKS BY PETER L. BENSON

*All Kids Are Our Kids: What Communities Must Do to Raise Caring and Responsible Children and Adolescents* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006)

*The Handbook of Child and Adolescent Spiritual Development*, with Eugene Roehlkepartain, Pamela E. King, and Linda M. Wagener (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2006)

*Developmental Assets and Asset-Building Communities*, with Richard Lerner (Norwell, Mass.: Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 2003)

*Trends in Youth Development: Vision, Realities, and Challenges*, with Karen Pittman (Norwell, Mass.: Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 2001)

*What Kids Need to Succeed*, with Judy Galbraith and Pamela Espeland (Minneapolis: Free Spirit, 1998)

*Beyond Leaf-Raking: Learning to Serve, Serving to Learn*, with Eugene Roehlkepartain (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993)

*The Quicksilver Years*, with Dorothy Williams and Arthur Johnson (New York: Harper & Row, 1987)

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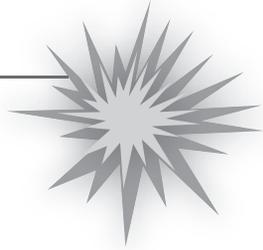
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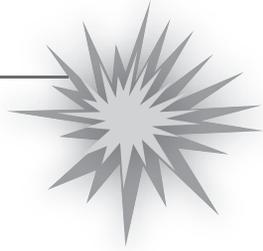
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To  
Liv, Kai, Brad,  
Katie, Matt, Michael,  
Andrew, Stef, Mike, Kyle, Maggie,  
Aaron, John, Zach,  
Rita, Tokie  
and  
TLove  
The spark glistens.  
Keep it at the center, always.



# FOREWORD

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**I**t takes a spark to ignite the flame, that burning desire to succeed.

We as parents must ignite the spark that glows in our children as it sputters and comes to life.

As we provide our children with all the resources they need to grow into happy, healthy individuals capable of taking their place in the world, we must give them learning and growing experiences that provide that “spark,” that one thing that excites and intrigues them. Then we must support that interest and help it to flourish.

Our challenge is to strike the flint that ignites the spark and then become the keepers of the flame. Feeding the fire, through our support and guidance, providing opportunities and experiences that let that flame grow until it is a glowing light—that can help illuminate the world.

*Alma Powell*

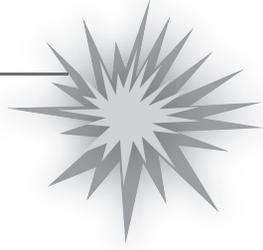
*Chair, America’s Promise Alliance*





# SPARKS





# Introduction

## *How Igniting Our Teenagers’ Sparks Can Support and Save Our Children and Their Future*

Parenting a teenager today isn’t easy. It never has been, but it’s getting even harder. For the first time in many generations, parents are finding themselves dealing with overwhelming local, national, and international crises like global warming, terrorism, and financial uncertainty while at the same time wondering how they’re going to raise kids who are happy and successful. The world is changing so quickly. How can we help our teenagers succeed when the future appears unpredictable—and downright scary?

I’m troubled by the many challenges our young people face today. I’m concerned about the parents who are doing their best to help their children grow up safely and achieve their true potential. That’s why I’ve been an advocate for families and have been doing research on children, youth, and parents for more than thirty years.

I know about the difficulties—everybody does—but what I’ve been more interested in is what helps teenagers, their parents, and

families succeed. Through my work at Minneapolis-based Search Institute, I have discovered a key way that will help all teenagers succeed, a way that makes the path clearer and brighter for each young person, for each parent, and for every family.

I call this new way of knowing and supporting our teenagers SPARKS.

SPARKS are the hidden flames in your kids that light their proverbial fire, get them excited, tap into their true passions.

SPARKS come from the gut. They motivate and inspire.

They're authentic passions, talents, assets, skills, and dreams.

SPARKS can be musical, athletic, intellectual, academic, relational—anything from playing the violin to enjoying work with kids or senior citizens.

SPARKS get kids going on a positive path, steering them into making a difference in the world and away from self-defeating or dangerous paths.

SPARKS, when they are known and acted on, help youth come to the life-changing insight that “my life has a purpose.”

All our kids have SPARKS. But before we find out more about sparks and how to ignite them, let's take a closer look at the challenges our teenagers really face these days.

## THE STATE OF TEENAGERS TODAY

Because the world is changing so rapidly, it's easy for parents to become confused and baffled. Our teenagers have become technological whizzes. They're talking on the cell phone while IMing (instant messaging) on the computer *and* studying for history at the same time. We ask them a question, and they don't respond because they can't hear us. Their ears are clogged with headsets or ear buds

from the MP3 players hidden in their pockets. We try to connect with them, but they're out the door, with either a jam-packed schedule or a desire to be anywhere but at home.

### **The Plugged-in Generation**

As parents, we're aware of the technological revolution, but most of our teens know far more about it than we do. They've grown up with it. They've never lived in a time when it wasn't a normal part of their daily lives. There's been nothing for them to adjust to. In fact, most teenagers think technological devices are things they *need*, not just want. Many teenagers today have a cell phone, a computer (or access to one), a video game console, an MP3 player (many of them equipped with Internet and video capabilities), and their own TV. Many use all this hardware simultaneously. When today's teenagers are awake, most of them are plugged in to something electronic.

At some point, you may have fought against these technological contraptions, raising questions about how your teenager was going to get her homework done—or even how she was going to develop *normal* social skills, such as talking to someone face-to-face or using a phone to ask questions and listen, instead of zipping off a cryptic message. You've been concerned about your teen being contacted by pedophiles and other online predators. This is awful, scary stuff, totally new and different from anything we've experienced before. We're living in a brave new world driven by technological power, and the technology itself seems to be changing every three to six months.

If we look at technology objectively, however, we can see that it's not all bad, not by a long shot. All our teenagers' technological savvy has actually had many benefits. Through the Internet and social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace, teenagers are connecting with teenagers around the world. They have access to television broadcasts from other countries through

cable, satellite TV, and the Internet. This has led to teenagers tapping into teenage culture in other countries. Teenagers interested in Anime and Manga get most of their information from Japan and other Asian countries. Those interested in sports may root for Italy, France, or Brazil (not the United States) for the soccer world cup or for South Africa or England for the rugby world cup.

Some teenagers have embraced the food of foreign cultures and have become fond of Thai, Indian, Mexican, or Ethiopian cuisine. Some wear clothing and hairstyles that are chic with teenagers from far, far away. If you ask teenagers about their favorite music, don't be surprised if they mention a band from South Africa, Argentina, Germany, or even Saudi Arabia. They watch musical groups on YouTube, and they get ideas from people all over the world. To teenagers today, their world is the world.

The globalization of teenagers has led them to be comfortable with diversity, and many embrace multiplicity. A number of teenagers speak more than one language, with some of them starting a second language in preschool or kindergarten. In Southern California, more than ninety languages are spoken in the public schools. In Chicago, the number is 118. In New York City, the number is more than 120.

For some teenagers, a favorite prank is lifting a classmate's cell phone and having a bilingual (or trilingual) friend reprogram it into Mandarin Chinese, Arabic, or Russian before slipping it back to the unsuspecting teenager. The teen then cannot use the phone until he finds someone who can translate it back. Or he learns the language!

Many teens today know people of different ethnicities, races, religious traditions, political ideologies, abilities, and socioeconomic statuses. One group called themselves the "mini United Nations" because the four guys were of four different races and had four different religious beliefs: a Somali Muslim, a Caucasian Christian, a Jew, and an Asian Buddhist. This was a group of friends in a public

high school—in Minnesota of all places. To these teenage boys, this group of friends was as natural as the jock or nerd group.

### **A Widening Gap**

Yet while many teenagers are comfortable with diversity, they also recognize a growing chasm between two main groups of their peers. The rich are richer (and own fascinating technological gizmos that other teens all want). The poor are poorer. The smart are smarter (and taking college-level courses as early as seventh grade). Many struggling teenagers find themselves getting further and further behind.

There are other big chasms as well. Teenagers today know more kids who are depressed, who struggle with mental illnesses, who are trying to overcome learning disabilities, or who live in abusive or neglectful homes. Some teenagers are willing to help out, giving a poorer student the coat off their backs—only to come home to an irate parent who spouts about the high cost of clothing. They also find themselves trying to hang on to their friends (and figure out where they belong) as teenagers move away, transfer to another school, or head to an inpatient facility for a short stint to deal with mental illness or traumatic abuse.

The gap widens as many of the more affluent and privileged young people begin competing earlier and earlier. Today at middle- and upper-class preschool bus stops, many parents talk about trying to get their five-year-old kids into special language classes or elite college prep schools. With the growing competitiveness, kids are finding themselves needing to choose whether to attend an art school or a more technical school in fourth grade, seventh grade, or ninth grade, instead of waiting to make those decisions during their senior year in high school. Others find themselves on the path of being home-schooled for a number of years, attending a public school for a while, and then ending up in a private school—all before turning eighteen. Choosing what to do after high school no longer is the first big decision for teenagers today.

### **Instant-Results Living**

For many teenagers, days are filled with smaller decisions, and many of these choices have become impulsive. Teenagers today are part of the “want-it-now generation.” They don’t have time to wait, and they’re surrounded by devices and environments that feed their impatience and restlessness. They’re used to instant messaging, and many think e-mail is too archaic, too slow, too 1990s. Many find TV boring. Why sit in front of a box when they can view downloaded TV podcasts and movies on their video MP3s—or watch clips on YouTube? All this instant access to the media makes it harder for parents to know what teenagers are watching—and when. How do you monitor a handheld device that goes with a teenager everywhere, including to bed?

Teens’ expectation of quick results and instant downloading has resulted in a lot of teenagers having a sense of entitlement. Teenagers no longer believe that only certain groups should have access to certain things, based on age or authority; no, in the brave new world of open sources, everyone should have access to everything with no thought of earning it. Many expect something for nothing, and many can get a lot without doing much.

A lot of what teenagers want does have a price tag attached to it, and teenagers buy things off eBay, Amazon, iTunes, Craig’s List, and Internet sites from around the world. One parent lamented how her teenage daughter’s holiday wish list included items that could only be ordered online—and only from overseas.

A few groups of teenagers have special problems. For example, affluent young people sometimes wind up rudderless, believing that they don’t need to do anything in life except enjoy it. Many party all the time, experiment with drugs, and often end up in despair—or in trouble.

This kind of problem is also fueled by our celebrity-driven culture. Who hasn’t read the headlines about Britney Spears, Paris Hilton, and Lindsay Lohan, who spend most of their time partying and making headlines for outrageous behavior? Or about the pro-

fessional athletes making headlines with their drug use, acts of violence, and arrests? Today many teenagers think that their worth is measured by how famous they can become. They brag about the number of hits their videos receive on YouTube, and they quickly learn that the more outrageous the content is, the more people want to watch.

What's even more frightening, however, is teenagers' lack of a long-term perspective. Very few people become millionaires, famous artists, acclaimed actors, or professional athletes. Yet ask teenagers if they think it's possible that they will become a millionaire, and most will say yes.

### **Jaded Naïveté**

The events of September 11, 2001, changed not only us adults but also our children. Many teenagers today say that September 11 was a wake-up call. Only 14 percent of teenagers say, "I think the world is becoming a better place." They're worried about terrorism and the threat of global war. Among teens with a variety of political beliefs, some want to fight while others long to reach out and make peace. "About half admire America, while half don't," says Chip Walker of Energy/BBDO, which conducted research on teenagers. Some teens believe in a strong military presence and want to enlist when they're old enough. Others say the United States has been meddling too much in international affairs and causing tensions between countries to rise—instead of ease.

Although a number of teenagers stay up-to-date on current events, most are unsuspecting and naive. They're used to lock-down drills and bomb threat preparations at school, but they leave their electronic gizmos out in places where anyone can take them (and sometimes do). Although many feel unsafe in the world, they feel overly safe in certain locations, such as in teen hangouts or most teenagers' homes—or when driving cars into any kind of neighborhood.

Sexually, they're overexposed. They can easily access R- and NC-17-rated movies on the Internet—even when parents put on

Internet blockers. Pornography, hard-core pornography, is prevalent through these technological devices, which has led teenagers to dance in grinding styles, creating an uproar at school dances and with most adults. Some fashions have become much more slinky and provocative; there are more miniskirts, halter tops, and bare midriffs, leading to tighter dress codes at school, but not everywhere in the community.

For some teenage boys and girls, a hookup (a brief and casual sex encounter) can be a part of their day, like going to school. Yet while many seem jaded about sexuality, they also seem naive about date rape, sexually transmitted diseases, and the strong emotional bonds that can form from sexual intimacy. They're clueless about the depth and dimension of true intimacy as well as the conflict that can result from meaningless sex without true love or trust.

## THE STATE OF PARENTS TODAY

Many grandparents shake their heads and wonder how their adult children can possibly parent well in a society that, in many ways, has run amok. Parents and grandparents have much to be concerned about. Researchers now predict that our kids will be the first generation that will not exceed the economic lifestyle of their parents, and our kids will also be the first generation in which many will not live as long as their parents, due to the high rates of obesity, diabetes, and other illnesses that result from living a sedentary, poor-diet lifestyle.

### Stressors on Parents Today

All parents today—even those who are middle class or wealthy—are feeling the strain of a declining economy. Most parents are working harder, working multiple jobs, or trying to get an educational degree while also working and raising a family. Families with two parents often have both parents working different shifts (so that kids are more likely to have the presence of one parent, even

though the parents rarely see each other), while single-parent families are often feeling isolated, more broke than usual, and in a state of perpetual financial anxiety.

Adding to the stress is the intensity of family schedules. Unlike the generation before us, family life doesn't necessarily revolve around one person—the old-fashioned breadwinner, usually the father—but around every family member instead. This often means juggling two careers; two jobs; kids in school with special after-class activities; huge drop-off, pickup, and commuting conflicts; and an abiding sense of tension and stress. There's just not time for everyone to do what he or she needs to do with family members running simultaneously in so many different directions.

### **Temptations Facing Parents Today**

Because of the stress of being a parent today, many parents are finding themselves tempted to parent in ways that aren't always helpful to their kids' development. Some parents are helicopter parents, hovering closely over their teenagers to ensure that they're safe and doing the right thing. Others are demanding parents, expecting their children to be self-sufficient too early—four-year-olds caring for babies and eight-year-olds cooking (by using the microwave) to feed two or three younger siblings.

It's also tempting to slack off and let the mass media and media technology become the sole preoccupations of our teenagers, especially when that's what kids clamor to do all day. Sure, why not step back and let them post photos, make videos, watch movies, and play games 24/7? Unfortunately, too many teenagers are both spending and revealing too much of their lives online, and their parents don't even know it.

### **Isolation of Parents Today**

Many parents feel pulled in opposite directions. They work, keep up a home, get their kids to medical appointments, and attend to school, extended family, and other activities that often lead them

to wonder how they can do it all—or even do a little—in a decent manner.

This kind of stress and pressure also leaves parents feeling really isolated and alone. In a study Search Institute conducted with the YMCA of the USA, the number-one finding was that most parents felt isolated, even if they were married. Fifty-three percent of parents say they don't have any sources of support. One-third of parents said they could name only one source of support, even though research consistently shows that parents are more effective when they have lots of practical help and encouragement.

Busyness is only one barrier keeping parents from connecting with others. Another is fear for their kids' safety. A U.S. Census Bureau report found that nearly one out of every five children is kept inside because parents feel that their neighborhoods aren't safe. Yet, as the study pointed out, the crime rate has fallen, and most neighborhoods are actually safer than they were ten years ago. The problem is that we've become a fear-driven society. So much is changing, and so many bad things are happening, that it's difficult to know how to protect our children while also giving them the opportunities to grow and succeed in life.

When parents are intentional about connecting with other people, they often run into the "values tension." They discover that other parents hold different beliefs, and they're not always sure they want their children to be exposed to (or to take on) those values. Or they may run into parents who don't seem to value much of anything at all. They're disturbed that their teenagers may be highly attracted to parents who happily let them do whatever they want and to kids who have no boundaries.

Building a supportive community has become hard, and busy parents often end up focusing more on what they can control, such as their home environment, the choice of school that their child attends, and the activities that their children get involved in. Those things are important for raising healthy kids, but parents should not

be doing this alone. They need community. They need support. They need others they know they can turn to—and trust.

Thus too many parents believe that if they want to get something done right, they need to do it themselves. They become super-parents, attempting to do it all and driving themselves to exhaustion.

## SPARKS: WHAT TEENAGERS NEED TO SUCCEED

All parents worry. It is a big and complex world to which we are introducing our children. As we try to be good parents, there are two things all of us want for our kids. We want them to know, and know deeply, that at their very core there is something good and special about them. We want them to see themselves as persons of worth, of value to the world. You and I know, as adults, what a precious gift this perception is to a person; many of us struggle with a lack of it all our lives. The second thing we want for our kids is to have the courage to put their gifts into play.

The concept of spark speaks powerfully to these universal wishes. A spark is something inside your teenager that gets him excited. It's something that makes your teenager want to jump out of bed in the morning. Spark is the thing that gives teenagers (and actually all people) meaning.

Despite all the stressors, barriers, and difficulties, a spark is something that works. Whether teenagers live in a two-parent or one-parent home, whether they're poor or rich, regardless of their race, a spark is something that works for *all* kids. A spark has the power to change the course of a teenager's life for the better.

We need to help our kids find their own sparks. We need to listen closely to what genuinely excites our teenagers. It may start with a passion for the electric guitar, tinkering with a car, shooting hoops, or another choice that we might never on our own have thought of