

TEEN VOICE 2009

**THE UNTAPPED STRENGTH OF
15-YEAR-OLDS**



Funded by Best Buy Children's Foundation and prepared by Search Institute



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THE 15-YEAR-OLDS

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TEEN VOICE 2009:

THE UNTAPPED STRENGTHS OF 15-YEAR-OLDS

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What's Inside

When Teens Speak, We Listen <i>A welcome letter from Best Buy</i>	3
Study Highlights	4
1. A Different Story about Teens	7
2. Sparks: Growing Up from the Inside Out	10
3. TVI: Finding Their Own Voices	16
4. ROI: People and Places that Make a Difference	21
5. Sparks + TVI + ROI = Strength @ 15	27
6. What Gets in the Way?	29
7. Fifteen Actions to Support 15-Year-Olds	32
8. What Are We Waiting For?	35
Technical Information about the Study	37
Additional Tools and Resources	41



» WHEN TEENS SPEAK, WE LISTEN

Too often we hear bad news about young people—the challenges they face or the problems they create. Best Buy is committed to changing the conversation about teens and helping the world see them as the outspoken, intelligent, creative, bring-on-the-world individuals they are.

To do that, we must be willing to listen. That's why Best Buy Children's Foundation commissioned *Teen Voice 2009*, a national study to help us hear what teens have to say, and to see them as community assets.

Listening is only the first step, of course. These current and future leaders also want to be supported and empowered to make a difference in the causes they deem most important. Best Buy's social change platform, @15, is designed to do just that. @15 provides teens with opportunities to learn, contribute, lead and develop life skills.

As the father of two teenage boys, I'm well aware that teens have the power and desire to do great things and make the world a better place. Best Buy and @15 are reaching out to fuel those dreams and help them become a reality.

Brian J. Dunn
President and Chief Operating Officer
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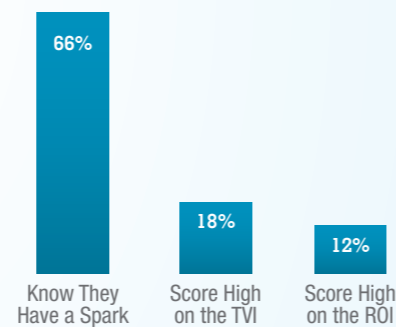
STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

What happens at age 15 has a lot to say about teens' success in school and beyond. Based on a national study of 1,817 fifteen-year-olds, *Teen Voice 2009: The Untapped Strengths of 15-Year-Olds* offers a unique, positive look into the lives of today's teens. It explores three interlocking concepts: "sparks," "teen voice," and "relationships and opportunities." When these strengths work together, they have tremendous potential to set or keep 15-year-olds on a positive course in the midst of this critical time in life.

Sparks: Growing Up from the Inside Out

- "Sparks" is a metaphor for describing how young people experience talents, interests, or strengths that make them feel really happy, energized, and passionate, and that give them real purpose, direction, or focus.
- Two-thirds (66%) of 15-year-olds say they have at least one spark (Display A). This level is similar among both females and males, and among blacks/African Americans; Hispanics/Latinos; and whites.
- Yet too few young people have much spark support beyond their family. Fewer than half of the kids who know their spark say that anyone at school (48%), a coach, mentor, or other youth worker (43%), a religious leader (29%), or a neighbor (16%) encourages their spark.
- Among the 15-year-olds surveyed, 28% describe their strongest spark as sports, athletics, or other physical activities, and 24% describe it as creative activities such as art, dance, drama, music, or writing.
- Teens who know their sparks are more likely to report higher levels of initiative, sense of purpose, and desire to make a difference. They are also more likely to value having strong friendships, being civically engaged, and serving others.

DISPLAY A Teens Who Score High on 3 Key Strengths



TVI: Finding Their Own Voices

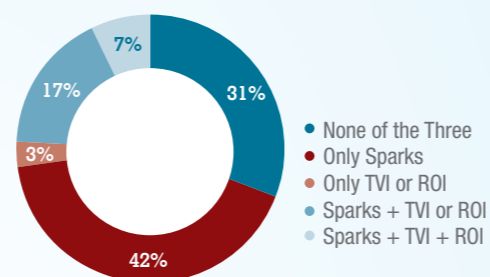
- This study introduces a new Teen Voice Index (TVI) to give the nation a snapshot of teen engagement in social issues and civic life. Young people who find their voice both contribute in powerful ways and also set themselves on a positive path for their own future.
- Overall, just 18% of youth scored high on the TVI (Display A). Females are somewhat more likely than males to score high. But the greatest difference is that the higher their parents' education, the higher teens score on the TVI, revealing some of the barriers teens face in fulfilling their potential.
- Fifteen-year-olds with high TVI scores are at least three times as likely as those with low scores to see civic engagement as important, hold prosocial values, and have a sense of hopeful purpose. They are twice as likely as teens with low TVI scores to be actively engaged in school and to have goals to master what they are studying. And on every outcome, those with medium or "okay" TVI scores do better than those with low scores, but the high TVI scorers fare far better still than even those with "okay" scores.

ROI: People and Places that Make a Difference

- Sparks and voice flourish with the help of relationships and opportunities that recognize, encourage, and guide teens. This study's Relationships and Opportunities Index (ROI) highlights three elements that significantly help teens: Being valued and treated fairly; having access to and being involved in high-quality opportunities, such as after-school programs; and having people who help nurture their sparks.
- Only about one in eight 15-year-olds (12%) scored high on the ROI (Display A). Teens with high ROI scores are at least three times as likely as those with low scores to have a sense of hopeful purpose, express caring values, be actively engaged in school, and take on leadership roles. And just as with the TVI, youth with mid-range ROI or "okay" scores do better than low scorers, but not nearly as well as those with high ROI scores.
- A critical issue in this gap between high and low scorers on the ROI is the quality of the programs in which they participate. Among the 68% of teens who say they took advantage of various community opportunities in the past year, just 35% said they participated in *high-quality* programs. Counting all teens—including those who didn't participate at all—we estimate that *only about 23% of America's 15-year-olds participate in high-quality programs and activities in their communities.*

Sparks + TVI + ROI = Strength @ 15

- Though each of these factors matters, teens who experience all three of these strengths are better off. For example, only 16% of young people with low scores in all three areas (sparks, the TVI, and the ROI) have a sense of purpose and hope for the future. However, most teens (68%) have a sense of purpose and hope if they score high in all three.
- Thus, the challenge becomes clear when we put the pieces together: *Only 7% of America's 15 year olds experience high levels of all three of these critical strengths (Display B).*

DISPLAY B Teens Who Experience Multiple Strengths**What Gets in the Way?**

- About one-third of teens are unable to identify a talent, interest, or hobby that they are deeply passionate about.
- Once teens identify their passions, many don't know how to *develop* them.
- About one in five teens indicate that someone has actively discouraged them from pursuing their passion or interest.
- Economic disparities, racial discrimination, and quality of community opportunities and programs all get in the way of teens experiencing these strengths.

Conclusion

The nation's 15-year-olds want to make the best of their own lives. They are a rich resource, ready to be tapped. They need more safe chances to explore the things that might capture their energized attention and enrich their lives and the lives of their families, schools, and communities. It's up to adults to work alongside young people to help them find and follow their passions, enriching themselves, their families, and their communities as a result.

About This Study

Teen Voice 2009: The Untapped Strengths of 15-Year-Olds was designed and analyzed by Search Institute. It is based on data collected between October 8 and November 11, 2008, by Harris Interactive through a Web-based panel study. It included a sample of 1,817 fifteen-year-olds in the United States, weighted to align with census percentages by gender, race/ethnicity, geographic location, urbanicity, and parent education. In addition, Harris Interactive conducted a series of online bulletin board focus groups from November 18 to November 21, 2008, with 52 teenagers recruited from those who had participated in the survey.

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1 A DIFFERENT STORY ABOUT TEENS

If you believe the headlines, most teenagers are failing school, having sex, drinking alcohol, and committing violence. They're zoned out on computers, iPods, and cell phones, and they won't have anything to do with adults—particularly their parents.

It's true that some teens do face these challenges and make poor choices. But there's a different story, just as true, that doesn't often get attention: Most of today's teens are actually savvy, active, engaged, and interested in making a positive difference in their world. But too often, they are, as this report shows, an under-tapped and under-recognized source of creativity and energy for our communities, nation, and world.

What's up with 15-year-olds?

Fifteen-year-olds are taking early steps toward adulthood, taking on new responsibilities and being exposed to new risks. What happens at age 15 has a lot to say about their success in school and beyond (see Display 1). *Teen Voice 2009: The Untapped Strengths of 15-Year-Olds* gives young people, educators, parents, policy makers, youth workers, and other stakeholders a unique look into the lives of the nation's 15-year-olds. (See Display 2 for a brief overview of the study.) It shows:

- Most teens have deep talents, interests, and passions (what we call "sparks"). They are eager to use these strengths to make a difference in areas that matter to them.
- However, many don't have the kinds of relationships and opportunities they need to help them tap their spark during this important time in life when they are on the cusp of young adulthood.

DISPLAY 1 Why 15-Year-Olds?

Age 15 represents a critical transition time in growing up. When they are 15, teenagers typically . . .

- Move into high school. Students who engage well (academically and socially) during their first year of high school are much more likely to stay in school and to be academically successful.
- Have been through significant physical changes, including puberty.
- Have begun developing adult reasoning capabilities—though they are still learning how to exercise judgment.
- Are exploring how and why they matter, what they value, and who and what they believe in.
- Become more independent. Many 15-year-olds begin to drive, work, and spend more time on their own and with their peers. They take on more leadership roles.
- Are exposed to more high-risk behaviors, such as sexual activity, violence, and alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use.

- When they are surrounded by people and places that nurture their sparks, they're much more likely to be engaged in school and in life, and to contribute to society in meaningful ways.

An opportunity, not just a challenge

Age 15 is a time ripe with possibilities. It is an opportunity to see teens in a new way as they move toward adulthood. It is an opportunity to focus on their own motivations, values, and passions for making a difference. It is an opportunity to find creative and meaningful ways to keep kids engaged in school, family, learning, work, and civic life.

Our nation needs to tap all of its strengths to build toward a productive, vibrant future. Young people's hopes and dreams are part of that solution. By giving them a voice and then empowering them to take action, we can expect, over time, to reduce the problems that show up in disturbing headlines. Our teens can lead us into the future with confidence.

New ways to engage with teens

What might happen if we first asked teens about the talents, interests, or hobbies they are passionate about, rather than just telling them what they should do? How could that change their lives?

Then, what if we challenged and supported teens to use what's really important to them to make a difference right now? How could taking that real-world action affect them—both now *and* in the future?

“Right now, I don't think that most authorities take us seriously. Of course they listen to us, and act like they're going to do something about it. But I'm pretty sure that the majority of the time, they don't truly take us seriously because we're only teenagers.” —GIRL, INDIANA

How could taking this approach to young people make us think and act differently in our families, schools, and communities? What might adults expect of young people? What could they expect of adults and community institutions?

Teen Voice 2009: The Untapped Strengths of 15-Year-Olds invites you to explore these questions with three interlocking concepts. When these work together, they have tremendous potential to set 15-year-olds on a positive course in the midst of this critical time in life. These three ideas are:

- **SPARKS**, their individual talents, passions, or gifts that are deep within them and give them energy, motivation, focus, and joy. So we start with things that really matter to young people.
- **VOICE**, which focuses on whether young people believe they have a voice in their families, schools, organizations, and communities, and whether they can make a real difference in things that matter to them.

“Well, my mom never got the chance to go to college, and she hates going to her job every day. I don't want to be like that. I want to have a job so that when I wake up in the morning, I can say, “Yay! I'm going to work!” —GIRL, MARYLAND

- **RELATIONSHIPS** and opportunities, which explore whether young people have supportive relationships and quality opportunities that nurture their sparks and give them the tools for success and contribution.

The pages that follow examine how young people experience each of these ideas, using new indexes (or survey measures) that give a national snapshot of how these positive lenses affect how we view and relate to teens. More important, the indexes show how these resources—individually and when combined—make a positive difference in teens' lives.

DISPLAY 2 About This Study

Teen Voice 2009: The Untapped Strengths of 15-Year-Olds is based on data collected between October 8 and November 11, 2008, by Harris Interactive through a Web-based panel study. It included a sample of 1,817 fifteen-year-olds in the United States. These percentages are the demographic profile of the data after being weighted to align with census figures.

Gender	Female	49%
	Male	51%
Race/Ethnicity	White/European American	55%
	Hispanic/Latino	18%
	Black/African American	15%
	Asian American/Pacific Islander	6%
	Other/multiple/no answer	6%
Community Type	Urban/city	29%
	Suburban/next to a city	49%
	Small town/rural area	23%
Region of U.S.	East	20%
	Midwest	22%
	South	34%
	West	24%
Parents' Highest Education	High school or less	33%
	Some college	33%
	College graduate or more	34%

2 SPARKS: GROWING UP FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Most of what we do in society with teenagers is what we might call “development from the outside in.” That is, we believe that adults know what young people need to know and do (and not do). So we focus on ensuring that teens know what they need to know and do to be successful in a dog-eat-dog world.

To be sure, adults play critical roles in shaping, challenging, guiding, and mentoring young people.¹ However, growing up works best when it combines two emphases:

1. Ensuring that adults, institutions, and communities are giving young people what they need to succeed (development from the outside in); and
2. Nurturing the sparks that each young person has within himself or herself (development from the inside out).

Both emphases are important. But because teens are too often viewed in a negative light (if any light at all), we tend to focus all of our attention on what adults need to do to “fix” kids. It’s time to correct the imbalance. Yes, some development happens from the outside in. But it’s just as important for teens to develop from the inside out.

Teen Voice 2009: The Untapped Strengths of 15-Year-Olds reveals new research on teens’ sparks—what’s unique and important inside each and every young person. It highlights whether 15-year-olds see themselves as having sparks, what they say their sparks are, and how having and knowing your sparks is related to positive growth and development.

What are sparks?

Our research uses sparks as a metaphor for describing how young people experience talents, interests, or strengths that make them feel really happy, energized, and passionate, and that give them real purpose, direction, or focus.² So sparks are part of who a young person really is—part of their sense of identity. Here’s how we described the concept to teens in the survey:

When people are really happy, energized, and passionate about their talents, interests, or hobbies, we say they have a ‘spark’ in their life. This spark is more than just interesting or fun for them. They are passionate about it. It gives them joy and energy. It is a really important part of their life that gives them real purpose, direction or focus.

When you ask teens about their sparks, they immediately know what you’re talking about. They get it. And if they believe they have these unique gifts, it shows in the way they talk about them and the way they live their lives. They describe their sparks as the “love of my life” or their “purpose.” Teens who don’t recognize their own passions describe “spark” in less flattering ways, as a type of “obsession” or having “tunnel vision,” as we see in Display 3.

How many teens know their sparks?

Two-thirds (66%) of 15-year-olds say they have at least one spark (Display 4). This level is similar among both females (68%) and males (64%), and among blacks/African Americans (69%); Hispanics/Latinos (66%); and whites (68%).

Nearly all (98%) teens with sparks say they spend time on these interests each week, and 60% spend time on these interests or activities every day. Sixty percent of those who are involved weekly spend more than five hours per week cultivating their passionate interests.

What about the youth who say they don’t have a spark or they don’t know? Some indicated that they just hadn’t figured it out yet. Others said they enjoyed so many things that they didn’t want to limit themselves. Here are examples of what they said:

- “I haven’t figured out one thing to be passionate about, because I like different activities but don’t focus on one.” – boy, Kentucky
- “I enjoy doing a variety of different things at once. I have a short attention span which is why I don’t stick to any particular thing.” – girl, California
- “A passion is really hard to find. It could be a number of things but I think for me personally it is hard to find a certain passion because it is always changing.” – girl, Illinois
- “I have the things that I like doing, but there’s nothing that I would like, give everything up for. There’s just nothing really that I LOVE to do, probably just because I haven’t had the time to explore all my options. I’m sure, however, that sometime in life I’ll find something that is that important to me.” – girl, Indiana
- “There is so much to see and do, it’s hard to pick one thing.” – boy, Massachusetts

Do others help them with their sparks?

As we’ll see later in this report, a key to helping grow a spark is to have people and places that know, care about and nurture that spark. Among 15-year-olds who say they know their own spark, only 77% indicate that their parents help them cultivate their spark. Just over half of these teens who know their spark say their friends encourage and support them (58%), and only about half (52%) say they have grandparents and other family members who do.

More troubling, fewer than half of the youth with sparks say that people at school (48%), coaches, mentors, or other youth workers (43%), a religious leader (29%), or a neighbor (16%) helps them develop their spark. Thus, too many teens are left on their own to sort out how to cultivate their sparks. Just as troubling, too many people in teens’ lives miss the opportunity to build a nurturing relationship with teens around the things that really matter to them. (See part 4 of this report for more on the relationships and opportunities that kids need.)

What are the most common sparks?

Young people have many different sparks (also shown in Display 4). Among the 15-year-olds surveyed, 28% describe their strongest spark as sports, athletics, or other physical activities, and 24% describe it as creative activities such as art, dance, drama, music, or writing.

Overall, different groups of teens share these interests at similar levels. As shown in Display 5, similar proportions of African American, Hispanic/Latino, and white youth point to sports as their main spark. However, there are important differences, often related to gender. Boys are twice as likely as girls to indicate that sports and technology are their primary spark. Girls are twice as likely to indicate creative activities as their spark.

A few more differences are evident when combining gender and race/ethnicity. For example, Hispanic girls are somewhat more likely to name the arts, and Hispanic males somewhat less likely to name sports. African American females are more likely to name computers and technology, while black males are less likely than other males to name technology. Few other gender or racial/ethnic differences are evident related to other types of sparks.

Why do sparks matter?

On the surface, teens who do and don't say they have sparks are very similar. For example, 69% of teens in each group report spending time on at least one talent, interest, or hobby they care about on a weekly basis. But for about one-third of 15-year-olds, those interests do not stimulate enough passion and interest to be called *sparks*.

This distinction between having simple interests and having the more deeply influential *sparks* is critical, because there are some important differences between the teens who do and don't say they have one or more sparks. Furthermore, this relationship between having sparks and these outcomes is true across gender and the racial/ethnic groups we studied.

For example, teens who know their sparks are much more likely to say that they volunteer during a typical week (Display 6). They are more likely to report higher levels of:

- initiative;
- sense of purpose; and
- desire to make a difference in the world.

They are also more likely to place a high value on:

- strong friendships
- being civically engaged, and
- serving others.

Thus, the idea of sparks also has profound significance in the process of growing up. Some of the most important "work" of being a teenager is to shape a self-concept (that is, who I am) and one's place in the world (how do I matter?). A clear and affirmed sense of purpose and passion helps teens anchor their identity in internal strengths that are not based primarily on the perceptions of other people. These internal strengths encourage teens to recognize that they have skills and qualities the world needs. Furthermore, expressing one's unique strengths also generates its own reward, motivating teens from the inside to be engaged in their school and community.

The more talents and interests, the better

Knowing and nurturing even one spark is good for teens. Being passionately interested and engaged in more than one talent or interest is even better. Display 7 shows the percentages of teens who report important positive commitments, such as being adaptable, valuing academic skills, and wanting to contribute to society based on whether they say they have no talents or interests, one talent or interest, or more.³

In each case, teens reporting at least one talent or interest are much more likely to report each of the commitments than those who say they have no talents or interests. Furthermore, those with two or more talents and interests are even more likely to report these positive commitments.

Why would having multiple talents and interests be important for teens' development? It suggests that young people are creating a dynamic web of relationships and opportunities—an important step on the pathway to an engaged, committed, and fulfilling life. Thus, helping young people identify and nurture *several* interests gives them a better chance to find *their* sparks.

DISPLAY 3 What Do Teens Think of Sparks? It Depends Who You Ask!

Teens who say they have a spark describe it this way:

- "It's my life."
- "The love of my life."
- "A job you need to do to be happy."
- "Purpose."
- "Meaning of life."
- "A way of life."
- "My life and my only love."

Teens who don't believe they have a spark describe the idea of "spark" this way:

- "Obsession."
- "Closed mind."
- "Goal."
- "Devotion."
- "Fanatic."
- "Tunnel vision."

DISPLAY 4 Do You Have a Spark?

Know They Have Sparks	Type of Sparks (among those who have sparks)	
Yes		66%
	Participating in sports, athletics, or other physical activities.	28%
	Participating in or leading art, dance, drama, music, writing, or other creative activities.	24%
	Using computers, electronics, or other types of technology.	15%
	Studying, reading, doing research, or other ways of learning.	7%
	Being in nature, caring for animals, or participating in outdoor recreation.	6%
	Doing religious or spiritual activities, or learning about religions or spirituality.	5%
	Being an entrepreneur, running a business, or inventing things.	3%
	Doing construction, architecture, or other types of mechanics or engineering.	3%
	Serving others, participating in politics, or working on social issues.	3%
	Teaching, leading others, or public speaking.	2%
	Other	5%
No		10%
Not Sure		24%

DISPLAY 5 Differences in Primary Sparks, by Gender and Race/Ethnicity

		All	Black/African American	Hispanic/Latino	White
Participating in sports, athletics, or other physical activities.	All	28%	29% ^h	24%	30% ^h
	Females	23%	22%	19%	25% ^h
	Males	34% ^f	38% ^h	28%	36% ^h
Participating in or leading art, dance, drama, music, writing, or other creative activities.	All	24%	26%	28%	23%
	Females	33% ^m	31%	36%	31%
	Males	15%	15%	17%	16%
Using computers, electronics, or other types of technology.	All	15%	17%	18%	13%
	Females	10%	18% ^w	6%	6%
	Males	22% ^f	14%	30%	20%

In all tables in this report, superscript letters indicate significant differences in mean average scores. Percentage differences sometimes might appear to be meaningfully different, but the difference in mean scores also had to be significant for a difference between percentages to be labeled as statistically significant. Reading by rows, an h means this group (white or Black) has a significantly greater percentage naming the spark than do Hispanics. Reading by columns, an f means males name this spark more than females, etc. Percentages that appear to be quite different from each other may not be labeled as statistically significant differences because they were based on relatively small numbers of youth in those cells.

DISPLAY 6 Why Sparks Matter

Positive Actions and Commitments	If a Teen Have Sparks	If a Teen Doesn't Have Sparks	Gap*
Teen reports . . .			
Volunteering at least one hour per week in a typical week.	54%	37%	17
Sees self as . . .			
Taking initiative to develop talents	80%	47%	33
Having had a sense of purpose for a long time	64%	35%	29
Asking adults for guidance to develop talents	63%	39%	24
Being adaptable and flexible	75%	55%	20
Giving up other things to focus on interests	44%	24%	20
Planning to do something that matters in other people's lives	77%	58%	19
Valuing improving academic skills	81%	67%	14
Places high value on . . .			
Finding purpose and meaning in my life	87%	67%	20
Contributing to society	64%	45%	19
Helping people who are poor	58%	42%	16
Being a leader in my community	44%	28%	16
Serving my country	39%	25%	14
Improving race relations	49%	35%	14
Working to correct social inequalities	47%	35%	12
Having strong friendships	90%	79%	11
Having lots of money	58%	58%	0

* This gap is the point difference between those with and without sparks.

DISPLAY 7 The More Talents and Interests, the Better

	Identifies No Talents/Interests	Identifies One Talent/Interest	Identifies Two or More Talents/Interests
Is adaptable and flexible.	45%	60%	72%
Wants to master new skills.	24%	44%	63%
Takes advantage of opportunities to nurture strengths and interests.	39%	59%	73%
Values improving academic skills.	46%	69%	79%
Wants to contribute to society.	32%	47%	62%

3 TVI: FINDING THEIR OWN VOICES

Teens want their voices to be heard. They want to make a difference in addressing the big issues they care about. But their interests and concerns start close to home. In order to unleash their passions and commitments to make a difference in the world, it is important to start with what's important to them.

With this study, Search Institute introduces a new Teen Voice Index (TVI) to give the nation a snapshot of teen engagement in social issues and civic life. And, as we'll show, those young people who find their voice both contribute in powerful ways and also set themselves on a positive path for their own future.

What matters to teens?

We start by asking what's most important to teens. It's no surprise that most often their top priority is having strong friendships, with 86% saying this is quite or extremely important (Display 8). However, the next-highest priority is striking: finding purpose and meaning in life. Consistent with the discussion of the importance of sparks, four out of five 15-year-olds say this is quite or extremely important.

"I want to be successful in life . . . I want to be able to make something out of myself and contribute to society in some shape or form . . . At my school, I see a bunch of kids who choose to slack off and mess around in school because they believe that their parents would be able to bail them out of every situation. I want to grow up to rely solely on myself." —GIRL, CALIFORNIA

Less important, on average, are levels of selected social issues, including addressing poverty and improving race relations. And though most teens place a priority on contributing to society, they are less likely to see it as important to be a leader or to serve their country.

One reason young people may not place a high priority on some of these social issues is that many do not believe they have the power to make much difference. Overall, 38% indicate they can make a great deal or some difference, 30% indicate they can make a little difference and one-fourth (26%) believe they can make almost no or no difference. (These levels vary little by gender or across racial/ethnic groups.)

Part of the challenge is helping teens see that their views and actions matter; they need to feel that their energy is a resource *right now*, not just for the future. Sparks and teen voice are connected: Youth with sparks are more likely to be confident about their

"I would love everyone to listen to me. I don't want to be the center of attention, but it is nice to be heard when I have something to say." —GIRL, ILLINOIS

community impact (45% think they can make some or a great deal of difference, versus 16% among those without sparks). But still, when more than half of those purpose-filled youth doubt their ability to make a difference, we must face serious questions about how society is marginalizing teens—and the strengths and energy we all lose as a result.

Not all groups of teens see these issues the same way, with the most common differences being evident in the responses by gender and by race/ethnicity. Females are more likely to emphasize friendships, meaning and purpose, and social justice issues than males. Males are more likely to emphasize having lots of money and serving their country.

Priorities differ among the racial/ethnic groups studied. For example, African American and Hispanic teens are more likely than white teens to value:

- Addressing the multiple social justice and leadership issues;
- Finding meaning and purpose; and
- Having lots of money.⁴

Teens' priorities and sense that they can make a difference may well change during high school. In the meantime, we have opportunities to tap 15-year-olds' priorities, helping them discover concrete ways to put their ideals into action, then giving them the opportunities and skills to make a real difference.

For example, most teens say their parents help them to develop their interests, regardless of whether they have sparks or positive feelings about making a difference. But *youth who can name their sparks and have confidence to make a difference get more help from other adults outside their families and from their friends*. They get more financial help, more encouragement and support, and more help with transportation than do youth without sparks or who feel they can't make a difference. Grandparents, friends, teachers, coaches, religious leaders, and neighbors are all more likely to support them. Thus, there are everyday opportunities for many more people to help teens both develop their sparks and believe in themselves as community resources. Young people are ready now.

A New Benchmark: The Teen Voice Index (TVI)

All teens have the potential to find and follow meaningful pursuits. But some are much more engaged and involved than others. They believe they can make things happen and solve problems. They are leaders, and they plan to stay engaged in their community and nation. They want to make their voices heard. These are the young people who score highest on the TVI, which is introduced with this study. (See Display 9, which describes the index and how it is scored.)

Overall, only about one in five youth (18%) scored high on the TVI (Display 10). Females are somewhat more likely than males to score high. Differences by race/ethnicity are minimal. The greatest difference is evident with parents' education level, which is a commonly used substitute measure for family income.⁵ The higher the parents' education,

the more likely teens are to score high on the TVI. This pattern reveals the barriers teens face in fulfilling their potential.

Why the Teen Voice Index matters

Having a voice and a sense that they can make a difference is important for young people’s development. Fifteen-year-olds with high TVI scores are at least three times as likely as those with low scores to see civic engagement as important, hold prosocial values, and have a sense of hopeful purpose for the future (Display 11). They are twice as likely as teens with low TVI scores to be actively engaged in school and to have goals to master what they are studying. And on every outcome, those with medium or “okay” TVI scores do better than those with low scores, but the high TVI scorers fare far better still than even those with “okay” scores.

Giving teens a voice and a sense of their power to make a difference can be a key to unlocking their potential. Empowered teens are most likely to do well in school, expect a lot of themselves, and show other signs of positive development. The key to unleashing this potential lies in the *relationships and opportunities* teens have in their families, schools, and communities. The next section focuses on the important roles adults play in transforming these experiences.

DISPLAY 8 What’s Most Important to Teens?

	GENDER			RACE/ETHNICITY*		
	All	Female	Male	Black/African American	European American	Hispanic/Latino
Having strong friendships	86%	89%	81%	84%	87%	88%
Finding purpose and meaning in my life	80%	85%	76%	89% ^a	78% ^b	84% ^a
Having lots of money	58%	54%	62%	66% ^a	55% ^b	53% ^b
Making a contribution to society	56%	61%	54%	66% ^a	52% ^b	62% ^a
Helping people who are poor	53%	59%	46%	66% ^a	45% ^b	60% ^a
Improving race relations	44%	47%	41%	66% ^a	32% ^b	55% ^a
Working to correct social and economic inequalities	43%	48%	39%	55% ^a	36% ^b	50% ^a
Being a leader in my community	38%	40%	37%	55% ^a	30% ^b	47% ^a
Serving my country	35%	32%	37%	36%	33%	37%

(Boldface percentages represent areas where there are statistically significant differences between the groups of teens being compared (e.g., between females and males). Superscript letters (a, b, c) are also used to note where racial/ethnic differences are statistically significant among the three groups shown. If groups have the same letter as others in their row, the differences are not statistically significant)

* Sample sizes for other racial/ethnic groups are too small to include in these comparisons.

DISPLAY 9 The Teen Voice Index (TVI)

The TVI was created by determining if 15-year-olds experience these five features in their lives:

- A sense of personal power to make things happen;
- A belief that they can help solve community problems;
- Planning for future civic engagement (such as contributing to or working on political campaigns or for a cause);
- Being a leader in a group or organization in the past year; and
- Identifying through an open-ended survey question three things they most wanted the next U.S. president to deal with. (The poll was held shortly before the November 2008 presidential election.)

Young people received one point for each feature they experienced. Low scorers had 1 or fewer points, Medium had 2 or 3, and High had 4 or 5. For more information on the psychometric properties of the index, see the Technical Information section at www.search-institute.org/at15research.

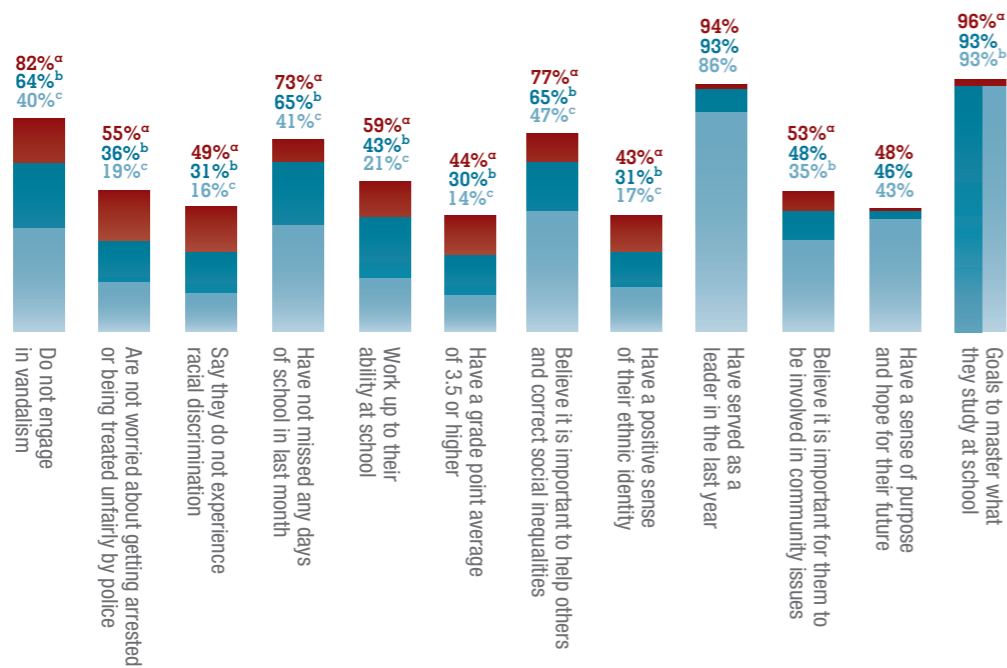
“I want to talk about helping people who need it, especially the children and racism and sexism in the world . . . I want to be heard by everyone.” —BOY, SOUTH DAKOTA

DISPLAY 10 Teens Whose Voice Is Heard

Percentages of 15-year-olds who score high (4 or 5 on a 5-point index) on the TVI, by demographics.

Total Sample	18%	
Gender	Female	20%
	Male	16%
Race/ethnicity	African American	19%
	White	17%
	Hispanic	20%
Highest Parent Education	High school or less	14%
	Some college	18%
	College graduate or more	25%

DISPLAY 11 Positive Outcomes Related to the Teen Voice Index (TVI)



NOTE: This is a five-point index. Low TVI = 0-1; Medium TVI = 2-3; High TVI = 4-5. See Display 9.

a, b, c: Cells with different superscripts are significantly different from each other (within the row). Differences in percentages without superscript numbers were not statistically significant from other percentages in that row.

4 ROI: PEOPLE AND PLACES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Fifteen-year-olds don't develop their spark or voice by accident or by themselves. These characteristics flourish with the help of relationships and opportunities that recognize, encourage, and guide teens. Who do young people turn to for help? What opportunities do they access to find their voice and nurture their spark?

The Relationships and Opportunities Index (ROI)

This study introduces the Relationships and Opportunities Index, or ROI (Display 12), which identifies the kinds of people and places that are vital to teens growing up successfully. It is fitting that this index has the same initials as the financial concept, "return on investment," as it speaks to the important ways that caring adults and society invest in young people. This index captures three interlocking resources in teens' lives:

- Being valued and treated fairly by people in their family and community.
- Having access to and being involved in high-quality community opportunities.
- Having others who help them nurture their sparks.

Only about one in eight 15-year-olds (12%) scored high on the ROI (Display 13). This percentage is consistent between females and males as well as across racial/ethnic groups. However, teens whose parents have more education (a proxy for family income) are more likely to have high ROI scores, suggesting, in part, that family financial resources give teens access to more opportunities, regardless of gender and race/ethnicity. Parental education appears to be particularly associated with GPA, leadership, civic engagement, level of worries, and racial respect, but the positive relationship between ROI and outcomes remains even after controlling for parental education. Thus, though education and income matter, many other dynamics also play roles.⁶

The importance of relationships and opportunities

Increasing their experiences of relationships and opportunities could make a big difference in many teens' lives.⁷ Youth with high ROI scores are much more likely to report positive outcomes. For example, teens with high scores are at least three times as likely as those with low scores to have a sense of hopeful purpose, express caring values, be actively engaged in school, and take on leadership roles. And just as with the TVI, youth with mid-range ROI or "okay" scores do better than low scorers, but not nearly as well as those with high ROI scores.

Looking even more deeply at the educational outcomes that are the focus of so much public concern and policy these days, those with high scores on the Index are significantly more likely to have better school attendance, stronger goals to master their schoolwork, more engagement and effort, and, not surprisingly given their higher attendance, desire for mastery, effort, and higher grades. Like other studies in a growing body of research, the *Teen Voice 2009* study underscores the difference positive opportunities and relationships can make in young people's lives.⁸

What relationships matter to teens?

The Relationships and Opportunities Index highlights the value of caring, supportive relationships in all areas of teens' lives. These start at home. Across the board, teens tend to see their parents as supporting them in life. So it's not surprising that 15-year-olds who know their sparks see parents as their primary supports (Display 14).

That said, twice as many teens (43%) name mothers as name fathers (19%). This finding is consistent with many other studies that show young people tend to talk more with and feel closer to their mothers, regardless of their family situation (though the challenge is even more difficult for those with divorced dads who do not have custody). Fathers in all kinds of families need to make extra efforts to know their children's sparks, help them identify those sparks, and be more involved in nurturing their teens' passionate interests.

Friends are also a big part of life for 15-year-olds. Almost all of them (93%) say their friends sometimes or often help them develop their talents or interests. Two-thirds (65%) indicate that they choose friends who support their talents or interests. Yet only 10% of those with sparks say their friends are the primary people who help them grow that passionate interest or talent. On average, parents still trump peers in this area.

Other adults are less likely to be seen as resources than parents and peers, but many youth rely on a wide range of adults to support and encourage them (Display 15). Overall, providing this encouragement and support is the most common way people nurture teens' sparks, with 93% of teens saying people do this for them. In addition, two-thirds of youth say people help them by providing transportation, helping financially, and attending performances, games, or events (all 67%). Thus, 15-year-olds with sparks have significant people in their lives who help, in both general and specific ways, to focus on nurturing their passions and commitments.

Where teens go for support and encouragement

In addition to having people who support them and nurture their spark, young people need access to places that give them opportunities to use their voice and nurture their sparks. These opportunities may include after-school programs (such as sports teams or lessons), libraries, religious organizations, parks, and other settings. As shown in Display 16, most teens report that these resources are available in their communities or neighborhoods. At least half say they have taken advantage of several of these opportunities in the past three months. However, even though about two-thirds (68%) of teens say they participated in the past year, 32% didn't.

At least two realities are reflected in these findings. First, between 20 and 50 percent of teens (depending on the resource in question) say these resources are *not* available or are not "easy to get to" in their communities (effectively making them unavailable). These

resources may not be present, or teens may not know about them. But the effect is the same: A large proportion of 15 year olds don't have access to these opportunities. Thus, part of the challenge in responding to these results is *making programs more available to young people*.

In addition, a second group of teens can identify programs, libraries, teams, and lessons that are available. But they don't use them. Nearly nine in 10 say parks are available, for example, but only 65 percent have used the parks in the past three months. And 66 percent say youth organizations such as YMCAs and Boys and Girls Clubs are available, but just 23 percent have used those in the past few months.

“I am very confident that my hopes and dreams will come true, because I have a very strong support system and parents who are encouraging me to be successful.” — GIRL, MARYLAND

The gap in high-quality opportunities

A critical issue in this gap between high and low scorers on the ROI is quality. It's not enough for the opportunities and resources to be available, or even for teens to use those resources; they also need to be of high quality in order to be truly effective in promoting positive youth development. In this study, participation in a high-quality program means that teens report that they . . .

- Feel safe in the program or setting.
- Often learn skills such as teamwork or peaceful conflict resolution.
- Often develop warm and trusting relationships with peers and adults.
- Are often allowed to help make decisions.
- Often do something about which they are passionate.

Among the 68% of teens who say they took advantage of one or more of these community opportunities in the past year, just 35% said they participated in *high-quality* programs. Counting all teens—including those who didn't participate at all—we estimate that *only about 23% of America's 15-year-olds participate in a high-quality programs and activities in their communities*. Our teens need—and deserve—better.

Connecting opportunities with teens' passionate interests

Why don't teens access community resources, even when they know about them? Many factors are at work. But a major reason may be that many teens don't see how these resources connect with their passionate interests. For example, 15-year-olds with sparks are more likely to report using *all* of these community resources than youth without sparks.

In addition, teens who know their sparks are twice as likely as other teens to participate in high-quality activities. It's hard to know whether young people with sparks seek out opportunities and relationships that help their sparks grow, or if young people are already connected to these opportunities and relationships, which in turn help teens nurture their sparks. It probably goes both ways. The challenge is to connect teens who don't know or recognize their own sparks with the quality relationships and opportunities that will enrich their lives. Discovering ways to do that will increase the ROI—both in terms of the relationships and opportunities they need, and the long-term return on investment for society.

DISPLAY 12 The Relationships and Opportunities Index (ROI)

The Relationships and Opportunities Index was created by determining whether young people experience these 12 features in their lives:

Supportive Relationships and Community

1. Feeling treated as resources by adults in their community.
2. Feeling valued by adults in their community.
3. Perceiving that their racial group is treated fairly and that they are personally not discriminated against because of their race or ethnicity.

Opportunities for Involvement

4. Spending time volunteering.
5. Participating in high-quality after-school programs.
6. Spending at least 2-5 hours a week in these after-school activities.
7. Having access to resources in their communities, such as parks, libraries, religious organizations, and youth organizations.
8. Using those resources.

Nurturing Sparks

9. Identifying a talent or interest they care passionately about and that gives them a sense of focus ("spark").
10. Taking actions to pursue and develop their sparks.
11. Believing that pursuing their sparks helps them develop useful skills and learn how to get along better with others.
12. Having people in their lives who help them nurture their spark.

Teens received one point for each feature they experienced. Low scorers had three or fewer points; medium had four to eight; and high had nine to twelve. In addition, one point was subtracted from the total score if teens said their family, friends, or other adults had actively discouraged them from pursuing their sparks.

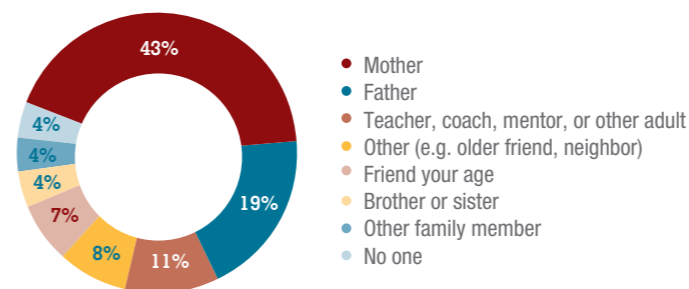
DISPLAY 13 How Many Teens Have the Relationships and Opportunities They Need?

Percentages of 15-year-olds who score high on the Relationships and Opportunities Index.

Total Sample		12%
Gender	Female	13%
	Male	11%
Race/Ethnicity	African American	16%
	White	12%
	Hispanic	10%
Highest Parent Education	High school or less	9%
	Some college	12%
	College graduate or more	17%

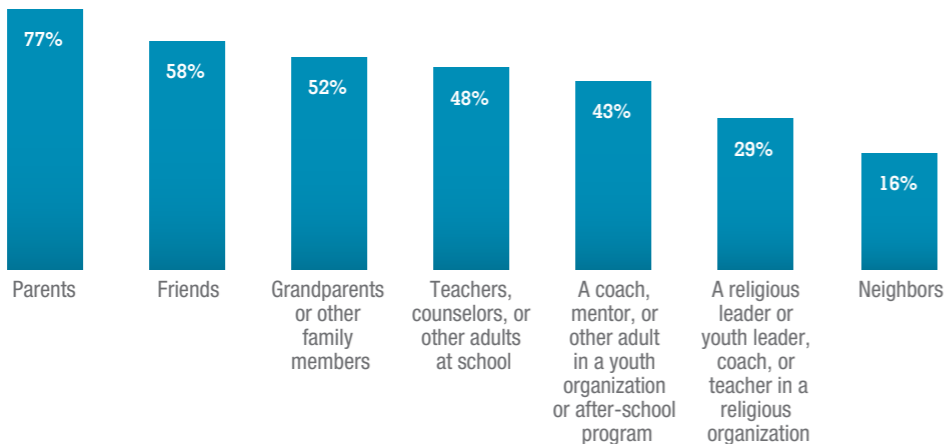
"I know my family wants me to get somewhere in life, and I want them to be proud of me. But most importantly, I want to know myself that I can do it without backing down or failing. I want to be proud of myself." —GIRL, OHIO

DISPLAY 14 Who MOST Nurtures the Spark?



DISPLAY 15 Relationships That Encourage Sparks

Among 15-year-olds who know their own spark, here are percentages who say these people often “help you develop your talents, interests, or hobbies by giving you encouragement or support, or by pushing you to get better at those talents, interests, or hobbies.”



DISPLAY 16 Opportunities that Nurture Sparks

This table shows the percentages of 15-year-olds who say each resource is available in their neighborhood/community “for pursuing your talents, interests, or hobbies,” then whether they use these resources (at least once in past three months), depending on whether they know their own “sparks.”

	Available in Neighborhood or Community	Used at Least Once in Past 3 Months		
		Total	If Know Sparks	If Don't Know Sparks
Parks	87%	65%	68%	64%
Libraries	88%	62%	65%	52%
Religious organizations	75%	51%	56%	36%
Sports teams or lessons	79%	50%	56%	32%
Opportunities to learn school subjects outside of school	59%	45%	50%	37%
Music, art, writing, or dance lessons or groups	64%	42%	48%	29%
Places to volunteer, serve others, or get involved in political issues	60%	36%	39%	32%
Museums	46%	24%	27%	17%
Youth programs, such as YMCAs, Boys & Girls Clubs, or Scouts	66%	23%	27%	13%

5 SPARKS + TVI + ROI = STRENGTH @ 15

Throughout this report, we’ve seen that teens with sparks do better on many outcomes. Teens also fare better when they experience teen voice and positive relationships and opportunities.

But what happens when young people have *all* of these strengths in their lives? Not surprisingly, Display 17 shows that teens who experience all three of these strengths do significantly better on almost all of the outcomes we studied.⁹ For example, only 16% of young people with low scores on sparks, the Teen Voice Index (TVI), and the Relationships and Opportunities Index (ROI)¹⁰ have a sense of purpose and hope for the future. However, most teens (68%) have a sense of purpose and hope if they score high in all three strengths areas: Sparks, TVI, and ROI.

As important as having sparks is, it is even more important on most outcomes for teens to experience the strengths captured in the TVI and ROI. A spark, by itself, can be a passionate interest, but may remain largely private or personal. In these cases, sparks have less impact on teens’ daily lives, particularly when compared to what happens when people and places know about and nurture that spark, embrace teens, and help them give back to the community.

Like other research on youth development, this study confirms that having even some of these positive resources is good for teens. But having more is better. And having all three is by far the best for success @ 15.

“I pick up my guitar every chance I get. It’s like part of me. And if I’m not playing the guitar, I’m practicing Japanese.” — BOY, OKLAHOMA

The 93% challenge

The national challenge is clear when we put the pieces together. Only 7% of America’s 15 year olds experience high levels of all three of these critical strengths (Display 18). Furthermore, more than three in 10 teens don’t experience high levels of any of these strengths that are so critical for their development and society’s well-being.¹¹

Unlike the headlines we generally see about teens’ problems, this challenge isn’t about the mistakes that our kids make. This challenge—getting the other 93% of teens to experience these resources more fully—focuses on the ways we as a society fail to provide for young people the sparks, voice, opportunities, and relationships they need to thrive. So what is getting in the way? That is the focus of the next section.

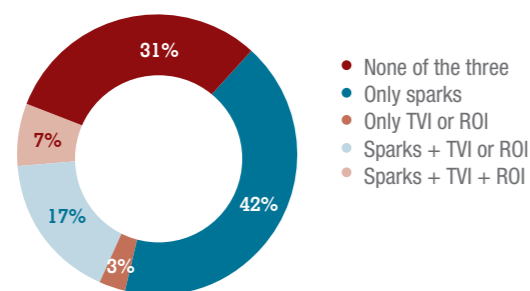
DISPLAY 17 The More, the Better: Sparks + TVI + ROI

Percentages of teens who report each outcome based on their experiences of three strengths: sparks, voice (TVI), and relationships and opportunities (ROI). The outcomes are organized from those with the greatest to least difference between those teens with none of the three and all of the three.

	None of the Three	Only Sparks	Only TVI or ROI	Sparks + TVI or ROI	Sparks + TVI + ROI
Have served as leader in the past year.	34 ^d	47 ^{c,d}	71 ^c	83 ^b	98 ^a
Have goals to master what they study at school.	37 ^d	59 ^c	76 ^b	79 ^b	87 ^a
Have a sense of purpose and hope for the future.	16 ^d	30 ^c	38 ^c	57 ^b	68 ^a
Believe it is important to be involved in community issues.	18 ^c	26 ^c	27 ^b	43 ^b	65 ^a
Have a positive sense of their ethnic identity.	19 ^d	36 ^c	37 ^c	62 ^b	75 ^a
Believe it is important to help others and correct social inequalities.	17 ^d	25 ^c	33 ^b	35 ^b	58 ^a
Work up to their ability at school.	18 ^d	24 ^c	20 ^c	45 ^b	54 ^a
Have a grade point average of 3.5 or higher.	53 ^d	56 ^{c,d}	70 ^{b,c}	77 ^{a,b}	82 ^a
Say they do not experience racial discrimination.	38 ^b	41 ^{a,b}	47 ^{a,b}	53 ^a	72 ^a
Are not worried about getting arrested or being treated unfairly by police.	40 ^{a,b}	44 ^{a,b}	36 ^b	55 ^a	54 ^a
Have not missed any days of school in the past month.	87	91	86	94	97
Do not engage in vandalism.	91	95	94	95	98

a,b,c: Cells with different superscripts are significantly different from each other (within the row). Differences in percentages without superscript numbers were not statistically significant from other percentages in that row.

DISPLAY 18 Youth Who Experience Multiple Strengths



6 WHAT GETS IN THE WAY?

Teen Voice 2009: The Untapped Strengths of Today's 15-Year-Olds offers a different view of teens, suggesting that most 15-year-olds have sparks, and that they are eager to find their own voice so that they are valued and recognized by the broader community. Many are connected with people and places that are committed to nurturing their development.

At the same time, very few young people experience these interlocking strengths in combination. Though two-thirds can identify their sparks, fewer than one in five 15-year-olds scores high on the Teen Voice Index, and less than one in eight scores high on the Relationships and Opportunities Index. What's getting in the way? This study points to some challenges.

"I tell my family about my dreams and they support me and believe I can do it. I don't tell my friends or teachers because the topic hasn't come up." — BOY, ILLINOIS

Trouble finding—and acting on—voice and sparks

About three in 10 15-year-olds can name their interests and talents, but these aren't things they're passionate about, so they don't rise to the level of being sparks. Some teens possess these passions but lack the safe, nurturing opportunities to reflect on their interests, share their hopes and dreams, and clarify what makes them feel the happiest, most engaged, and most productive.

Once teens identify their sense of purpose and passions, many don't know how to develop them. In fact, one-third of 15-year-olds do not take the initiative to really develop their talents and interests. Connecting them with adults and peers who share their interests and helping them think through what they can do to keep growing can help them develop their passion and expertise.

The same may be true for finding their voice in community life. Most 15-year-olds feel confident to deal with life's *personal* challenges. But only 40% feel they can make some or a great deal of difference in solving *community* problems. They appear not to have specific skills, opportunities, or motivations to get involved in practical ways. Perhaps helping them see how their unique strengths can help with the issues they care about will increase their motivation. For example, a teen whose spark is drawing can help create graphically compelling posters to promote a community clean-up project. Or a 15-year-old with a passion for writing can help other teens communicate to public officials about the need to upgrade the local youth center. The possibilities for connecting 15-year-olds' passions with bettering their schools and communities are as endless as young people's

imaginations. Adults can help them make these connections, and then point them toward concrete steps to make real contributions.

One set of underutilized resources are the parks, libraries, museums, faith communities, and other resources that many youth know are nearby, but don't access. Though quality and interesting opportunities may also be an issue (and another challenge to address), helping young people find, connect with, and utilize these resources may help open up new opportunities for them to find their voice and nurture their sparks.

“My long-term goal I had when I was younger was to graduate middle school and then high school. I have already passed the first part and am halfway through the second part. So I am sure I will finish that goal. I am still focused on graduating high school.” —BOY, KENTUCKY

Negative attitudes that discourage teens

About one in five teens indicate that someone has actively discouraged them from pursuing their passion or interest. The people who these teens say most often discourage them from pursuing their sparks tend to be friends (10%), parents (9%), grandparents or other family members (9%), and teachers or other people at school (7%). Most often, teens said these people simply “didn't encourage or support me” (56%). But they also said these teens should focus energy elsewhere (55%), said it was a waste of time (53%), and said they were not good enough (34%).

The message about not being good enough deserves a special comment. This study asked about talents *and* interests, because sometimes teens are good at something (a talent) but not particularly interested in it. Or they can be interested in something that they are not especially adept at. If the goal is holistic, balanced development, young people need to be encouraged to explore many interests and options, particularly when they are internally or intrinsically motivated—whether or not they are particularly good at those things. In other words, identifying talents, interests, and sparks is not necessarily about specializing in something that could have career implications (though that is relevant and important for many youth). Rather, this process is more about exploring, sampling, and exposing oneself to numerous activities and commitments as part of shaping a personal and social identity. If talents, interests, and sparks happen also to help clarify a career path, so much the better. But that is not the primary reason for helping teens nurture those passions.

Messages of discouragement such as not being “good enough” squelch teens' enthusiasm for and focus on their passions and interests, much as asking a young child to explain her uniquely abstract drawing can stifle an early creative impulse. Yes, there is a time for reality checks and guidance. (For example, 99.97% of high school basketball players will never play professional basketball, according to the NCAA.) But teens also need adults to come alongside them, guiding them as they find their own voice and cultivate their sparks. By working with them instead of dismissing their passions and interests, adults can help teens grow and develop.

Systemic challenges and gaps

A number of systemic community challenges get in the way of young people finding their spark and voice, partly by reducing the number or quality of relationships and opportunities in young people's lives.

One of the underlying issues involves economic disparities. Young people from families with lower incomes face additional challenges in finding their voice, tapping relationships and opportunities, and developing their sparks. Teens whose parents have no more than a high school education are less likely to experience the three key strengths in this study: Teen voice; relationships and opportunities; and sparks. This gap leaves out too many teens. These youth haven't had the opportunities and supports to help them find their own voice and explore their sparks. In addition to the quality issues addressed earlier, transportation and cost issues must be addressed so all teens can more readily access available opportunities.

Another systemic issue is racial discrimination. The good news is that disparities among racial/ethnic groups in sparks, voice, and relationships and opportunities appear much less significant than gaps based on economic differences. That finding may reflect a study sample that is somewhat skewed toward more affluent teens, but it may also reflect real social progress.

Nevertheless, even among these relatively advantaged teens, both Hispanic (59%) and especially African American youth (47%) are far less likely than white youth (81%) to say they experience racial fairness and an absence of discrimination in their lives. African American youth were especially likely to have been discouraged from pursuing their sparks. In addition, African American (66%) and Hispanic youth (63%) were much more likely than white youth (48%) to say they are worried about things such as being treated unfairly by police, being arrested, or being a victim of crime.¹²

How do the three strengths that are the focus of this study relate to these issues? Whether teens are worried about these things happening to them doesn't change much on the basis of their TVI scores. However, the level of relationships and opportunities (which includes sparks) does matter: 58% of teens who score low on the ROI are worried about discrimination or trouble with the law. That compares to 55% of those with medium scores on the ROI, and 43% of those with high scores. Young people who can identify their sparks, who have support to develop them, and have opportunities to pursue those passionate interests in high-quality settings are not without worries, but they report far fewer of them.

A third systemic issue is the quality of community programs and activities. Most 15-year-olds spend time in some kind of organized activities, including after-school programs and other community resources such as parks, libraries, and religious organizations. But only about one-third of those who participate (translating to only 23% of all 15-year-olds)—are in *high-quality* programs that really develop their sparks, promote caring relationships, teach skills like teamwork, leadership, and peaceful conflict resolution, and let them make decisions. Bolstering the quality of community out-of-school-time activities to give young people voice and nurture their sparks offers a significant opportunity for addressing the challenges they face.

7 FIFTEEN ACTIONS TO SUPPORT 15-YEAR-OLDS

Teen Voice 2009: The Untapped Strengths of 15-Year-Olds reminds us that the lives of today's teens are often quite different from what conventional wisdom tells us. Most 15-year-olds—both females and males and across racial/ethnic groups—want to make the best of their own lives. Most have deep passions, interests, and gifts to share, and issues they want to address. When encouraged and guided with appropriate relationships and supports, they make smart choices.

Yet too many of them don't have those opportunities in their lives. They don't really know where to start, and they don't always have people in their lives to help them figure it out. And though there are deep and systemic issues that need to be addressed, much of what is needed to help more teens find their voice and their spark are things that caring adults—parents, grandparents, other family members, teachers, youth workers, mentors, neighbors, and others—can start doing today.

Over the past 20 years, Search Institute and other leaders have learned a lot about what kids need to succeed. Through surveys with more than three million teenagers (grades 6 to 12), reviews of existing research, and practical work strengthening programs, policies, and informal individual actions in hundreds of communities, we have identified practical steps that caring adults, neighbors, parents, teachers, and others can take to make a difference by building young people's developmental assets.¹³ Like sparks, teen voice, and relationships and opportunities, this asset-building approach focuses on cultivating strengths, and recognizing that stronger kids and communities are more likely to thrive, avoid high-risk behaviors, and overcome challenges.

Based on this research and practical experience, here are 15 actions adults can take to support 15-year-olds in making the most of their talents, interests, and sparks, and to get everyone involved in helping them, for the ultimate betterment of us all.

- 1) **Ask teens about things that matter to them.** Ask them about their spark and why it energizes them. Ask them for their perspectives on issues in your community, the nation, and the world. Listen to their thoughts before offering your perspective.
- 2) **Give them time, if they haven't yet identified their sparks or issues they care deeply about.** It may be okay that they are still exploring many options and interests. Be patient, while also helping them be intentional and reflective about who they are.
- 3) **Introduce them to others who share their spark or commitments.** If they are deeply concerned about the water quality in the local river, introduce them to someone you know with influence or expertise. If they love to play the saxophone, introduce them to a friend in a jazz band.
- 4) **Believe in them, even when they may not believe in themselves.** Expect a lot of them, knowing that they will usually rise to the occasion—particularly with the right support and encouragement.
- 5) **Help them figure out the next little step for moving forward.** They may not know what to do next to voice their concerns, nurture their spark, or find an after-school opportunity that they would really enjoy. Help them think through the options and figure out what their next step can be.
- 6) **Challenge negative perceptions when you hear them.** Adults (and other teens) may belittle a young person's interests or concerns as impractical or trivial. Teens need allies to stand up for them.
- 7) **Link them with people of multiple generations.** Teens may seem to only want to be with friends their own age (and sometimes they do). But they also can appreciate a broader web of relationships, both with younger children (sharing their spark with the little ones) as well as with older adults (who may have lots of experience in their area of spark).
- 8) **Focus on sparks and youth voice in youth programs.** Encourage participating youth to share their gifts, talents, passions, and interests, then decide together how these can be integrated into programming. Equip adult leaders and volunteers to focus on building relationships with all of the youth who participate.
- 9) **Address sparks and give teens a voice in schools.** Encourage young people to do projects related to their sparks and interests. Tap their creativity, gifts, leadership, and commitments to strengthen the school and enrich its climate, knowing that young people who are actively pursuing their sparks and who feel they have a voice in their school are more likely to be engaged and do well academically.
- 10) **Find out what gets in their way when they're stuck.** Listen and help them figure out ways around the problem. If needed, connect them with other people who may also be able to help them move forward.

- 11) **Don't impose your ideas on them.** They may be on a different path than you might have expected—or hoped for. Listen to them and ask them questions. And avoid speaking in critical or unsupportive ways that discourage them from pursuing legitimate interests or concerns.
- 12) **Tap them as volunteers and leaders in the community.** Recognize the ways they can contribute now. Particularly try to find opportunities to engage them as leaders and contributors that tap their interests, concerns, and skills. They'll do a better job, be more invested, and grow more in the process.
- 13) **Introduce them to new interests and issues.** Expanding their horizons is an important part of helping them be well-rounded. And having *multiple* talents and interests is better than having one.
- 14) **At the same time, help them prioritize and focus.** Sometimes they can get caught up in trying so many things or tackling so many issues that they get overwhelmed or discouraged. Learning to make choices and focus is an important life skill.
- 15) **Support them every step of the way.** Cultivating sparks and finding one's voice can lead in unexpected directions. As you build your relationship with teens, encourage them as they grow and develop, celebrating the successes and fulfillment that come as they find their own voice and passions on their journey into adulthood.

8 WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

Most 15-year-olds—two-thirds—can identify sparks they are passionate about pursuing. Almost everyone can identify at least a couple of people who help them pursue those interests. Yet only a little more than half of teens—53%—feel that pursuing their interests helps them do better in school, promotes good relationships with others, or gives them skills they can use in future jobs or careers. In other words, they don't think the things that are important to them will help them in the "real world."

Our challenge, then, is to *help young people use their current interests, talents, and passions—their sparks—to grow networks of support and understand how they can ignite those sparks in the ways they live, lead, learn, and love in the world.*

In reality, about one-third of 15-year-olds do not take the initiative themselves to really develop their talents and interests. Even among those with passionate interests, many don't know what to do to nurture and grow their interests. We need to show them how. This may involve . . .

- Connecting them much more with adults who are working in those areas of interest.
- Mentoring them about how to study and how to practice their passionate interests.
- Giving them opportunities to get more experience doing what they love to do.

Then there are those teens—one-third in all—who have interests that haven't become sparks for them. They aren't passionate about them, and these interests don't make them focus and find joy and purpose. These teens need help with . . .

- Cataloging their interests.
- Naming and describing their hopes and dreams.
- Clarifying what they are doing when they feel the happiest, most engaged, and most productive.

And, above all, they need more safe chances to explore the things that might capture their engaged attention and enrich their lives.

If we want to help teens pursue their talents, commit to socially worthy values, and get involved in their communities now and in the future, the agenda seems clear:

- Help them identify their talents and interests.
- Help them identify the things they are interested in that they also are passionate about; passionate interests that would give purpose, direction and joy to their life.
- Encourage them, provide transportation for them, and help them financially to pursue those passions.
- Help them and their families connect with community resources—from parks and libraries to music and art lessons, sports opportunities, and volunteering.
- Build in more opportunities in schools and after-school programs to allow youth to help make decisions about what goes on there.
- Make sure those settings are safe places, dedicated to promoting warm and trusting relationships and teaching skills like teamwork and peaceful conflict resolution.
- Listen to what youth say.
- Encourage teens to develop and pursue multiple interests that are exciting to them, not just one.

It should not be surprising that this study shows that the youth who have these relationship and structural opportunities also are doing better:

- They get more As on their report cards.
- They skip school less.
- They assume more leadership roles in organizations and clubs.
- They engage less in vandalism or other anti-social behavior.
- They volunteer more in an average week.
- They are more likely to plan on being civically active by writing to public officials, giving money to causes, or working in political campaigns.

The nation's 15-year-olds have told us what they need. They are a rich resource, ready to be tapped. It's up to adults to work alongside young people to see that they find and follow their passions, enriching themselves, their families, and their communities as a result.

TECHNICAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE STUDY

Instrument Development

Survey and bulletin board discussion items were taken or modified from numerous existing surveys, and some were created for this study. Items came from instruments that included: Search Institute's *Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors* survey; Search Institute's *Thriving Orientation Survey*; Flanagan's measure of Adolescent Civic Commitments, the African-American Men study (conducted by Kaiser Permanente, the *Washington Post*, and Harvard University); the University of Michigan's *Monitoring the Future* study; the Boston Youth Survey; Phinney's Multi-Group Ethnic Identity measure; Anderman, Urdan, and Roeser's measure of Personal Mastery Goal Orientation; the National Promises Study of the America's Promise Alliance; and questions from William Damon's book *The Path to Purpose*, and Peter Benson's book, *Sparks*.

A number of new questions were generated through discussions among the Search Institute research team, the research advisors from the University of Michigan, the University of Minnesota, Morehouse College, and Best Buy staff members. Search Institute created the survey, and worked with Harris Interactive research staff to refine and pretest the items and interview flow to achieve maximum reliability, validity, and efficiency of administration.

Quantitative Survey Sample

The quantitative survey questionnaire was self-administered online via the Internet, averaging about 23 minutes per respondent. Respondents for this survey were selected from among the Harris Poll Online (HPOL) database, which includes several million people who have agreed to participate in Harris Interactive surveys and from a trusted partner. Because the sample is based on those who agreed to be invited to participate in an online research panel, no estimates of theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

Password protected e-mail invitations asked respondents to participate in a survey about current events. Qualified respondents were U.S. residents who were 15 years old. A representative sample of 1,817 U.S. residents age 15 was surveyed online, including 1,023 white respondents, 301 Black/African American respondents, 302 Hispanic respondents, and 90 Asian/Pacific Islander respondents.

Data were weighted to reflect the population of 15-year-olds in the U.S. according to three race/ethnicity groups: Hispanic, Black/African American, White/Other (including Asian/Pacific Islander). Each group was weighted according to key demographic variables (gender, race/ethnicity, region, and parents' highest education [a proxy for household income]). These variables were weighted to known parameters in the United States. A post-weight was applied to bring the data from all three groups in line with their proportion in the total population of 15-year-olds in the U.S., based on race/ethnicity and gender.

Reliability of Survey Percentages

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including sampling error, coverage error, error associated with non-response, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments. The magnitude of the sampling variation is measurable and is affected both by the number of interviews involved and by the level of the percentages expressed in the results.

With pure probability samples, with 100 percent response rates, it is possible to calculate the probability that the sampling error (but not other sources of error) is not greater than some number. With a pure probability sample of 1,817, one could say with a 95% probability that the overall results have a sampling error of +/-3 percentage points. Sampling error for data based on sub-samples would be higher and would vary.

However, that does not take other sources of error into account. This online survey is not based on a probability sample and therefore no theoretical sampling error can be calculated. Harris Interactive avoids the words "margin of error," as they are misleading. All that can be calculated are different possible sampling errors with different probabilities for pure, unweighted, random samples with 100% response rates. These are only theoretical because no published polls come close to this ideal.

Qualitative Sample

Harris Interactive also conducted a series of online bulletin board focus groups among 15-year-olds recruited from the quantitative study. These respondents were among those who agreed to be re-contacted in the next two months. One group consisted of those respondents who said they had a "passionate interest" on which they spent at least two hours per week, while the other group consisted of those respondents who either did not have a passionate interest or were not sure if they had a passionate interest.

A total of 52 respondents participated in the bulletin board sessions (26 in each group). Forty-seven respondents completed all three sessions, while the remaining respondents completed at least the first session. All respondents were paid a \$60 incentive for participation.

In each board, respondents represented a mix of gender, income levels, ethnicities, and geographic spread across the country. Each board also included a subgroup of respondents who felt they could make only a little difference, almost no difference, or no difference at all in solving community problems, as well as a subgroup of respondents who reported having been actively discouraged from pursuing their talents, interests, or hobbies.

Data Analysis

Harris Interactive conducted initial descriptive analyses. Their complete report and topline findings are available for downloading at www.search-institute.org/at15research. Additional crosstabulation, analyses of variance, and regression analyses were conducted by Search Institute, including the construction of the two indexes that are introduced in this study. More details on the methodology are available from www.search-institute.org/at15research.

How Reasonable is the TVI and ROI Scoring?

Only a small minority of teens received high scores on the Teen Voice Index (TVI) and Relationships and Opportunities Index (ROI), and less than 10% had all three strengths of sparks, TVI, and ROI. Are the scoring guidelines for these measures unrealistically stringent? We think not. Here, for example, is how we would describe teens who score high on the TVI. They . . .

- agree or strongly agree that they have control over what happens in their life;
- believe that they can make some or a great deal of difference in helping to solve problems in their community;
- have already done or probably in the future will do things such as vote in elections, refuse to buy certain products, or give money to or work for a political campaign;
- have been a leader in a group or organization two or more times in the last year; and
- identified at least one issue for the President to address (i.e., did not leave this item blank).

These criteria describe young people who have confidence, who believe they are resources, who want to be involved as problem solvers and leaders, and who have at least a minimal knowledge of public affairs such that they could name just one issue, even in very general terms (e.g., "education," "healthcare") for a new president to tackle. These hardly seem to be overly ambitious hopes for our young people.

In the same way, here is how we would describe young people who score high on the ROI. They . . .

- have a spark in their lives;
- at least sometimes (or often) get support to develop their spark from any two of seven resources such as parents, other family, school, neighbors, friends, or other community resources;
- have not been actively discouraged from pursuing their sparks;
- get from pursuing their sparks a lot or a great deal of any two attributes such as being given skills, learning to get along with others, having chances to contribute, or being encouraged to learn new things outside school;
- agree or strongly agree that they do things such as take the initiative to develop their sparks, ask adults for guidance, and give up doing some other things in order to pursue their sparks;
- agree or strongly agree their racial group is treated fairly and they no more than once in a while experience things like getting less respect or people acting afraid of them because of their race or ethnicity;
- agree or strongly agree that they feel important and useful in their family, and are given chances to help make their school or community better;
- agree or strongly agree that adults in their town or city care about young people their age, and listen to what they have to say;

- participate at least two hours in a typical week in sports teams or clubs, other clubs or organizations, creative arts programs or lessons, or programs of a religious organization;
- say that they often or very often in these activities get to develop skills such as teamwork or resolving conflicts peacefully, get to develop warm relationships with adults and other peers, and are allowed to help make decisions;
- have any seven of nine community resources that are easy to get to such as parks, libraries, museums, youth organizations, arts lessons, sports programs, and religious organizations;
- have used any five of these at least once in the last three months; and
- spend at least one hour in a typical week volunteering in their community.

These ROI criteria describe young people who have passionate interests or sparks and get support to develop those sparks. Pursuing their sparks helps them to have a better life, in how they prepare for a career, in their relationships, in how and what they learn, and in how they contribute. They feel racially respected, respected as young people with something to offer, and useful in their families, schools, and communities. They live in communities with plentiful resources, and they use those resources. They participate at a modest couple hours a week in after-school programs that help them learn useful skills, have good relationships, and make some decisions. And they give back in service by volunteering an hour a week on average. If anything, these standards for a “high” ROI score seem more like the minimum level of hopes and aspirations we as a society should have for the relationships and opportunities available to all our young people. That so few are able to say they meet these generous standards underlines the wide gap between our hopes and young people’s realities, and the nature of the voice and opportunity challenge we must meet.

If there is any good news in the low figures for “high” scoring, it is that 46% of the sample got medium scores on the TVI and 48% on the ROI. This suggests that, with a fairly modest social commitment to build these strengths, many of those at the upper end of the medium groups could be propelled into the high group.

» ADDITIONAL TOOLS AND RESOURCES

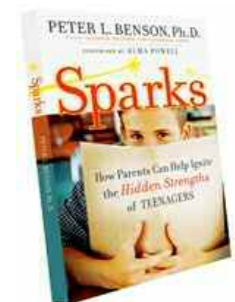
@15 is Best Buy’s platform to connect with teens, give voice to their perspectives, and invest our resources to turn their ideas into action and support their efforts to lead social change.

Through www.at15.com, teens can . . .

- Collect points through the @15 Change Exchange to direct up to \$1 million of the Best Buy Children’s Foundation’s charitable contributions
- Nominate their school for a \$1,500 technology grant, awarded every 15 days on at15.com.
- Express their opinions about what’s happening in the world through the @15 IMO, a periodic poll that takes the pulse of 15-year-olds on the issues of the day.
- Apply for @15 Scholarships that recognize good grades and community service.

Sparks: How Parents Can Help Ignite the Hidden Strengths of Teenagers

Written by Search Institute’s president, Peter L. Benson, Ph.D., this book describes a simple yet powerful plan for awakening the spark that lives inside each and every young person. Grounded in research with thousands of teenagers and parents, *Sparks* offers a step-by-step approach to help teenagers – and parents – discover, celebrate, and act on their unique gifts. For tools and ideas related to this book, visit www.ignitingsparks.com. Or pick up the book at a nearby bookstore or by visiting www.searchinstitute.org.



FOOTNOTES

- 1 Search Institute has worked extensively with communities, schools, organizations, and families to encourage them to provide youth with the Developmental Assets® they need to grow up successfully. The Developmental Assets focus on the vital roles that everyone in a community plays in young people's development by, among other things, supporting young people, setting boundaries, empowering them, and offering them constructive activities. For more on the idea of Developmental Assets and the science behind them, visit www.search-institute.org/assets.
- 2 The concept of sparks was first introduced in Peter L. Benson, *Sparks: How Parents Can Help Ignite the Hidden Strengths of Teenagers* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008).
- 3 Not all talents and interests are sparks. But the 15 year olds with multiple talents and interests are more likely to find their sparks: Just 20% of those with no talents and interests say they have a spark. In contrast, 53% of those with 1 talent or interest and 74% of those with 2+ talents or interests say they have a spark. Of course, it is illogical for teens to say they have no talents or interests, and then they say they do have a spark, which is a passionate interest. We suspect that this disconnect between the two sets of answers occurs because, when spark is defined for teens (as we did in this survey), they do recognize that this kind of passionate focus on something occasionally happens to them. But it doesn't happen often enough, or in consistent enough circumstances, for them to be able to easily name it or describe it as a talent or interest.
- 4 Many of these racial/ethnic differences may be attributed to the relatively high education level of the youth of color in this study. For example, in the raw (unweighted) sample, 29% of the African American youth had mothers who graduated from college, versus 25% among White youth and 20% among Hispanic youth. The proportions for African American and Hispanic youth are much higher than their figures in the general population. However, the sample was weighted to adjust these sample percentages to their true national proportions, and this should have substantially corrected the raw sample skewness.
- 5 Parental education is used in this and many other studies as a useful but not perfect proxy or substitute for measuring family income, since it is very difficult to obtain accurate information on family income in surveys of teenagers.
- 6 Explaining differences in the ROI (and TVI) solely by parental education as a proxy for income oversimplifies a more complex reality. Youth from families with more education do not differ only in financial resources, but may differ also in factors related to social class, such as values, life goals, motivation, and personality characteristics that together also contribute to greater likelihood of having sparks in the first place, and being able to pursue them in various settings. To see if the relationship between positive outcomes and the Teen Voice and Relationships and Opportunities Indexes was due mainly to these education differences, we re-ran the analyses, but then controlling for parental education. We found that all of the significant linkages of the Voice and Opportunities Indexes except one remained significant even after controlling for the effects of parental education (the TVI had a borderline significant association with anti-social behavior, which became non-significant when mother's education was controlled). Parental education predicted some of the following outcomes as or more significantly than did the indexes: GPA, leadership, the importance of civic engagement, not feeling worried, and experiencing racial respect. Parental education had a borderline significant relationship with mastery goals (for both TVI and ROI) and sense of purpose (for ROI only). The other five outcomes were not significantly predicted by parental education.
- 7 The 15-year-olds in this study were not followed over time, so we cannot infer a cause-and-effect relationship. However, many of the individual components of the Relationships and Opportunities Index have been found in other longer-term studies to have the power to predict subsequent positive outcomes.

- 8 Throughout this report, we occasionally mention "other studies" about positive youth development. They are too numerous to individually mention in a report of this type, but readers are directed to the following foundational resources for links to hundreds of studies that support the general conclusions of the @15 research: Peter L. Benson, Peter C. Scales, Stephen F. Hamilton, & Arturo Sesma, Jr. (2006). *Positive youth development: Theory, research, and applications*. In W. Damon & R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology* (6th ed., Vol. 1) (pp. 894-941). New York: John Wiley; Peter C. Scales & Nancy Leffert. (2004). *Developmental assets: A synthesis of the scientific research on adolescent development* (2nd ed.). Minneapolis: Search Institute; and Jacquelynne Eccles & Jennifer A. Gootman (Eds.). (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. Washington, DC: National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (National Academy Press).
- 9 Very few young people in this national sample either missed school much in the last month or committed acts of vandalism, so there are no statistically significant differences due to sparks, TVI, or ROI on those outcomes in this study.
- 10 Sparks is normally counted as a part of the Relationships and Opportunities Index. When doing these analyses, Sparks was dropped from the calculation of that index, in order to more fairly see what the effect is of adding Sparks, Teen Voice, and Relationships and Opportunities. In addition, as in earlier analyses, leadership was dropped from the Teen Voice Index when looking at how these resources link to leadership. Racial discrimination was dropped from the Relationships and Opportunities Index when examining how these resources link to perceived racial discrimination.
- 11 As we noted earlier, young people are more likely to have these resources when their parents have more education. But there are few meaningful differences by gender and race/ethnicity. For example, the percentage who have all three resources (Spark, TVI, and ROI) ranges from 7% for both boys and girls, and 6-8% across African American, Hispanic, and white youth.
- 12 About one-third (35%) of all 15 year olds are somewhat or very worried about being treated unfairly by police, and nearly one in five (18%) are worried about being arrested. These are sizeable proportions that might not all be due to feelings of racial discrimination, but also to teens' perceptions that they are viewed negatively (as a threat or a problem) by wider society.
- 13 For more information on this broader work, visit www.search-institute.org.

ABOUT @15

Best Buy believes in the power of teens, and @15 is a new platform to connect with them, give voice to their perspectives, and invest our resources—including the energy and talents of our employees—to turn their ideas into action and support their efforts to lead social change. Teens bring passion and enthusiasm to tackling tough issues. They are also important to our business—they shop in our stores, and they're our future employees. There's a real opportunity to listen to—and learn from—what teens have to say. And through the @15 Fund, we'll put the philanthropic power of @15 directly into their hands. To learn more, visit www.at15.com.

About Best Buy Co., Inc.

With operations in the United States, Canada, China, Europe, and Mexico, Best Buy is a multinational retailer of technology and entertainment products and services with a commitment to growth and innovation. The Best Buy family of brands and partnerships collectively generates more than \$40 billion annual revenue and includes brands such as Best Buy, Audiovisions, The Carphone Warehouse, Future Shop, Geek Squad, Jiangsu Five Star, Magnolia Audio Video, Napster, Pacific Sales Kitchen and Bath Centers, The Phone House and Speakeasy.

Approximately 165,000 employees apply their talents to help bring the benefits of these brands to life for customers through retail locations, multiple call centers and Web sites, in-home solutions, product delivery and activities in our communities. Community partnership is central to the way we do business at Best Buy. In fiscal year 2008, we donated a combined \$31.8 million to improve the vitality of the communities where our employees and customers live and work. For more information about Best Buy, visit www.bestbuyinc.com.

About Search Institute

Search Institute is Best Buy's research partner in the @15 Program. Based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the institute is a leading innovator in discovering what children and adolescents need to become caring, healthy, productive, and responsible adults. It applies this knowledge to motivate and equip everyone in society—youth and adults—to take part in creating a world where all young people are valued and thrive.

Search Institute is an independent, nonprofit, nonsectarian organization whose mission is to provide leadership, knowledge, and resources to promote healthy children, youth, and communities. It was founded in 1958 and has been promoting positive change on behalf of young people for 50 years. For more information, visit www.search-institute.org.

Other @15 Partners

Ashoka's Youth Venture • Genesys Works • Project Girl • Mercy Corps • Communities in Schools • AFI Screen Nation • Boys and Girls Club of America • Mouse Squad • Go North! • National Urban League • National Council of La Raza • Science Museum of Minnesota • Sweat Equity Enterprises • Best Buy Teach Awards • Best Buy Scholarships

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