

April 1, 2024
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“Sparks” in Youth

In the 4-H world, we talk a lot about helping youth find their “spark,” and how it is different for each child. Wisconsin 4-H defines spark as, “a passion for a self-identified interest or skill, or a capacity that metaphorically lights a fire in a young person’s life, providing energy, joy, purpose, and direction.” I often find myself thinking how I can help youth find their spark and how they can use it one day to become an entrepreneur or make a career out of it, but I think we should all look at it a little differently. When we think about what we should do with our kids or students, maybe we should look at it from the lens of the child. They do not need to know what they are doing for the rest of their life when they are in elementary school, but they want to learn and engage in today. Instead of encouraging youth to always look at the future, we should be providing opportunities for them now, and if they don’t make it a job or find their lifelong passion, they have the experience. From the experience they could learn something new, or it could lead them to something that is new!

In a world of everything being fast, it is important to provide real and rich experiences with our youth. That doesn’t mean we need to take them on a vacation all the time, but it is important to provide activities that help them develop problem solving and critical thinking skills. Doing art projects, STEM activities, and giving children the freedom to play outdoors are all ways to let the kids work their imagination and work through those skills. Although the kits we buy from the store can make cool projects and help youth work on following directions, I want to encourage you to provide youth with supplies and let them do what they want with it. This will let them be their own leaders and not comparing their project to a picture. By doing this, you may spark something in them that they didn’t know they loved! And remember, even if it isn’t something they can’t make a career out of, they will learn skills they will take with them forever!

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