

Helping Youth Thrive

At Search Institute, we've been studying young people who are thriving for the past five years. Young people who are not just surviving, but who are truly doing well—aware of and using their interests, talents, and abilities; achieving their goals; living up to and beyond their potential.

We've discovered three things that, when they are all present in young people's lives, almost guarantee that they will thrive:

1. Young people know their “sparks,” the special interests and abilities they are passionate about
2. They pursue their sparks and use them to contribute to a better world
3. Their parents and other adults support, encourage, and help them with their sparks.

This resource is intended to help you help young people thrive, by addressing all three of these important factors in one simple way: by talking with young people. Now look back at that bullet list of wonderful things that Angelica praises her parents for—how many of them are about her parents talking with her?!

What do we mean by “simply talking with young people”? Well, what we mean is having real, person-to-person conversations with them, talks that help them discover their own abilities and possibilities, talks that guide them to try new things and take next steps, talks that reveal your own struggles and dreams and lessons learned, so that your children can learn from them. Real adult-to-child conversations, not just pal-to-pal chats.

Things to know and skills to practice

Have you already been having thriving conversations with the young people in your life? Are you just getting started? Do you want to become more intentional, more effective as a young person's guide, role model, cheerleader, teacher, or coach? Take a look at the skills below—you likely have a number of them already, but perhaps there are a few you could bone up on, deepen your knowledge of, or apply differently.

Listening First

The focus is talking “with,” not talking “to.” And since adults spend much of their time talking “to,” we sometimes have to stop our selves and listen first. Ask open-ended questions. Give a little silence that opens the space for young people to find their own voices. And that ties to the next point . . .

Creating a Feeling of Safety

In order for many people to talk about their innermost self, their dreams, their passions, they need to feel safe. That may mean knowing they

won't be made fun of or put down. It may mean talking while walking or driving, so they don't have to looking eye-to-eye with someone. It may mean talking after spending quite a bit of time together doing other kinds of activities and getting to know each other well.

Practice making it safe for young people to talk with you. Keep their confidences if they ask you to (unless, of course, it entails harm to them or others). Respond with respect, interest, and positive ideas. Try having talks in different kinds of situations and see which situations seem to feel "safest" to the young person you want to talk with.

Allowing for Individuality

It's a cliché to compare the uniqueness of human beings to the uniqueness of each snowflake—but clichés emerge from widely known truths. In regard to thriving, it is certainly true that each of us has his or her own personal best, his or her own ways of fulfilling their special potential. But there are some particular kinds of individuality to be sure to keep in mind when you're hoping to be a "thriving guide" for a young person, including age, temperament and personality, and stage of development.

Age. Remember that young people have different abilities at different ages. The youngest children may well reveal that they have passions and talents, but be unable to focus on them for very long. And the difference in planning, decision making, and problem solving between a 13-year-old and a 16-year-old can be huge. Have high expectations for kids of any age, but make sure they are age-appropriate.

Temperament and personality. Is the girl or boy you're working with a highly sensitive person (HSP)? Is he or she outgoing or shy? Talkative or reserved? The kind of person who laughs long and loud or who chuckles quietly? Does he or she shake off disappointments or take them to heart? Does he or she prefer things to move in logical, predictable directions, or does he or she like to just jump in and see what happens? A performer or a behind-the-scenes person?

All these kinds of differences in temperament or personality in young people may make a difference in how you approach and talk with her or him. One child may get so excited and think so far ahead of where he is that he might need help to rein in his imagination and focus on next steps. Another might be a little insecure about her talent and need more encouragement to be bold and confident. Practice observing the young person you want to help thrive—what kind of person is he or she? What styles of interaction seem to be most effective?

Practice observing yourself, too! Are you more demanding of others than yourself, or less? Do you treat all young people as equals, or do you find yourself sometimes acting from assumptions or stereotypes? How often do you say "You should..." compared to "What do you think"?

Broadening the range of your interaction and speaking styles and making sure you are phrasing things in positive, empowering ways will increase your effectiveness with young people in all your spheres of influence.

Stages of development. Numerous aspects of a young person's development—cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and more—need to be accessed for a young person to thrive. Yet few, if any, people develop at the same rate in all aspects. So a young person may be a straight-A student in academics, yet lag behind some of her peers in emotional self-regulation. Another might be very astute in observing and understanding others' feelings, but not yet have developed strong skills in focus and concentration.

Part of your “work” as a thriving guide may be to notice a young person's strengths and challenges, and look for ways to help her or him raise the levels of any developmental areas that need it.

Affirming the different pathways to thriving

Some people seem to know what they want to be, what their spark is, from the time they are very young. Others discover their passion during elementary, middle, or high school. Many really “find themselves” in the exciting intellectual atmosphere of higher education. Others seem to continue searching, even give up searching for awhile, then later in life suddenly emerge as a writer or an artist or a teacher. In fact, the existence of the common term “late bloomer” testifies to the relative commonness of the latter experience.

Finding your spark and moving from surviving to thriving can take a number of pathways, so it's important to not try to force a particular trajectory on any particular young person. Instead, do your best to discover the young person's natural pace and rhythm. Sometimes he or she may need to time to think about the possibilities, or a nudge to start looking for new ones.

Walking a fine line sometimes

Helping a young person thrive is more of an art than a science. Sometimes a subtle change in tone or emphasis can make all the difference in whether good advice is accepted or rejected. This calls for skill on the part of the adult in observing his or her own behavior, body language, and manner of talking.

Practice being aware of the sometimes fine line between empty praise and helpful encouragement. Notice whether you're going beyond support to doing some of the work for them. Be intentional about whether someone needs just a nudge, or to be pressed a bit, or really responds to being pushed. And most of all, keep an eye on the creative tension between realism and idealism. When a young person says his spark is to become an astronaut, yet he doesn't seem to have an affinity for science, ask yourself what's really going on. Is that really his spark? Is he actually responding to or eager for the sense of adventure and exploration that an astronaut represents? Do you need to help him find another activity that satisfies that urge for some healthy risk-taking? Or do you need to find him some tutoring in science subjects?

Converting a dream into steps to take

Young people often need help to see how current classes and chores and tasks have anything to do with their ultimate dream. It's up to you as the adult to help them begin to break a big goal into achievable steps. When a young person says she wants to be the president someday, help her see the value in signing up for debate and drama now by pointing out that the skills she learns in those classes will be called on whenever she makes a speech in the future.

Teaching good values

It's not enough for a young person to have talent and a supportive adult or two. Two matters of character are vital to thriving as well: 1) developing the motivation, dedication, confidence, and discipline to excel at his or her spark, and 2) using that spark to give back to or contribute to the world.

When the supportive adults around a young person, including parents, extended family, teachers, clergy, coaches, and mentors, present a united front on important values, a young person is more likely to begin to claim those values as his or her own. And when those same adults live out those values through their own lives, that role modeling goes even farther than repeated reminders about "if at first you don't succeed, try, try again".

Show them the options—with enthusiasm!

Principles of Thriving Conversations

As you get started or continue with thriving conversations with the young people in your life, consider these principles. They may help you be clearer and more intentional about keeping thriving as a primary goal.

You can't start too soon.

While little ones who are not yet talking can't really participate in thriving conversations, and elementary-age children may not be ready to commit to a spark with dedication, you can't start too soon in nurturing in your children a spirit of adventure, exploration, and contribution.

It's never too late.

It's never too late for a young person to receive encouragement and assistance in finding or rekindling a spark—and it's never too late for adults, either! Besides, some people have a longer timeline in discovering their sparks, so sometimes patience and persistence are key.

Know yourself, but stay open to possibilities.

One of the best ways to talk with young people is to tell them about yourself genuinely and authentically. Think about your own history, and share with young people your dreams, your struggles, your successes, and what it's been like. And remember that if you aren't feeling very "sparkling" lately, it might be time to open your eyes to discovering a new spark for yourself.

Know the child, but be open to surprises.

If you are a child's parent, you know that child well—but that knowledge can sometimes blind you to change in your child. If your child has been a marvelous singer since she was a toddler, be sure to remind her of that when she's trying to decide whether to be in chorus this year or not. But at the same time, be sure to listen if she wants to try dance or gymnastics or debate this year instead.

Watch for prime moments.

These thriving conversations don't have to be artificial or constrained. Watch for prime moments to bring up the ideas. For example, when the young person has gotten a report card (good or bad!), when he or she has won or lost a competition, when you're watching an inspiring movie or TV show together or have enjoyed a live performance of some kind, when he or she announces "I'm bored!"....all are good times to talk about possibilities, passion, and spark. Sometimes the best moments come when you're not expecting them!

Don't give up.

If at first the conversations don't go smoothly, or you feel as if you're talking to a brick wall, wait a few days and try again in a new way. Check yourself to be sure you're listening more than you're talking, and that you're saying more positive things than negative things. And remember that finding and acting on our sparks is a lifelong process; it doesn't all happen at once.

***Conversation Starter 1: "You're Really Good at This!"**

Finding the Moment

Catch a young person doing well, and then say something about it! It could be anything from spelling to soccer to singing. It could be happening in a formal setting like a class or a game, during a practice, or during a quiet moment in the car or on the bus after an event. All that matters is that the thriving conversation is started right away, when the "doing well" is fresh.

Questions, Probes, and Ideas

- You really seem to be a natural at this.
- Have you ever thought about how this talent could be something you get paid for later in life?
- Is this really fun for you?
- Have you always been good at this or did you have to learn it first?
- What do you like about it?
- Do you have any goals around this? Anything I can do to help?
- I love seeing you doing well and enjoying it.

Follow-through

No matter what the talent or skill, there are places to go with it. Good spellers can compete in spelling bees, help check her friends' English papers, or consider becoming an editor as a job. A good soccer player

can not only continue to play on better teams, and improve his own skills, but also become a coach for younger players or perhaps get a scholarship for college. Be creative and help your young person open up to the myriad possibilities.

***Conversation Starter 2: “This Seems to Make You Happy”**

Finding the Moment

The key to finding this is to notice—notice when a young person is having a flow experience...not just the momentary happiness of an ice cream sundae, but the sustained “time doesn’t exist” thrill of spending two hours in front of the computer editing video footage and then proudly showing others the resulting 5-minute clip. Or the hours spent curled up in a comfortable chair to plow through the fourth Harry Potter novel in one sitting. Or it might be that a child who has been bored through the first five days of a vacation suddenly lights up when you stop by the roadside to say hello to a group of beautiful horses.

Questions, Probes, and Ideas

- What does it feel like when you’re doing this activity?
- How did you become so motivated?
- Do any of your friends like doing this, too?
- Let’s figure out a way for you to do more of this!
- Would you teach me a little about it so I can share in the fun or understand you better?
- What are the things you like about it?
- How does a person move to the next level?
- Is there anything else that makes you feel this way?

Follow-through

Noticing their enjoyment can affirm for a young person that this talent, skill, or spark is something special about her or him. A great way to follow through is to check back about the activity in a few days or a week by subtly suggesting there’s a next step: What’s your next film project going to be? Have you found any other books you like as much as the Harry Potters?

***Conversation Starter 3: “Have You Ever Thought of...?”**

Finding the Moment

This is a question for a quiet time, while you’re traveling, sitting on a bench at the park, taking a break from a bike ride, or laying on a hillside waiting for Fourth of July fireworks to start. It might also work well right after you hear the young person heave a sigh of boredom.

Questions, Probes, and Ideas

- What’s the coolest job you’ve ever heard of?

- I know someone who spends every workday taking care of elephants
- Do you ever wish you were an inventor? An undersea diver? A scientist making a medical breakthrough?
- Have you ever heard of people having a life list? [explain about it being a list of really interesting goals and things to do during one's life, then tell one from yours, like "join a tornado chase team" or "explore a real castle" or "record a song I've written".

Follow-through

Make an agreement to take some steps toward meeting some life-list goals! Google the term "life list" and visit some of the sites that come up to see if you like the ideas there.

***Starter 4: "I Had a Really Great Day Today; Let Me Tell You Why!"**

Finding the Moment

Blow your kids' minds one day by bursting through the back door and, instead of immediately asking them about homework or complaining about the traffic, say exuberantly, "I had such a great day today!" Then, whether they ask about it or not, tell them what was so great about it. Let your enthusiasm spill into your tone of voice and your gestures; jump up and down, if that's your style. Set the stage for a confidential talk .

Questions, Probes, and Ideas

- When's the last time you had a day like that?
- What were you doing? What was so great about it?
- [If it has been awhile] What could we do to make tomorrow or the next day a day like that for you?
- What would you want to do? How would you spend your time?
- What would you have accomplished at the end of the day?
- I don't always have days like this, but I love it when I do—and it happens more often when I do what I love. What do you love to do?
- One thing that always improves my days is doing something to help other people; did you help someone today?

Follow-through

Encourage your young person to make some plans for a really great day; offer to help on some parts of it, but be sure to leave room for his or her initiative, too. Consider planning a little surprise for the young person—a bit of extra time together, an unexpected early-breakfast date on a school day, a "new" used book or CD from the thrift store. Help him or her see that the more you visualize and plan for having great days, the more often they happen!

By Kay Hong, Senior Projects Manager, Search Institute

Copyright © 2008 Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN.

www.search-institute.org