



# IGNITING THE SPARK



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# Igniting the Spark through 4-H Youth Development

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*4-H leaders play a critical role in the development of young people. Volunteers who seek opportunities to mentor young people with an identified spark can be their best advocate and biggest cheerleader. Utilizing the 4-H Thrive Model, we discuss the positive trajectory of youth when sparks are ignited.*

## Youth Sparks Defined

Sparks are the things in life that young people are passionate about – a skill or talent, a special interest or an ability that comes from within and, when expressed, it brings the young person joy (Benson, 2008). Sparks motivate and inspire young people and bring excitement to their participation. Identifying the inner passions, interests and talents of young people inspires them on the path to thriving. Sparks are what help youth see the potential within themselves.

Sparks can oftentimes help youth see their own potential. Sparking the inner passions, interests and talents of young people that inspire them on the path to thriving is central to youth development work. Having this spark can give the young person a sense of purpose and really encourage them to set and achieve goals.

## Volunteers Role in Supporting Youth Sparks

4-H Leaders play a critical role in helping young people find and ignite their sparks. They partner with youth in the discovery process by encouraging and providing opportunities for a 4-H member to express their spark. 4-H Leaders can help in a variety of different ways, from actually teaching them skills, to mentoring the young person in their spark or even just supporting their passions by attending concerts, sporting events, art shows or public events where the young person is in their “happy place”. Helping ignite a young person’s spark isn’t just about being their biggest cheerleader but about giving constructive feedback and always pushing them to step out of their comfort zone and try something new. Sparking the passions and interests of 4-H’ers goes beyond their project and club involvement. Because of 4-H’s emphasis on “learning by doing” in an atmosphere that’s driven by the young person’s specific interests, 4-H can really provide a safe place for that young person to identify, practice and fine-tune some of their curiosities that can easily result in finding their spark.

Youth Sparks is at the very center of the 4-H Thriving Model (Figure 1). Similar to finding that perfect fit of a 4-H project for each member should be helping youth find their spark. Some young people are really involved in service and leadership through 4-H but taking it one step further and finding a passion and not just a past time is what turns a 4-H experience from a good one to an epic one. Arnold’s (2018) model shows the connection between the developmental and long-term outcomes being dependent on finding and fostering those sparks in young people.

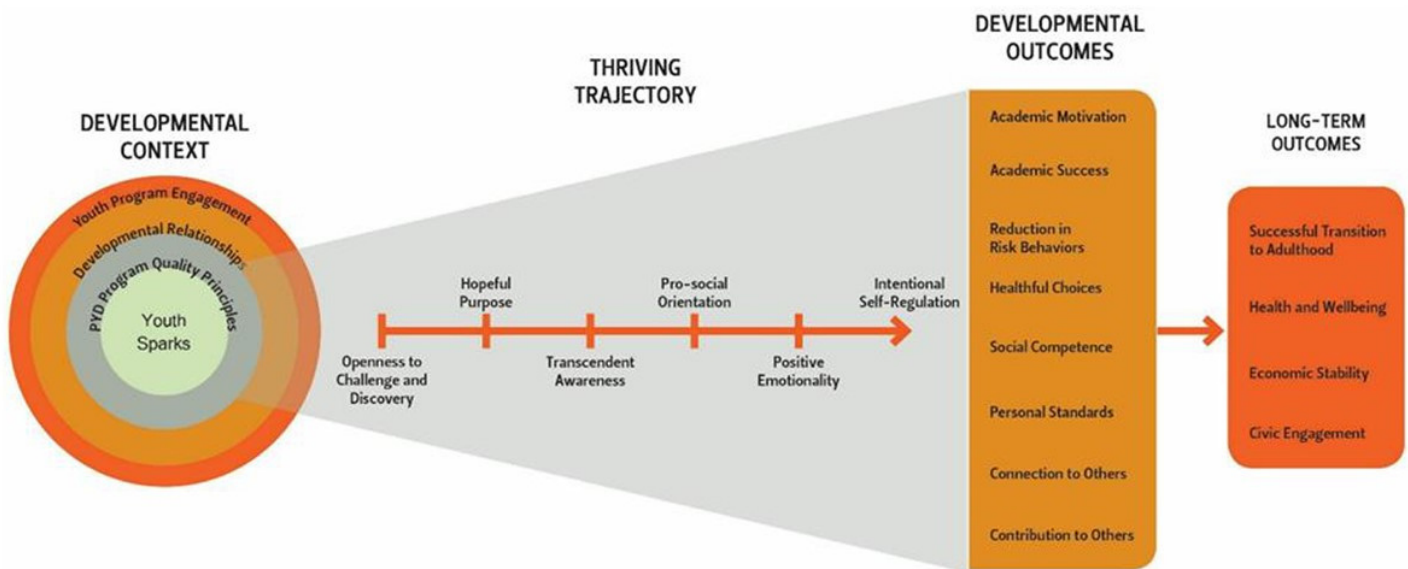


Figure 1 The 4-H Thriving Model

### An Example

When speaking and asking questions (see below) with a senior 4-H member about her Spark, the responses were varied. This member listed her passion as agriculture, which may seem a bit broad, but growing up in an agriculture community, it was easy for her to pinpoint what makes her the happiest. She is involved in showing livestock through 4-H but the real reason she enjoys it so much is because she has the opportunity to be a small-scale producer and see how the real world works with regards to livestock. She has seen how the market changes the costs of not just the animal, but the feed and all the minerals and supplements she uses on a regular basis. She indicated that she seeks out friends and peers who also have similar interests, so it makes it easy find opportunities to learn more and express her passions. She credits her 4-H Leaders for helping her hone and advance her Sparks.

### Potential Questions in helping a young person identify their Spark

What activity(ies) do you love most?

Do you think you have a spark – something you are passionate about and that truly makes you happy when you're involved?

When and where do you live your spark?

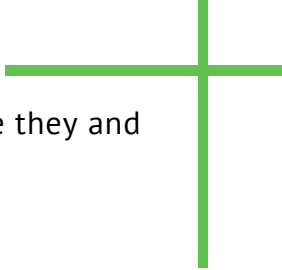
Who knows your spark?

Who else is involved your spark? (Peers)

Who helps feed your spark?

What gets in your way?

How will you use your spark to make our world better?



Are there adults involved in leading, supporting or encouraging your spark? Who are they and how did they contribute?

### **Implications**

The role that a 4-H leader plays is critical in the development of a young person and especially in identifying their spark. Time and again, those volunteers who really seek out opportunities to mentor young people after seeing them find their spark can be their best advocate and biggest cheerleader. Since 4-H depends so much on its trained volunteers, 4-H leaders play an extra special role in ensuring that the 4-H member is on the trajectory of life skill development and the identifying of their spark. There is evidence that the nurturing qualities and intentionality of service that the volunteers possess plays a far more important role for young people rather than the subject matter expertise they may bring to the program. (Arnold, 2018) The implications for this would support the idea that a volunteer doesn't have to be a subject matter expert in order to volunteer with 4-H, rather they need to have the desire to help young people achieve and the willingness to push them to be better.

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