

# TEEN VOICE

# 2010

RELATIONSHIPS THAT  
MATTER TO AMERICA'S  
**TEENS**



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PREPARED BY SEARCH INSTITUTE

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## TEEN VOICE 2010: RELATIONSHIPS THAT MATTER TO AMERICA'S TEENS

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2010

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TEENS

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# TEENS

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# UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

Instinctively, human beings want to be appreciated and valued for their contributions to their families, communities and ultimately, the world. And teens are no different.

While at times, there seems to be plenty of news that focuses on teens' problems and challenges, we at Best Buy believe there's so much more that can be done when we focus on the positive, valuable impact our teens make every day. With that, Best Buy Children's Foundation is proud to support an annual study with Search Institute that focuses on teens' strengths and passions as part of the foundation's social change platform, @15. This second annual study helps to focus our efforts to support and empower teens to make a difference in the causes they deem most important.

*Teen Voice 2010* has a clear message from teens: "We deeply value the adults who take the time to really get to know us and what matters to us." When adults take the time to do this, our nation benefits and frankly, we all benefit because helping young people discover their passions, find their voice and make a difference in the world has lasting effects.

As the father of two teenage boys and one pre-teen boy, I know teens deal with issues and have concerns that I never had growing up. But *Teen Voice 2010* challenges me—and us—to make it a priority to stop and really listen to their hopes, dreams, perspectives and worries. Then help them do something about the things that drive them. Doing so is rewarding for all of us, and powerful in helping ensure all of our nation's teens have a voice and an opportunity to create a great tomorrow for themselves.

Brian J. Dunn  
Chief Executive Officer, Best Buy Co., Inc.  
Board Member, Best Buy Children's Foundation

# STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

Too many teens are growing up without the supports and opportunities they need. These are clear messages in *Teen Voice 2010*, which introduces a new national study of 1,860 15-year-olds. This survey is complemented with in-depth interviews with 30 15-year-olds in three cities across the United States. This new report both reinforces the 2009 inaugural *Teen Voice* study findings and strengthens a growing body of research that documents a persistent gap between what teens need and what we as a nation actually offer them.

## *The Key Strengths*

*Teen Voice 2010* focuses on three key strengths that make a big difference in teens' lives, each of which was introduced in *Teen Voice 2009*:

- ▶ **Teens' SPARKS, or their deepest passions and interests;**
- ▶ **Teen's VOICE, or their confidence, skills, and opportunities to influence things that matter to them; and**
- ▶ **The RELATIONSHIPS teens need to support their growth.**

These strengths are not just "feel-good" ideas. Teens with high levels of sparks, relationships, and voice do better on every academic, psychological, social-emotional, and behavioral outcome we have studied. This finding strongly suggests that youth with all three strengths are already on the path to success in school, work, and life. Yet more than one-third of 15-year-olds (38 percent) surveyed did not score high on any of the strengths. And only 7 percent experience high levels of all three strengths (Figure A).

## *Adult Relationships That Matter*

Teens need positive, sustained, and meaningful relationships with extended family members, teachers, mentors, grandparents, neighbors, and many others. The Relationships and Opportunities Index (ROI) measures several dimensions of adult-youth relationships beyond the family. The survey reveals that *just 19 percent of 15-year-olds score high on this index*, suggesting that only about one in five 15-year-olds has this web of positive, sustained, and meaningful relationships with adults.

Given the gap, it is important to understand what adults do that gives teens a signal that the adults really "get" them. Teens say that adults who "get them" show it by listening to them and paying attention, being honest and dependable, and enjoying their time together (Figure B). In reality, however, adults who "get" teens are the exceptions. Relatively few teens say that most adults they know ask for their opinions, have meaningful conversations with them, give them chances to help out, or spend time playing sports or doing artistic activities with them.



## Sparks

*Teen Voice 2009* introduced the concept of sparks, which is a metaphor for a young person’s passionate interests—those things in life that give meaning, focus, energy, and joy. *Teen Voice 2010* digs deeper into teens’ sparks, exploring more about their experiences of sparks and the people and places that help sparks grow. In this year’s study, 80 percent of 15-year-olds surveyed said that they have at least one spark. The top three sparks 15-year-olds named were creative arts (28 percent), sports (26 percent), and technology (18 percent).

Just saying you have a spark doesn’t necessarily mean it’s important to you. The power of sparks comes when (1) you know your spark or sparks; (2) your spark is important to you; and (3) you take initiative to develop your spark. The Sparks Index includes these elements. Overall, 51 percent of teens score high on this index. So while a high number of teens say they know their sparks, there is still an important gap in the proportion of teens who are fully engaging with the things they care most about.

## Voice

In addition to having supportive relationships and a clear sense of their own sparks, teens need confidence, skills, and opportunities to speak up about and influence the things that matter to them in their own lives, their families, their communities, and the world. The Teen Voice Index seeks to measure these experiences in a young person’s life:

**LEADERSHIP—Has had a leadership role in the past year.**

**PERSONAL POWER—Has the ability to make good things happen in his or her life.**

**COMFORT EXPRESSING VOICE—Feels comfortable suggesting activities, sharing ideas about rules, and helping to organize activities.**

**COMMUNITY PROBLEM SOLVING—Believes he or she can help solve community problems.**

**CIVIC INVOLVEMENT—Plans to be involved, or has already been involved, in political and civic life.**

Overall, just 22 percent of all 15-year-olds—across all demographic groups—score high on this year’s Teen Voice Index. Developing the confidence, skills, and opportunities to express—and influence—what’s important to you is an important part of becoming active in community and civic life.

### *Putting the Pieces Together*

Each of these strengths—relationships, sparks, and voice—matter for teens' successful development. Teens who enjoy *high levels on all three* of the strengths do the best of all—on every academic, psychological, social-emotional, and behavioral outcome we studied. Yet too few teens experience them. More than one-third of 15-year-olds (38 percent) surveyed did not score high on any of the three indexes. And only 7 percent of 15-year-olds experience high levels of all three strengths.

### *Call to Action: Get to Know Teens*

Like all generations, today's teens face important challenges in growing up. And each generation must face these challenges with the perspectives and resources that are available to it. Most teenagers have a clear sense of their own sparks—things about them that can make a difference in the world. And most also have strong and supportive parents who invest tremendously in helping them grow up well, often against the odds.

Adults other than parents can also play powerful roles in young people's lives. Teens who form relationships with other adults who “get” them, listen to them, and are role models for them, as friends and informal mentors, have important advantages in facing the challenges, as shown by how much better they do on diverse measures of teen well-being. And that's a role that virtually every caring and responsible adult can play in helping millions of today's teens stay—or get—on a path to a hopeful future for themselves, their families, and their communities.

#### ABOUT THE STUDY

*Teen Voice 2010: Relationships That Matter to America's Teens* was designed and analyzed by Search Institute. It is based on data collected between October 12 and November 9, 2009, by Harris Interactive through a Web-based panel study. It included a sample of 1,860 15-year-olds in the United States, weighted to align with census percentages by gender, race/ethnicity, geographic location, urbanicity, and parent education. In addition, in-person interviews were conducted with 30 15-year-olds by the project's research advisors or their colleagues in three cities: Ann Arbor, Michigan; Atlanta, Georgia; and Minneapolis, Minnesota.

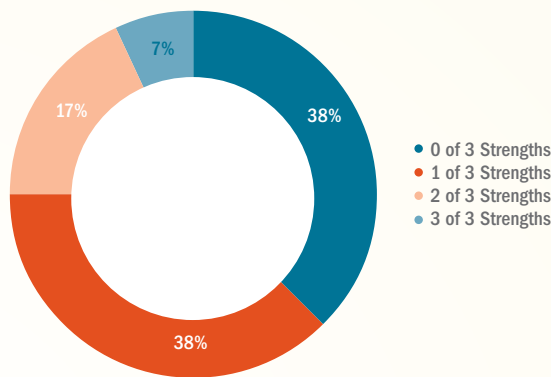
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**FIGURE A: NUMBER OF STRENGTHS EXPERIENCED BY 15-YEAR-OLDS\***

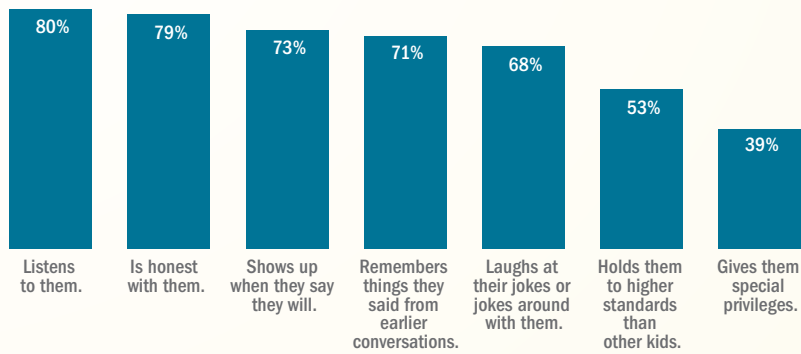
Percent of 15-year-olds reporting high levels of none, one, two, or three of the core strengths: sparks, voice, and relationships. Having successively higher numbers of strengths matters to teen well-being, but relatively few teens experience two or more strengths.



\*Throughout this report, chart figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

**FIGURE B: WHAT ADULTS “WHO GET” TEENS DO**

Percentage of 15-year-olds who say adults take these actions, if adults “get them.”





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# STRENGTHENING TEENS' FOUNDATION

There is a disconnect between how adults talk *about* young people, and how we relate *with* them. On the one hand, we say “they’re our future,” and we display bumper stickers that say they’re our “most precious resource.” But on the other, as this report shows, too many adults forget the basics about how to nurture that precious resource:

- ▶ **Get to know them for who they are.**
- ▶ **Respect and listen to them.**
- ▶ **Pay attention to what matters to them.**
- ▶ **Challenge them to live up to their potential.**

The result is that nine out of ten American 15-year-olds don’t have enough positive experiences and relationships upon which to build their lives. And it’s not their fault. In schools and communities across the country, too many teens are growing up without the supports and opportunities they need. These are clear messages in *Teen Voice 2010*, which introduces a new national study of 1,860 15-year-olds (see Figure 1). This survey is complemented with in-depth interviews with 30 15-year-olds in three cities across the United States. This new report both reinforces the 2009 inaugural *Teen Voice* study findings and offers an updated and richer understanding of American 15-year-olds. It also strengthens a growing body of research that documents a persistent gap between what teens need and what we as a nation actually offer them.

## The Key Strengths

*Teen Voice 2010* focuses on three key strengths that make a big difference in teens’ lives, each of which was introduced in *Teen Voice 2009*:

- ▶ **Teens’ SPARKS, or their deepest passions and interests;**
- ▶ **Teen’s VOICE, or their confidence, skills, and opportunities to influence things that matter to them; and**
- ▶ **The RELATIONSHIPS teens need to support their growth.**

These core strengths are critical for helping teens do well in school, contribute to their communities, and make positive choices. Cultivating these strengths can help to ensure that young people are ready for college, work, and life.

## Why These Strengths Matter

These strengths are not just “feel-good” ideas. As shown in Figure 2 (and explored in detail in this report), teens with high levels of sparks, relationships, *and* voice do better on every outcome we have studied. This finding strongly suggests that youth with all three strengths—who we would say are “thriving”—are already on the path to success in school, work, and life.

### *The Gap*

Yet as important as these strengths are, they are too often absent from teens' lives. More than one-third of 15-year-olds (38 percent) surveyed did not score high on any of the strengths. (See the Appendix for details on the measures and scoring used in this study.) And only 7 percent of the 15-year-olds experience high levels of all three strengths (Figure 3). That means that about 3.9 million 15-year-olds in America don't receive the relationships, opportunities, and supports they need to grow up well.

### *Why 15-Year-Olds?*

This study zooms in on 15-year-olds, largely because this age group is emblematic of the transition between childhood and adulthood. Fifteen-year-olds are taking early steps toward adulthood, taking on new responsibilities and being exposed to new risks. But they generally have not yet taken on adult roles (at least in U.S. culture). In addition, research shows that what happens at age 15 has a lot to say about teens' success in high school and beyond (see Figure 4).

### *Building on the 2009 Study*

This report builds on a previous study, *Teen Voice 2009*. It asks many of the same questions, allowing for direct comparisons. It also introduces new findings on new topics, particularly a much deeper analysis of teens' relationships with adults outside their families. As teens tell us about their relationships with adults, we can begin to see concrete ways we can—and need to—spend time with them, take them seriously, and listen to their perspectives.

### *Each Person Can Make a Difference*

The gap in teens' experiences of relationships, sparks, and voice is not a teen problem, but an adult one. Adults need to relate more to young people, and in more positive and developmentally helpful ways. The gap between what teens need and what they experience is disturbing because of the potential implications for young people's well-being—not to mention their readiness to become future workers, parents, community leaders, and neighbors. Yet the challenge, though daunting, is not insurmountable. This study also points toward an under-utilized but powerful strategy for tackling the deep and sustained issues that undermine young people's success. Much of what is missing involves things that every parent, grandparent, teacher, mentor, and friend can help to contribute.

To be sure, there are other policy and systemic challenges in our schools and communities that interfere with the strengths that are the focus of this study. But building these strengths is largely in the hands of the individual adults who do or could surround each young person with the encouragement, support, guidance, and listening ear that they need. Each of us can make a profound difference in the vitality and capacity of our young people, both now and in the future.



FIGURE 1: ABOUT THE STUDY

THE ONLINE SURVEY

(See Appendix 1 for more methodological information.)

A total of 1,860 15-year-olds nationwide participated in the 20-minute online survey, which was conducted by Harris Interactive, Inc., on behalf of Search Institute. The sample was quite diverse by gender, race/ethnicity, region, type of community represented, and parents’ highest education level. It matches the overall sample in 2009.

	2010 SURVEY	2009 SURVEY
<b>Gender</b>		
Females	49%	49%
Males	51%	51%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
White	57%	55%
Hispanic/Latino	19%	18%
African American	15%	15%
Asian	4%	6%
Other	5%	6%
<b>Region of the United States</b>		
East	21%	20%
Midwest	22%	22%
South	32%	34%
West	25%	24%
<b>Type of Community</b>		
Urban	29%	29%
Suburban	49%	49%
Small town/rural	23%	23%
<b>Highest Parent Education</b>		
High school or less	28%	41%
Some college	35%	32%
College +	37%	26%

IN-PERSON INTERVIEWS

(See Appendix 2 for more methodological information.)

In-person interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of 30 15-year-olds in three cities by the project’s research advisors or their colleagues. The three cities were Ann Arbor, Michigan; Atlanta, Georgia; and Minneapolis, Minnesota. The sample included 14 males and 16 females—16 white, 3 African American, 3 Hispanic/Latino, 4 Asian American, and 4 who self-identified as biracial or mixed. Their names have been changed in this report to protect their privacy.

**FIGURE 2: THE MORE STRENGTHS, THE BETTER**

Young people who score high (see the Appendix) on one or more of the three strengths in this study (sparks, voice, and relationships) do better on a variety of youth outcomes. These charts compare youth who score high on none, one, two, or three of these strengths, by whether they have selected outcomes. (Detail on the additional outcomes is found in Figure 25.)

OUTCOME	DEFINITION	High on 0 of 3 Strengths	High on 1 of 3 Strengths	High on 2 of 3 Strengths	High on 3 of 3 Strengths
Grades in School	Have a grade point average of 3.5 (B+) or higher.	55%	61%	78%	83%
School Effort	Work up to their ability at school.	27%	36%	51%	69%
Purpose and Hope	Have a sense of purpose and hope for their future.	15%	36%	57%	77%
Community Involvement	Believe it is important for them to be involved in community issues.	23%	35%	51%	69%

**FIGURE 3: NUMBER OF STRENGTHS EXPERIENCED BY 15-YEAR-OLDS**

Percent of 15-year-olds reporting high levels of none, one, two, or three of the core strengths: sparks, voice, and relationships. Having successively higher numbers of strengths matters to teen well-being, but relatively few teens experience two or more strengths.

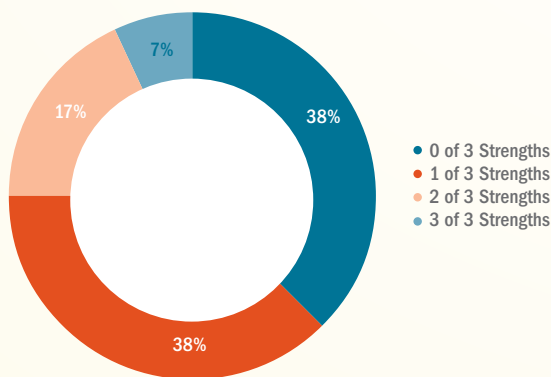


FIGURE 4: TURNING POINTS @ 15



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# ADULT RELATIONSHIPS THAT MATTER





Teens need adults in their lives who listen to them, laugh with them, guide them, and love them. Parents or other primary caregivers are, of course, the most critical. But teens also need positive, sustained, and meaningful relationships with extended family members, teachers, mentors, grandparents, neighbors, and many others.<sup>1</sup>

Some teens enjoy deep, sustained relationships with many caring adults. For example, Melissa (not her real name), a 15-year-old from Grand Rapids, Michigan, has a teacher she sees as her mentor and role model. In addition to being her math teacher, he also leads an after-school program focused on “talking and bonding” among 15 or 20 students. So she has seen him at least a couple of times a week over the past two years. Sometimes she’ll just stop by to talk or to get some help with math.

This teacher is one of those adults who “gets” teens, Melissa says. “He doesn’t treat me like I’m 15. He understands me, and he gives good advice. And he’s just a good person to come talk to—like, if I need advice or if I need to vent. He’s a cool guy.”

The ways he interacts with her makes all the difference, Melissa says. “He smiles a lot at me. When I walk in [and say], ‘Hey, I need help with math,’ he’s, like, ‘Oh yeah! I’d like to help you.’ . . . And he listens to me.”

### The Relationship Deficit

Many factors shape the relationships between teens and adults other than their parents. In order to get a big-picture perspective on teens’ relationships with adults other than their parents, we created the Relationships and Opportunities Index (ROI),<sup>2</sup> which measures several dimensions of adult-youth relationships, including the quality and quantity of those relationships in both formal and informal settings. The ROI also addresses broader social factors—such as prejudice and whether youth feel valued in their communities—that affect adult-youth relationships.

Each of those parts of the ROI were scored, and then the component scores added up to determine the overall ROI score (see Technical Appendix 1). When we put all the pieces together, we find that *just 19 percent of 15-year-olds score high (experiencing at least 75 percent of the components) on the ROI*. Thus, only about one in five 15-year-olds has the web of positive, sustained, and meaningful relationships in their lives that support, guide, encourage, and connect with them in positive ways. Furthermore, too many teens face community norms and prejudices that undermine connectedness and community.

Patterns vary among different groups of teens. As shown in Figure 5, females are more likely to have a strong web of relationships than males, and Hispanic/Latino youth are less likely to have high scores compared to African American and White teens. Finally, teens whose parents have at least a four-year college degree are more likely to have high scores. However, even with these differences, no more than one in four teens in any subgroup

*In order to get a big-picture perspective on teens’ relationships with adults other than their parents, we created the Relationships and Opportunities Index (ROI), which measures several dimensions of adult-youth relationships*

surveyed experiences a high ROI score. On average, all groups of teens experience a relationship deficit that hurts their chances of growing up successfully.

### *Why the Relationship Deficit Matters*

The gap in positive relationships with caring adults has serious implications for teens, their schools, and their communities. When young people have a strong relationship foundation, they are more likely to do well in a wide range of areas of development, as shown in Figure 6. But the opposite is also true: those with low scores are much more likely to struggle.

These findings confirm extensive research in many fields on the importance of relationships for individual, family, and community well-being. If we want young people to do well in school, contribute to society, and make healthy choices, we must make cultivating these positive connections a top priority.

### *Who Are the Adults Who Matter?*

The foundation of the ROI is teens having at least one adult other than a parent whom they can turn to for advice and support. In our study, 47 percent of 15-year-olds can identify an adult other than a parent or guardian who, among other things, acts as a formal or informal mentor, and whom they can “count on to be there for you, believes in and cares deeply about you, and inspires you to do your best.”<sup>3</sup> Many different adults can play this mentoring role, including adult friends, teachers, grandparents or other family members, and religious leaders (Figure 7). Females and Hispanic youth are somewhat more likely than males or white or African American youth to say that adult “friends” act as mentors or “get them,” but there are no other significant differences by gender or race/ethnicity. (Some of the sub-cell sizes are too small to allow valid analysis.)

### *What Kind of Relationships Do They Have?*

Of course, not all relationships with caring adults are created equal. In fact, only 69 percent of those *with a mentor* (broadly defined) experience these relationships as being long-term, frequent, and of a high quality.<sup>4</sup> When we include the 53 percent of teens who say they *don't* have a mentor, just 33 percent of the whole sample meets the criteria for having a *potentially high-quality, sustained relationship with a mentor or role model*.

The good news is that almost all teens who have mentors value the relationship. They say they trust, care about, and enjoy their mentors. More than 95 percent of teens with mentors in all demographic groups say they have a strong and caring relationship with that mentor (not shown).

That would be the case for Sam, a 15-year-old in Minneapolis. He and his informal mentor, John, get together every week or so to go out to eat, go fishing, or go to a store—nothing unusual. What's different is that John really seems to “get” Sam. Unlike many other adults in Sam's life, John really listens. Yes, he helps out when Sam is stuck on homework and encourages Sam to go out for sports if he's interested. But what Sam thinks about the most is the way John listens to him.

“When somebody doesn't really pay attention, they look somewhere else. Or they're multitasking or doing something else. . . . [But] he actually doesn't do something else. He is listening. And he looks at me when I talk to him.” In addition: “He answers when I call him.

Or if he doesn't answer, I leave a message, and he calls back when he can." He adds: "He respects me. And I respect him, too."

Unfortunately, the survey findings suggest that Sam is in a minority. Two-thirds of 15-year-olds don't have a sustained, high-quality relationship (emotionally close, look forward to spending time with their mentor, trusting their mentor, etc.) with an adult mentor or role model. It's a deficit that can have negative implications for their development.

### What Adults Do That Matters

Given the gap, it is important to understand what adults do that gives teens a signal that the adult really "gets" them. What we find are simple, practical actions that matter a lot to teens. As shown in Figure 8, teens say that adults who "get them" show it by listening to them and paying attention, being honest and dependable, and enjoying their time together—a lot like Sam's mentor. Youth are less likely to say it's important that the adults set higher standards for them than they do for other teens, or give them special privileges.

Similar themes surfaced when we conducted in-depth interviews. Teens described some of the practical ways adults had an impact and showed that they really cared. These included the following statements:

- She inspires and encourages me to be a better person.
- I can trust him. He respects and understands me.
- He pays attention to me, focuses on me, looks at me, and makes eye contact.
- She gives thoughtful responses to things I say and builds on the conversation.
- He doesn't multitask and isn't distracted.
- She seems happy when we talk.
- He compliments me.
- She makes an effort.
- He spends time talking with me and doing things together.
- She responds to my voice messages and texts.

These everyday actions that teens notice in adults offer a road map for the ways that adults can reconnect with teens. They do not require a lot of expertise or knowledge; they simply invite adults to stop, take time to listen, and treat teens with respect and support.

Adults Who Don’t “Get” Teens

In reality, adults who “get” teens are the exceptions. Building on previous studies of both youth and adults, we asked teen respondents whether most adults outside their family take steps to build meaningful intergenerational relationships, such as the actions shown in Figure 9. A small majority of the adults youth know outside the family do get to know the youth’s name, encourage youth to respect cultural differences, and encourage them to be honest and responsible. A more substantial majority give a general message about the importance of doing one’s best at school. (Most of these common actions reflect widely shared adult expectations of young people and are less about forming quality relationships.)

But in the end, only minorities of teens said adults they know do things to really get to know teens. Relatively few teens say that most adults they know ask for their opinions, have meaningful conversations with them, give them chances to help out, or spend time playing sports or doing artistic activities with them. The scarcity of adults spending time engaging in sports and arts with teens is especially troubling, since arts and sports are young people’s top two passionate interests or sparks, as we’ll see in Part 3.

These findings parallel earlier Search Institute national studies of adults and 12–17-year-olds.<sup>5</sup> Despite major differences in the samples, methods, and time frame, the overall patterns are quite consistent: too few adults build meaningful relationships with teenagers, despite the potential impact that these positive relationships can have in teens’ lives.

What Gets in the Way?

What do adults do (or not do) that tells teens that these adults don’t “get” them? In face-to-face interviews, teens explained some of the things that get in the way. These included the following statements:

- She can’t talk with me about anything deep.
- It doesn’t seem like he’s listening.
- She only talks about herself.
- He doesn’t want to hear what I think.
- She tells me I can’t do anything.
- He treats me like a child.

Teens say they feel misunderstood, belittled, neglected, and frustrated by these adults. Eventually they get the message not to expect much from many adults who, they conclude, “just don’t care about us.”



## The Challenge of Discrimination

Some young people—particularly African American and Hispanic/Latino teens—face an additional challenge in forming positive relationships with adults: discrimination. Although a slight majority of the total sample said they did not experience racial discrimination, African Americans especially, but also Hispanic/Latino youth, were consistently more likely than white teens to say they experience each of the indicators of discrimination (Figure 10).

At least one out of four African American 15-year-olds say people act as if they are not smart or as if they are dishonest. They also indicate that people seem to be afraid of them and treat them with less respect than others. Aside from the larger social justice issues that these findings highlight, each of these experiences undermines young people’s opportunities to form meaningful intergenerational relationships and, as a result, reduces young people’s access to positive adult relationships and role models.



*At least one out of four African American 15-year-olds say people act as if they are not smart or as if they are dishonest. They also indicate that people seem to be afraid of them and treat them with less respect than others.*

## Relationships Really Matter

Teens’ relationships with adults play a critical role in their successful development and thriving. The absence of a broad and deep web of adult relationships beyond parents hampers their growth and makes it difficult for them to thrive. But when those relationships are in place, it makes it easier for them to discover and give voice to their own passions or sparks, which is the focus of the next section.

**FIGURE 5: RELATIONSHIPS AND OPPORTUNITIES, BY GENDER AND ETHNICITY**

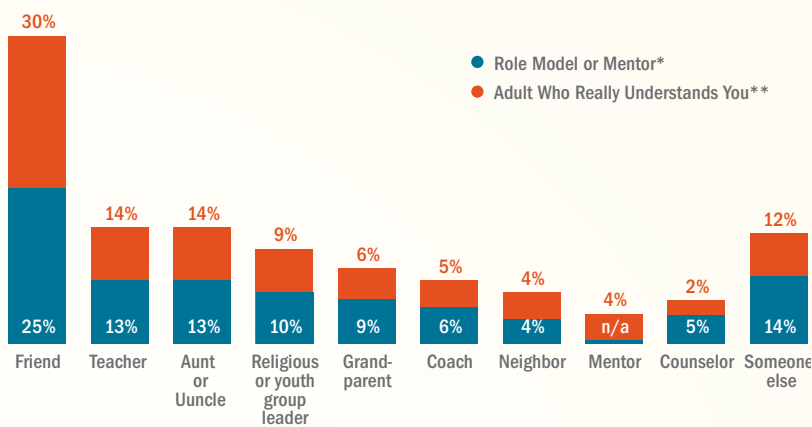
This table shows the percentages of 15-year-olds who score high, medium, and low on the Relationships and Opportunities Index (ROI). In none of these groups of teens did the percentage scoring high on the ROI exceed 24 percent of all those surveyed. (For more on the ROI scoring, see Technical Appendix 1.)

		HIGH	MEDIUM	LOW
Total Sample		19%	48%	33%
Gender	Males	17%	46%	37%
	Females	22%	49%	29%
Race/ Ethnicity	White	22%	47%	31%
	African American	20%	50%	31%
	Hispanic/Latino	14%	48%	38%
Parents' Education	High school or less	15%	48%	37%
	Some college	18%	47%	35%
	College+	24%	48%	29%

**FIGURE 6: PERCENTAGE HAVING OUTCOMES, BY LEVELS OF THE RELATIONSHIPS INDEX**

	HIGH	LOW
Goals to master what they study at school.	79%	42%
Work up to their ability at school.	60%	25%
Have a grade point average of 3.5 (B+) or higher.	73%	53%
Have a sense of purpose and hope for their future.	59%	17%
Have served as a leader in the last year.	80%	49%
Have a positive sense of their ethnic identity.	56%	15%
Believe it is important to help others and correct social inequalities.	74%	30%
Believe it is important for them to be involved in community issues.	60%	22%

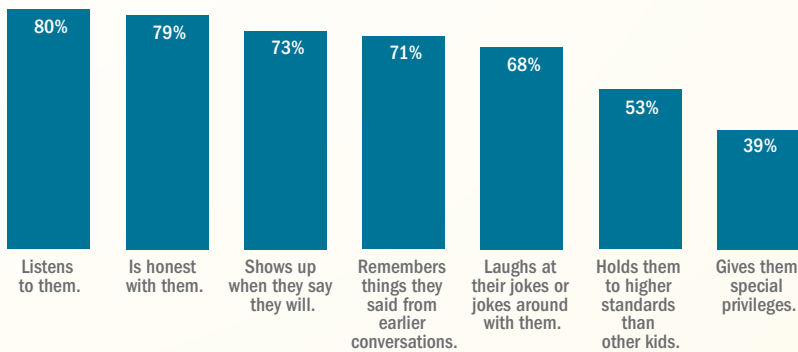
FIGURE 7: WHO YOUNG PEOPLE SEE AS “MENTORS”



- \* Based on youth who said they have “a role model or mentor who you go to for support and guidance, other than your parents or whoever is raising you.” A mentor was described as someone who “is older and has more experience than you, you can count on to be there for you, believes in and cares deeply about you, and inspires you to do your best.”
- \*\* Based on youth who said there is an adult outside of their family who “really ‘gets’ you (meaning they seem to understand and like you).”

FIGURE 8: WHAT ADULTS “WHO GET” TEENS DO

Percentage of 15-year-olds who say adults who “get them” do each of these things “a lot.”



**FIGURE 9: ADULT ACTIONS TO SUPPORT CHILDREN AND TEENS**

The shaded column shows the percentages of teens in this study who said that “most or almost all” of the “adults you know outside of your family” take each action with teens. The other columns are data from other studies for comparison purposes.

ACTION	TEEN VOICE 2010 (AGE 15)	U.S. YOUTH, AGES 12–17, 2002*	U.S. ADULTS, 2002*	U.S. ADULTS, 2000**
Tell youth to do their best at school.	66%	79%	68%	69%
Know youth's name.	59%	51%	49%	34%
Encourage youth to respect cultural differences.	51%	67%	57%	36%
Teach youth basic values like honesty and responsibility.	47%	55%	57%	36%
Ask for youth's opinions.	36%	38%	40%	25%
Have meaningful conversations where adult and youth get to know one another.	30%	29%	39%	34%
Give youth chances to contribute/help.	25%	39%	n/a	13%
Play sports/do arts activities with youth.	22%	28%	35%	n/a

\* Scales, P. C., Benson, P. L., & Mannes, M. (2002). *Grading grown-ups 2002: How do American kids and adults relate?* Key findings from a national study. *Assets Magazine*, 7(4), 12-page insert. Download from <http://www.search-institute.org/research/grading-grown-ups>.

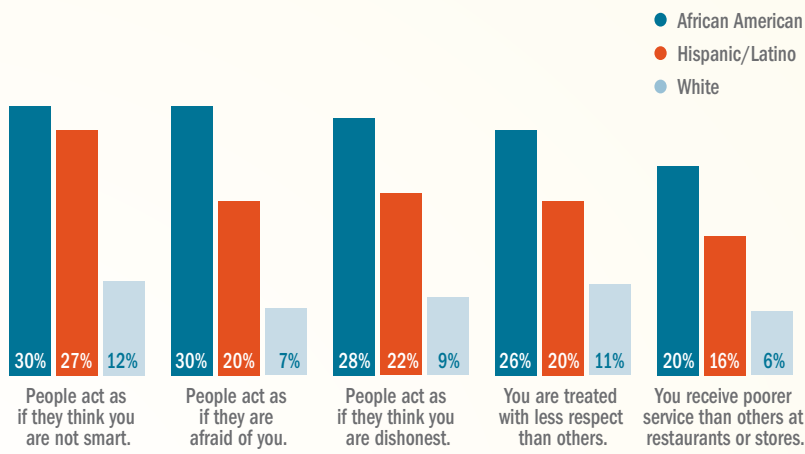
\*\* Scales, P. C., Benson, P. L., & Roehlkepartain, E. C. (2001). *Grading grown-ups: American adults report on their real relationships with kids*. Minneapolis: Lutheran Brotherhood and Search Institute; and Scales, P. C. (with Benson, P. L., Mannes, M., Hintz, N. R., Roehlkepartain, E. C., & Sullivan, T. K.). (2003). *Other people's kids: Social expectations and American adults' involvement with children and adolescents*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.

n/a: Questions not asked in this study.



**FIGURE 10: ENCOUNTERING RACIAL STEREOTYPES**

Here are the percentages of 15-year-olds, by race/ethnicity, who have had each of these experiences.





3

**SPARKS**

What motivates you to get out of bed in the morning? What challenges you to stretch, grow, and invest yourself, your time, your money? What part of you gives a deep sense of purpose, passion, and joy? We use the metaphor of “spark” to capture that unique and important aspect of each of us, including teens.<sup>6</sup>

Alisha (not her real name) embodies the idea of sparks. When asked to name her spark, her first response was, “Oh, I have way too many! Oh my goodness. I am like one of those people who always wants to be doing something, and doing something I love and I enjoy.”

But the 15-year-old from Decatur, Georgia, quickly focused on cooking. “I go crazy,” she says. “Like, my mom gets really annoyed because I’ll have these great ideas about like all these really complex desserts and stuff to create. And she’ll be, like, ‘Really? Again?’”

Though she had always helped out in the kitchen, Alisha truly discovered her spark in a culinary arts class at her high school. “I really got into it, ‘cuz it’s a class, and it’s something I love . . . and it’s a class, too! You know?”

Then her parents gave her cookbooks for Christmas. “I got so excited. I’m pretty sure I like ran around the house screaming,” she recalls, laughing. “My mom encourages me—even though she sometimes wants to scream because I have crazy ideas.”

When she’s cooking, Alisha loses herself. “You put your energy and focus into doing something, and you live for that moment, because you’re doing it, and you’re putting all your energy into it. And you’re loving what you do. . . . You just lose all sense of time, and you’re just doing what you do, and you’re happy to be doing it.”

Alisha is caught up in pursuing her spark, her passion. *Teen Voice* 2009 introduced the concept of sparks, showing how important sparks are to teens’ well-being. *Teen Voice* 2010 digs deeper into teens’ sparks, exploring more about their experiences of sparks and the people and places that help sparks grow. Recognizing and nurturing these sparks is a key to young people thriving during adolescence. Thus, this section explores the findings on young people’s sparks, who helps them grow, and what gets in the way.

## What Are Sparks?

Perhaps the best way to define sparks is to relate how they were introduced to teens in the survey. Here’s how we described sparks:

*“Sparks” are interests or talents you have that you are really passionate about. When you are involved with those sparks, you have joy and energy. You are not bored, and you might lose track of time because you are so involved in what you are doing. A spark is a really important part of your life that gives you a sense of purpose or focus.*

Given that description, 80 percent of 15-year-olds surveyed said that they have at least one spark, with 11 percent indicating that they were not sure, and 9 percent saying they did not think they had a spark.<sup>7</sup> As in last year’s findings, the overall levels of sparks do not vary much by demographic differences. Female and males, teens from all three ethnic groups

studied, and teens from different parts of the country and different types of communities are about equally likely to say they have at least one spark. One important difference is that those whose parents have only some college or just a high school education or less are significantly less likely to say they have at least one spark. In addition, if they have a spark, they are significantly less likely to say that it is important or that they take initiative to develop it. As a result, those from more limited educational backgrounds are less likely to score high on the Spark Index than are youth whose parents are college graduates or have even more advanced education (Figure 11).

### *Most Common Sparks for 15-Year-Olds*

Consistent with the 2009 study, the top three sparks teens named in this study were creative arts, sports, and technology (Figure 12). However, the most common sparks vary considerably between females and males (Figure 13). Girls are significantly more likely to name the creative arts as their spark, while boys are considerably more likely to say their sparks involved sports, or technology and computers.

However, sparks can be a wide range of things. Jason (not his real name), from Ann Arbor, Michigan, knows his spark may seem a bit unusual: "As obscure as it may sound, I love to argue." He continues: "I really want to pursue becoming a lawyer, along with branching off into politics eventually. But that's something I really enjoy."

Jason discovered this spark when he figured out it was easy for him to "get into arguments or dumb debates and stuff." He explains: "I realized if I just listen to what someone says, I can most likely use that against them in some way. Like, just the smallest misstep. And that's just probably from talking to friends. . . . Me and my friends, we constantly rain down on each other and watch for those missteps, so we can joke about them. But it also works really well in debates in classes!"

He also likes arguing with adults, "because automatically you're at a disadvantage. But you can kind of win." Parents, on the other hand, are different. "They're always kind of winning, no matter how much logic you can use against them!"

Jason says several teachers and his church's pastor have helped cultivate this debate spark. "They encourage debate in class or ask questions where they give kids open floor to debate and argue. That's fun." How do they do it? "Asking open-ended questions, I guess, where it's up to you to interpret it to how you wish," he says. "It's fun. I have fun. I feel happy when I'm [debating]," Jason says, "because it's something I can do really well."

### *Experiences of Sparks*

In addition to asking teens to say what their primary spark is, we also asked them to describe what it's like when they're focused on their spark. Consistent with the definition of sparks, more than 80 percent of 15-year-olds who can identify a spark say they experience "a lot" of joy and energy doing their spark, and feel a sense of purpose or focus a lot, while 70 percent lose track of time a lot (Figure 14). Only 7 percent say they get bored when engaged with or doing their spark.

In our in-depth interviews with 15-year-olds, we also asked, "How do you feel when you're involved with your spark?" They, too, describe losing track of time, having fun, and being focused, calm, peaceful, and happy. They also described a sense of being powerful, in



control, and having a sense of accomplishment. Several also talked about how it was hard at first, but they stuck with their goal. In each case, you sense the energy and commitment that come when teens truly discover and actively work on their sparks.

## When Sparks Are Strong: The Sparks Index

Just saying you have a spark doesn't necessarily mean it's important to you. The power of sparks comes when three key elements come together:

- 1. You know your spark or sparks
- 2. Your spark is important, which is evident by what you experience when doing your spark and by the amount of time you spend on it
- 3. You take initiative to develop your spark

As shown in Figure 11, these three elements combine to create the Sparks Index. Overall, 51 percent of teens score high on this index. That is, about half of 15-year-olds (1) know their spark, (2) recognize it as important (by their feelings about it and the time they spend with it), and (3) take initiative to develop it. So while a high number of teens say they know their spark, there is still an important gap in the proportion of teens who are fully engaging with their spark.

## Connecting Sparks to Teen Outcomes

Knowing your spark, seeing it as important, and taking initiative to develop it (taken together, scoring high on the Sparks Index) is powerfully connected to a variety of youth outcomes (Figure 15). For example, those scoring high on this Sparks Index are more likely than those low on the index to have a sense of purpose and hope, a positive sense of their own ethnic identity, and to be more involved in community issues.

The connections to school success are particularly important in a time when the nation is focused on academic achievement and college and career readiness. Teens who score high on the Sparks Index are more likely than their peers to work to master what they study and more likely to work up to their ability in school. They are also more likely to report having a high grade point average (GPA).

In addition, 71 percent said pursuing their sparks has helped them a lot or a great deal to learn new or extra things outside of school, and nearly six in ten (57 percent) said pursuing their sparks had given them a lot or a great deal of new skills that would help them in a career. Thus, schools' efforts to help students identify and pursue their deep interests and passions (their sparks) may be key strategies for boosting achievement as well as college and career readiness.

Teens who score high on the Sparks Index are more likely than their peers to work to master what they study and more likely to work up to their ability in school. They are also more likely to report having a high grade point average

## Relationships That Nurture Sparks

Though sparks emphasize teens' own passions and interests, they are more likely to flourish when supported and encouraged by the important people and places in teens'

lives. This connection links the previous discussion of adult relationships with the focus on sparks. Figure 16 shows that the teens with a high score on the Relationships and Opportunities Index are 86 percent more likely to score high on the Sparks Index. Teens with sparks are both more likely to have a meaningful relationship with caring adults and more likely to have that relationship be of a higher quality. For example, teens who score high on sparks are much more likely to say they have an adult who “gets” them (71 percent, versus 45 percent for those who score low on the Sparks Index).

It is impossible to know from these data whether teens who know their sparks have more opportunities for adult relationships or whether those who have more relationships develop a more active understanding of their spark. It is most likely that it is a two-way street. Caring adults offer more possibilities for young people to identify and grow their sparks. And adults are drawn toward teens with sparks, probably because of both their specific interests and their general enthusiasm. Either way, the result is positive.

### *Who Helps with Sparks*

Most youth who have a spark (76% percent) say that other people have “often” encouraged or supported them with their sparks. This support is most likely to come from a parent (68 percent), especially from their mothers (Figure 17). In addition, most of these young people (58 percent) say a mentor or role model also encourages them to pursue their sparks, and almost half point to their friends or grandparents or other extended family members as people who encourage their sparks. But beyond that, *fewer than one-third of teens who know their sparks say teachers, coaches, religious leaders, and neighbors frequently encourage them.*

Relationships and sparks appear to have the most power when they are linked to each other. However, about 23 percent of teens with high sparks score low on the Relationship Index, suggesting that they do not have strong connections to caring adults outside their family. Furthermore, about 14 percent of youth with high relationship scores are low on the Sparks Index. Thus, some teens develop a spark without having strong relationships with adults outside their family, and some have strong relationships with adults but do not know their sparks.

### *How People Help with Sparks*

Parents, mentors, friends, and other caring adults are often key to helping teens discover their spark. In our face-to-face interviews with teens in three cities, we asked them how they first discovered their sparks. They often talked about a parent or family member who encouraged them to try something, signed them up for a class, or taught them.

Then, once they had begun developing their spark, these same people encouraged them, challenged them to grow, expressed appreciation, asked for demonstrations of the spark, attended activities or concerts, or in other ways showed their support for the teen to develop her or his spark. Figure 18 shows some of the concrete ways that teens say various people help them nourish their spark. Parents and adult mentors are most likely to support teens in these concrete ways, with friends and other family members often playing important roles.

Neighbors are the least likely of these groups to provide general encouragement, financial support, or transportation. Also low, overall, are religious leaders, coaches, or

teachers. However, these percentages are higher for those youth who are part of a religious community (Figure 19). In fact, religiously connected teens get more frequent support from every potential source of support, and for every kind of support studied, whether it is providing simple encouragement, financial support, or transportation. The differences are sometimes dramatic, suggesting the powerful positive influence that intentional communities and other elements of religious commitments can have on young people.

### Not All Help Is Welcomed

Teens do not always accept adults' offers of support or help with their sparks. A sizeable proportion of 15-year-olds, 23 percent, say they have turned down an adult who wanted to help them nurture their sparks. For a third of those youth, the rejection was simply because the teen was just not interested in being helped, or wanted to do an activity on her or his own.

But 6% of those who had turned down an adult said it was at least partly because the adult really didn't understand them, and another 20 percent listed reasons relating to the personality of the adult, such as feeling threatened by them, or not being comfortable with them.

So, although adult encouragement and active help can be a positive resource for teenagers, offers of support coming out of the blue from an adult who barely knows a youth, even if the adult means well, may not be accepted. Rather, support needs to be provided within the context of a relationship that has had sufficient frequency and depth of contact that the youth feels understood and comfortable with the adult.

In addition, some teens said that adults have discouraged them from developing their sparks (Figure 20). They are most likely to say they have been discouraged by a parent or friend (15 percent), while grandparents and teachers also sometimes discourage their sparks. It is impossible to know from this study the reasons for the teens being discouraged. But it is important to recognize that some people will not be supportive for various reasons. Sometimes people will be discouraging due to practical reasons (such as cost or time), and other times discouragement stems from the need to provide a dose of reality (such as the low likelihood of a teen with a basketball spark actually playing in the NBA or WNBA). In the 2009 study, we explored these dynamics in more depth. Most often, teens said these people simply "didn't encourage or support me" (56 percent). But these adults also told the teens they should focus energy elsewhere (55 percent), said it was a waste of time (53 percent), and said they were not good enough (34 percent).

*Offers of support coming out of the blue from an adult who barely knows a youth, even if the adult means well, may not be accepted.*

### Making Sparks Matter in the World

Having a spark can be a wonderful experience. You lose track of time, become completely absorbed, and feel deep joy. But sparks could also become self-centered or isolating if they are nurtured outside of positive relationships, or without a broader context of beliefs and values about the ways a spark can be used to bring joy, peace, beauty, comfort, or healing to the world. That's where the next strength, Voice, comes in. Voice focuses on providing opportunities for teens to ask and answer the question: how do I use my spark and passions to make the world around me a better place?

FIGURE 11: SPARK LEVELS, BY DEMOGRAPHICS

% HIGH ON SPARKS INDEX*	
ALL	51%
Highest Parent Education	
High school or less	47% <sup>b</sup>
Some college	49% <sup>b</sup>
College	54% <sup>a</sup>
Graduate school	59% <sup>a</sup>
Gender	
Female	53%
Male	49%
Race/ethnicity	
African American	50%
Hispanic/Latino	53%
White	50%
Type of City	
Urban	53%
Suburban	50%
Small town/rural	50%
Region of the United States	
East	53%
South	51%
Midwest	49%
West	53%

\* A high score in the Sparks Index indicates that the teen can name a spark (1 point); sees it as “quite important” and as a source of joy, energy, and focus (1 point); and takes initiative to develop that spark (1 point). 0 points = no spark; 1 point = low spark; and 2 or 3 points = high spark.

a,b Percentages with differing superscripts are significantly different from each other. In this table, for example, youth whose parents have only some college or less are less likely to score high on the Sparks Index than are youth whose parents have at least a college education.

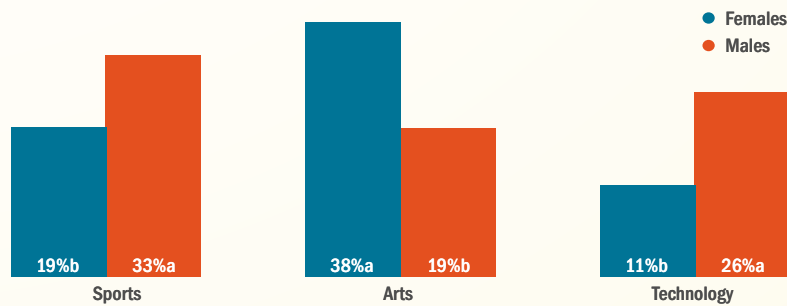


FIGURE 12: TYPES OF SPARKS

Here are the percentages of youth who say they know their sparks and who identify each of the following types of interests as their primary spark.

TYPE OF SPARK	DEFINITION	2010 SURVEY	2009 SURVEY
Creative arts	Participating in or leading art, dance, drama, music, writing, or other creative activities.	28%	24%
Sports	Participating in sports, athletics, or other physical activities.	26%	28%
Technology	Using computers, electronics, or other types of technology.	19%	15%
Studying or learning	Studying, reading, doing research, or other ways of learning.	7%	7%
Nature or the outdoors	Being in nature, caring for animals, or participating in outdoor recreation.	6%	6%
Religion or spirituality	Doing religious or spiritual activities, or learning about religions or spirituality.	4%	5%
Service and activism	Serving others, participating in politics, or working on social issues.	2%	3%
Construction and engineering	Doing construction, architecture, or other types of mechanics or engineering.	2%	3%
Teaching	Teaching, leading others, or public speaking.	2%	2%
Entrepreneurship	Being an entrepreneur, running a business, or inventing things.	1%	3%
Other		3%	4%

FIGURE 13: GENDER DIFFERENCES IN MOST COMMON SPARKS



a,b Percentages in the same row with differing superscripts are significantly different from each other.

FIGURE 14: FEELINGS OF ENGAGEMENT WHEN INVOLVED WITH SPARKS

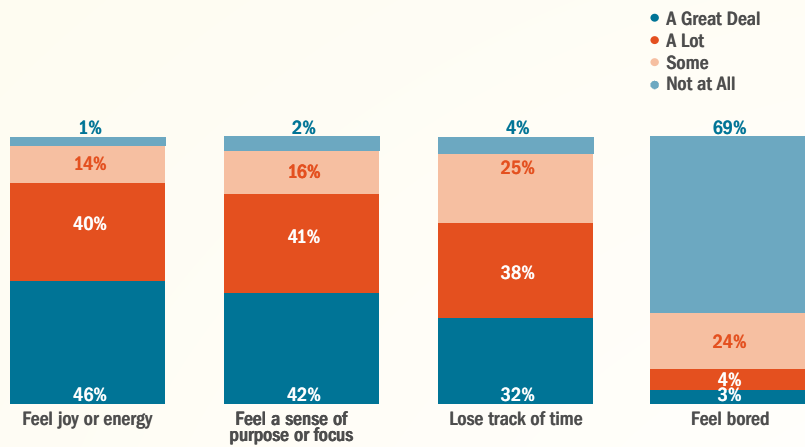


FIGURE 15: PERCENTAGE HAVING OUTCOMES, BY LEVELS OF SPARKS INDEX

	HIGH	LOW
Goals to master what they study at school.	69%	41%
Very often work up to their ability at school.	45%	30%
Have a grade point average of 3.5 (B+) or higher.	70%	51%
Have a sense of purpose and hope for their future.	48%	17%
Have served as a leader in the last year.	68%	52%
Have a positive sense of their ethnic identity.	36%	34%
Believe it is important to help others and correct social inequalities.	57%	36%
Believe it is important for them to be involved in community issues.	42%	32%

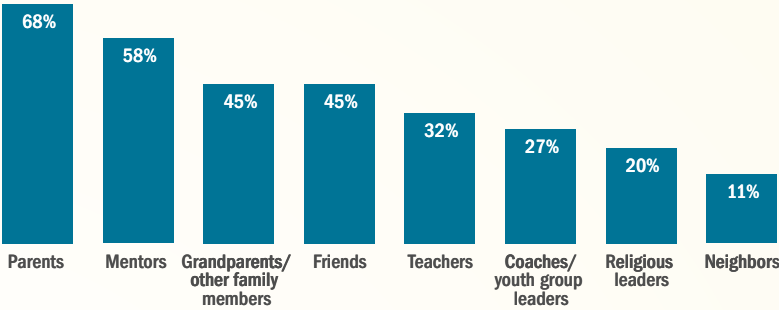
NOTE: Differences between the high and low scores are statistically significant for all of these items.

FIGURE 16: HIGH SPARKS LINKS WITH STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships and Opportunities Score	HIGH ON SPARKS INDEX	LOW ON SPARKS INDEX	DIFFERENCE FAVORING SPARKS
High	26%	14%	+86%
Medium	51%	34%	+50%
Low	23%	51%	-55%

**FIGURE 17:** PEOPLE WHO ENCOURAGE AND SUPPORT SPARKS

Percent of 15-year-olds who “often” get encouragement and support to pursue their sparks from each group of people.



**FIGURE 18:** DIFFERENT WAYS THAT DIFFERENT PEOPLE HELP WITH SPARKS

Here are the percentages of teens who say each person or group often or sometimes helps them pursue their sparks in specific ways.

	GIVING ENCOURAGEMENT OR SUPPORT, OR PUSHING THEM TO GET BETTER	PROVIDING MONEY OR FINANCIAL HELP	PROVIDING TRANSPORTATION
Parents	82%	80%	79%
Mentor	81%	56%	49%
Friends	76%	41%	42%
Grandparent or other family members	70%	58%	44%
Teachers, counselors, or other adults at school	59%	31%	20%
Coach or other adult in youth organization or after-school activity	47%	26%	20%
Religious leader, coach, or teacher	38%	23%	18%
Neighbors	31%	20%	19%

FIGURE 19: DIFFERENT WAYS THAT DIFFERENT PEOPLE HELP WITH SPARKS

Here are the percentages of teens who say each person or group often or sometimes helps them pursue their sparks in specific ways, according to whether or not they participate weekly in a religious community.

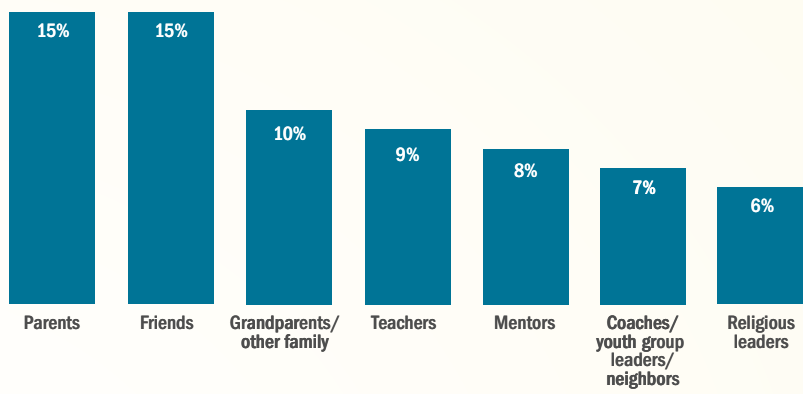
	Level of teen religious involvement	Giving encouragement or support, or pushing them to get better	Providing money or financial help	Providing transportation
Parents	Attend weekly Attend less	84% 80%	83% 78%	81% 75%
Mentor	Attend weekly Attend less	48% 32%	35% 21%	29% 19%
Friends	Attend weekly Attend less	79% 73%	44% 36%	49% 34%
Grandparent or other family members	Attend weekly Attend less	76% 62%	64% 51%	50% 37%
Teachers, counselors, or other adults at school	Attend weekly Attend less	64% 53%	36% 25%	24% 14%
Coach or other adult in youth organization or after-school activity	Attend weekly Attend less	59% 35%	33% 19%	27% 12%
Religious leader, coach, or teacher	Attend weekly Attend less	55% 16%	35% 10%	27% 7%
Neighbors	Attend weekly Attend less	38% 23%	24% 14%	24% 13%

NOTE: Differences between the weekly attendees and other teens are statistically significant for all of these items.



**FIGURE 20:** PEOPLE WHO DISCOURAGE SPARKS

Percent of 15-year-olds who say they have been discouraged from pursuing their sparks by each group of people.



# 4 VOICE



In addition to having supportive relationships and a clear sense of their own sparks, teens need confidence, skills, and opportunities to speak up about and influence the things that matter to them in their lives, their families, their communities, and the world. We call this “teen voice.” Through voice, teens express their sparks in the world and take on meaningful roles in contributing to their families, schools, and communities.

### *Dimensions of Teen Voice*

The Teen Voice Index seeks to measure these experiences in young people’s lives. It includes the following measures:

**LEADERSHIP**—Has had a leadership role in the past year.

**PERSONAL POWER**—Has the ability to make good things happen in his or her life.

**COMFORT EXPRESSING VOICE**—Feels comfortable suggesting activities, sharing ideas about rules, and helping to organize activities.

**COMMUNITY PROBLEM SOLVING**—Believes he or she can help solve community problems.

**CIVIC INVOLVEMENT**—Plans to be involved, or has already been involved, in political and civic life.

### *Experiences of Teen Voice*

Overall, just 22 percent of all 15-year-olds score high on this year’s TVI (Figure 21). Within the index, closer-to-home elements are more common among teens. For example, about six in ten teens have been in a leadership position at least once in the past year, and a slight majority (56 percent) felt they had the personal power to make good things happen in their own lives. Similarly, about the same proportion (55 percent) felt at least somewhat comfortable suggesting activities to adults and sharing their ideas with adults.

Given that only half of the youth surveyed are comfortable with expressing their voices close to home, it is not surprising that only minorities of 15-year-olds feel they can make even “some” difference in helping to solve problems in their communities (36 percent), or expect to be involved in future civic political activity (31 percent), besides casting votes.

Levels of teen voice are fairly consistent across various demographic differences. That is, regardless of gender, race/ethnicity, geography, or community size, teens in the study are all just about as likely as their peers to score high on the TVI. However, those whose parents have more education tend to have a stronger sense of their own voices than those whose parents have not completed high school or college.

## *The Power of Teen Voice*

Developing the confidence, skills, and opportunities to express—and influence—what's important to you is an important part of becoming active in community and civic life. Teens who score high on the TVI are much more likely to do well in school, have a sense of purpose in life, have a positive ethnic identity, and volunteer at least one hour a week (Figure 22). Conversely, not giving young people the skills and opportunities to express what matters to them may not only stifle their energy and commitment, but may also interfere with other educational and life outcomes as they become less engaged in community and civic life.

## *What Matters to Teens?*

Central to the teen voice concept is the goal of having young people tap their relationships and express their sparks in ways that contribute to the good of their families, schools, communities, and society. Though there are many other values that could be examined, we focused on the seven values shown in Figure 23. Consistent with the 2009 study, most teens do not place high importance on several social values. Overall, 46 percent rated the prosocial values high, and 36 percent rated the civic commitments as being important.

There were, however, important differences among the teens surveyed. Females rate most values higher than males do (with the exception of serving one's country) and African Americans (and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Hispanic/Latino youth) rate them more important than do white youth, with the exception of two items for which there are no significant racial/ethnic differences (contributing to society and serving one's country).

## *Teen Voice and Sparks*

Interestingly, only a small percentage of teens say serving others or civic or political activism is itself a personal spark for them. However, young people who are high on the Sparks Index are also more likely to have almost all the components of the Teen Voice Index. They are more likely to be leaders, be comfortable expressing their voices, feel they can help solve community problems, and feel a sense of personal power. So although these civic activities might not, of themselves, be things young people are particularly passionate about, young people who have sparks are far more likely to be civically active as well.

## *Relationships Matter for Teen Voice*

Teens who have a strong web of relationships with adults (as captured in the section on relationships) are more likely to score high on the Teen Voice Index as a whole, as well as its individual parts (Figure 24). Even among teens with these positive and close supportive relationships, however, teens still do not feel very capable of meaningful community engagement or that their actions will make a difference in the world.

## *Speaking Up Close to Home*

Most 15-year-olds appear not to be focused on tapping their sparks to tackle major social issues (though some are). Instead, they may find their voices closer to home in their families, schools, and communities. Lauren (not her real name), for example, finds her voice on the Teen Advisory Council (TAC) at her school in Ann Arbor, Michigan. "In TAC last year, I

was really quiet,” she recalls. “Then this year, I actually say my ideas and stuff. It’s more comfortable, because you’re with your friends and peers. . . . You just feel like you’re going to have more support when you tell them your ideas than if you’re just telling a bunch of adults your ideas.”

But adults can also be important allies, Lauren says. “We planned a gala for TAC earlier this year, and then one of the themes I suggested ended up being the theme of our gala. And so you actually get to see the outcome—and that the adults listen.

“When they react and say, ‘Oh, yeah, that’s good!’ You can actually feel that they like it. Instead of just being like, ‘Oh, yeah, good job.’ Then they actually are like, ‘Oh, my gosh, yeah! We can do this with it.’ Then there’s just a feeling of accomplishment.

“It’s nice to know that other people agree with you. You don’t want to have people disagree with you all the time! But when they agree, you just feel happy and accomplished, because you’re getting your ideas out there and having them be put into action.”

Lauren’s experience shows how finding opportunities to influence tangible things close to home may set the stage for broader involvement in the future. It also speaks to the important ways the combination of the three strengths—voice, sparks, and relationships—can help teens begin to discover their place in the world.

**FIGURE 21:** TEENS WITH HIGH SCORES ON THE TEEN VOICE INDEX

Percentages of 15-year-olds scoring high on the Teen Voice Index*		22%
Percent experiencing each element of the Teen Voice Index		
Personal power		56%
Community problem solving		36%
Civic involvement		31%
Comfort expressing voice		55%
Leadership		61%

\* Teens received one point for scoring high on each of the dimensions of teen voice, with a maximum index score of 5. For some analyses, we created low, medium, and high Voice Index groups among those with 0–1, 2–3, and 4–5 index points. When “leadership” was used as an outcome variable, it was dropped from the index and the groups, from low to high, were those with 0–1, 2–3, and 4 index points. See Technical Appendix 1 for more information.



FIGURE 22: PERCENTAGE HAVING OUTCOMES, BY LEVELS OF THE TEEN VOICE INDEX

OUTCOME	HIGH	LOW
Volunteer 1 hr/week or more [those in after-school programs].	57%	14%
Goals to master what they study at school.	77%	36%
Work up to their ability at school.	48%	24%
Have a grade point average of 3.5 (B+) or higher.	78%	47%
Have a sense of purpose and hope for their future.	56%	16%
Have a positive sense of their ethnic identity.	53%	14%
Believe it is important to help others and correct social inequalities.	69%	25%
Believe it is important for them to be involved in community issues.	53%	21%

NOTE: Differences between the high and low scores are statistically significant for all of these items.

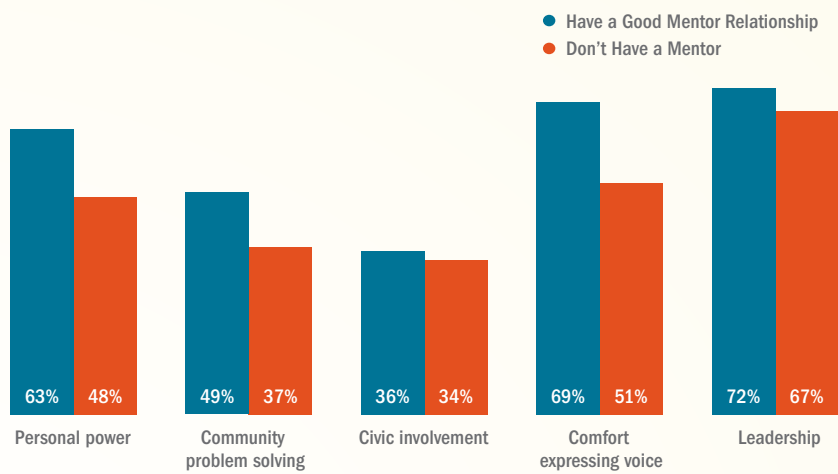
FIGURE 23: TEENS' SOCIAL VALUES AND COMMITMENTS, BY GENDER AND RACE/ETHNICITY

	GENDER			RACE/ETHNICITY		
	ALL	Female	Male	African American	White	Hispanic/Latino
Prosocial Values						
Finding purpose and meaning	82%	86% <sup>m</sup>	77%	89% <sup>wh</sup>	80%	81%
Contributing to society	64%	70% <sup>m</sup>	58%	69%	62%	61%
Correcting social inequalities	50%	53% <sup>m</sup>	47%	64% <sup>w</sup>	43%	57% <sup>w</sup>
Being a community leader	45%	45%	44%	59% <sup>wh</sup>	39%	47% <sup>w</sup>
Importance of Civic Commitments						
Helping the poor	58%	63% <sup>m</sup>	53%	76% <sup>wh</sup>	51%	63% <sup>w</sup>
Improving race relations	49%	53% <sup>m</sup>	45%	72% <sup>wh</sup>	39%	55% <sup>w</sup>
Serving my country	38%	36%	41% <sup>f</sup>	36%	39%	39%

<sup>m, f</sup> Percentages with these superscripts indicate that the percentages of females (f) are significantly different from the percentages for males (m).

<sup>h, w</sup> Percentages with these superscripts indicate that the percentages for African Americans are significantly different from the percentages for Hispanic/Latino (h) or white (w) youth.

**FIGURE 24:** EXPERIENCES OF TEEN VOICE, BY MENTOR RELATIONSHIP



NOTE: Differences between those who have a good mentor relationship and those who do not have a mentor are statistically significant for all of these items except for civic involvement.

5

# PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER



Each of these strengths—relationships, sparks, and voice—matter for teens. Each also has the potential to reinforce and complement the others. Some teens will grow up successfully without all of these strengths in their lives—but it is likely to be harder. So *Teen Voice 2010*'s confirmation of how few of today's 15-year-olds experience high levels of these three strengths is a wake-up call for all who are committed to teens' healthy development.

### *Relationships, Sparks, and Voice: The More, The Better*

The pattern is clear and consistent: teens who enjoy *high levels on all three* of the strengths do the best of all—on every academic, psychological, social-emotional, and behavioral outcome we studied. These findings almost exactly replicate the results of last year's study, *Teen Voice 2009*, and are consistent with other extensive research on young people's positive development.<sup>8</sup>

Figure 25 shows how the three strengths add together for more power. Every increase in the number of strengths results in an increase in the percentage of teens reporting the outcomes. Even those teens who score high on just one of the three strengths are better off than those with none. Those who scored high on two strengths are better off than those with one. And, on average, those with high levels of all three strengths are considerably better off even than those who are high on two of the three strengths.

So these strengths matter. Young people with high levels of sparks, relationships, and voice are on the path to doing well in the next phases of their lives too, as young adults who begin to take their place as the parents, teachers, police officers, artists, inventors, child care providers, construction workers, and leaders of our communities.

### *Too Few Teens Experience These Strengths*

As important as these strengths are, too few teens experience them. More than one-third of 15-year-olds (38 percent) surveyed did not score high on any of the three indexes. And only 7 percent of the 15-year-olds experienced high levels of all three strengths.

What's more, this gap is evident among all the groups of teens in this study (Figure 26): both females and males, and African Americans, Hispanic/Latinos, and Whites. Teens whose parents have at least a college education do a little better. But even among these youth, only 10 percent experience high levels of all three strengths (compared to 3 percent for those whose parents who are without a high school education).

The challenge for America is that—as we have now found in two consecutive national studies—fewer than one in ten 15-year-olds experiences strength in all three of these critical areas. This consistency suggests that these issues are not just passing trends; rather, they represent consistent challenges that we must address as a society.

It is important to note that the primary gap isn't that teens don't know their sparks. In fact, at least half of teens surveyed (51 percent) score high on the Sparks Index (Figure 27). The gap involves the ways adults in society listen to and build relationships with teens. Only about one in five has a high level of relationships (19 percent) or voice (22 percent). We might say that this is not a "youth problem." It is an "adult problem."

FIGURE 25: TEENS REPORTING EACH OUTCOME, BASED ON THE NUMBER OF STRENGTHS THEY EXPERIENCE

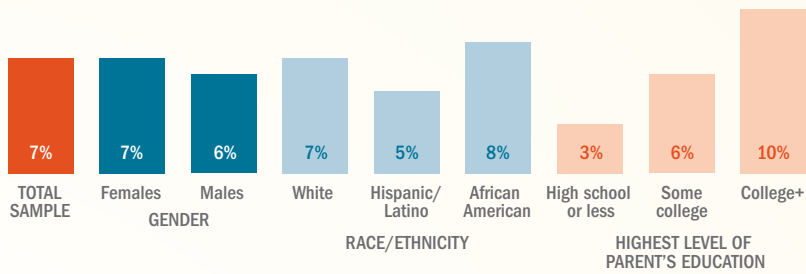
OUTCOME	NUMBER OF STRENGTHS ON WHICH TEENS SCORE HIGH			
	0 of 3 Strengths	1 of 3 Strengths	2 of 3 Strengths	All 3 Strengths
Volunteer 1 hr/week or more	23% <sup>c</sup>	30% <sup>c</sup>	52% <sup>b</sup>	73% <sup>a</sup>
Have not missed any days of school in the last month*	82% <sup>b</sup>	86% <sup>a,b</sup>	89% <sup>a,b</sup>	97% <sup>a</sup>
Have goals to master what they study at school	38% <sup>d</sup>	59% <sup>c</sup>	79% <sup>b</sup>	90% <sup>a</sup>
Work up to their ability at school	27% <sup>d</sup>	36% <sup>c</sup>	51% <sup>b</sup>	69% <sup>a</sup>
Have a grade point average of 3.5 (B+) or higher	55% <sup>c</sup>	61% <sup>b</sup>	78% <sup>a</sup>	83% <sup>a</sup>
Have a sense of purpose and hope for their future	15% <sup>d</sup>	36% <sup>c</sup>	57% <sup>b</sup>	77% <sup>a</sup>
Have served as a leader in the last year	46% <sup>d</sup>	59% <sup>c</sup>	85% <sup>b</sup>	99% <sup>a</sup>
Have a positive sense of their ethnic identity	19% <sup>d</sup>	30% <sup>c</sup>	48% <sup>b</sup>	67% <sup>a</sup>
Believe it is important to help others and correct social inequalities	28% <sup>d</sup>	50% <sup>c</sup>	66% <sup>b</sup>	86% <sup>a</sup>
Believe it is important for them to be involved in community issues	23% <sup>d</sup>	35% <sup>c</sup>	51% <sup>b</sup>	69% <sup>a</sup>
Are not worried about getting arrested or being treated unfairly by police	33% <sup>b</sup>	38% <sup>b</sup>	46% <sup>a</sup>	57% <sup>a</sup>
Say they do not experience racial discrimination	51% <sup>c</sup>	57% <sup>b,c</sup>	68% <sup>b</sup>	87% <sup>a</sup>
Do not engage in vandalism*	83% <sup>b</sup>	86% <sup>a</sup>	90% <sup>a,b</sup>	96% <sup>a</sup>

a, b, c, d Percentages in a given row that have different superscripts are significantly different from each other.

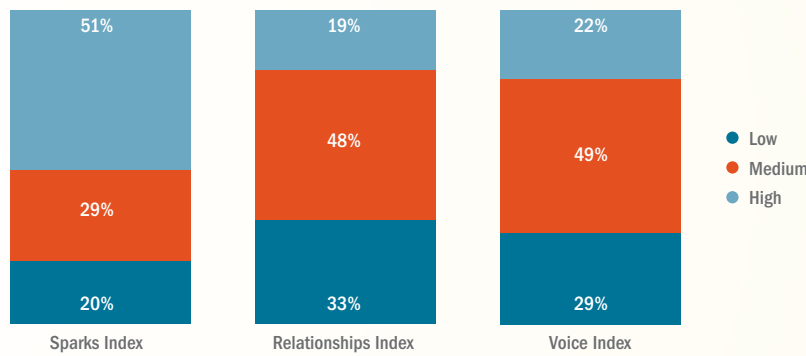
\* Because the vast majority of teens do not skip school and do not engage in vandalism, the differences on those outcomes are less striking. However, even for those outcomes, youth with high levels of the strengths do better than those with low levels.



**FIGURE 26:** TEENS SCORING HIGH ON ALL THREE STRENGTHS, BY INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES



**FIGURE 27:** LEVELS OF EACH STRENGTH AMONG 15-YEAR-OLDS



A close-up, slightly blurred photograph of two teenagers. On the right, a young man with dark hair is looking towards the left. On the left, a young woman with dark hair is looking towards the right. They appear to be in conversation. The image has a soft, painterly quality with a blueish tint.

**6**

# **A CALL TO ACTION AND ADVICE FROM TEENS**

The U.S. Bureau of the Census estimated that, as of November 2009, the time of this survey, there were 4.1 million 15-year-olds residing in the United States.<sup>9</sup> To the extent these results can be generalized, our study suggests that millions of them—3.9 million—are not receiving the kinds of relationships, opportunities, and supports that they need to enjoy the optimal well-being we want for them, and that all teens deserve.

There is no question that providing these opportunities to develop sparks, relationships, and voice could propel millions more 15-year-olds onto better developmental paths. And though this study focuses on 15-year-olds, thousands of other studies over the past 20 years confirm that the same kinds of developmental strengths would be as beneficial for all other young people, regardless of their specific ages.

Helping youth experience a high level of sparks, relationships, and voice is not an insurmountable challenge. There are, of course, investment and policy implications. Yet the change may most effectively start with individual adults—parents, teachers, neighbors, grandparents, mentors, coaches, aunts, uncles, religious leaders . . . and others from all walks of life. The change starts when each of us takes the time and effort to re-examine the ways we can or could connect with, listen to, and seek to nurture these basic strengths in our nation’s teens.

What might adults do? In in-depth interviews with 30 15-year-olds, we asked them what adults did and didn’t do that told them that the adults cared, were paying attention, and really understood them. We also asked them for their advice to their fellow teens about overcoming the challenges of growing up. Here are action ideas, based on what they said.<sup>10</sup>

*Advice from Teens to Adults*

- LOOK AT US. Make eye contact.
- SPEND TIME TALKING WITH US. Ask open-ended questions. Build on the conversation.
- LISTEN. Pay attention. Don't multi-task or get distracted when you're with us. Respond to our messages and texts.
- BE DEPENDABLE. Do what you say you're going to do.
- SHOW APPRECIATION FOR WHAT WE DO. Give compliments. Show that you're glad to see us or hear from us. Send us personalized cards.
- RELAX. Don't feel like you have to be on guard.
- SHOW THAT YOU'RE INTERESTED. Attend our concerts, games, and other events. Ask us to show you what we can do.
- LAUGH WITH US (AND AT YOURSELF). Laugh at our jokes. Show us your humor.
- SHOW THAT YOU'RE CONFIDENT IN US. Let us know you're convinced that we can do things.
- ASK US TO HELP YOU. Ask us for our ideas. Share your own, too.
- CHALLENGE US. Teach us what you know. Push us to do our best.

### *Advice from Teens to Teens*

All of the power doesn't lie with adults, however. Teens themselves also have a responsibility to face challenges and make their own choices. They don't have to wait for adults to make new things happen. The teens we interviewed had the following advice for their peers when facing new challenges.

**JUMP IN.** Try to make something happen on a small level. It will get bigger the more time you put into it.

**TRUST YOURSELF.** Don't let others bother you. Do what you think you should do.

**ASK FOR HELP.** Talk with someone you can trust—an adult or your best friend. They will help motivate you and find ways to move forward.

**WORK HARD.** If you believe in yourself and are willing to work hard, you can do it.

**HAVE FUN.** If you really like something, don't let challenges get in your way.

**DON'T GIVE UP, EVEN IF YOU HIT A PLATEAU.** Just keep doing it until you get it right.

### *Supporting Teens toward a Hopeful Future*

Like all generations, today's teens face important challenges in growing up. Some of those challenges are newer (such as technology and globalization); others have been around for a long time (such as sorting out your own identity and making choices between helpful and harmful activities). Each generation must face these challenges with the perspectives and resources that are available to it.

Our study reveals that most teenagers have a clear sense of their own sparks—things about them that can make a difference in the world. And most also have strong and supportive parents who invest tremendously in helping them grow up well, often against the odds.

This study underscores the powerful role that adults other than parents can also play in young people's lives. Teens who form relationships with other adults who "get" them, listen to them, and are role models for them have important advantages in facing these challenges. And that's a role that virtually every caring and responsible adult can play in helping millions of today's teens stay—or get—on a path to a hopeful future for themselves, their families, and their communities.





## ABOUT @15

At Best Buy, we believe in the power of young people today. We are committed to investing in the strengths of young people and showcasing their unique value because they are vital to Best Buy's business and the communities we serve.

That's why we created @15, a youth engagement program to activate young people as leaders in driving social change through technology. Best Buy is putting the power in the hands of young people through @15 because we know they are a critical part of the world and bring passion and enthusiasm to tackling tough issues. We think there's a real opportunity to listen to—and learn from—what young people have to say.

### About Best Buy Co., Inc.

With operations in the United States, Canada, Europe, China, Mexico and Turkey, 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 \$49 billion in annual revenue and includes brands such as Best Buy; Best Buy Mobile; Audiovisions; The Carphone Warehouse; Future Shop; Geek Squad, Jiangsu Five Star; Magnolia Audio Video; Napster; Pacific Sales; The Phone House; and Speakeasy.

Approximately 180,000 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 2010, we donated a combined \$25.2 million to improve the vitality of the communities where our employees and customers live and work. For more information about Best Buy, visit [www.bestbuy.com](http://www.bestbuy.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](http://www.search-institute.org) and [www.parentfurther.com](http://www.parentfurther.com).

### 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 • Go North! • National Urban League • National Council of La Raza • Science Museum of Minnesota • Do Something • Students Today Leaders Forever • Youth Service America



## TECHNICAL APPENDIX 1: THE ONLINE SURVEY

### The Survey Instrument

*Teen Voice 2010* used a substantial core of items and measures identical to those employed in the *Teen Voice 2009* study, thereby enabling the comparisons cited in the current report. Details on these repeated measures can be found in Scales, Roehlkepartain, & Benson (2009),<sup>11</sup> and Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain (2010).<sup>12</sup>

Several of those previous measures also were modified and a number of new measures were included, most adapted from measures previously shown to have acceptable psychometric properties. A new measure of youth's comfort expressing their voices was added to the *Teen Voice Index*, adapted from the "student voice" measure in Search Institute's school climate survey. Search Institute's measures of the Developmental Assets of "other adult relationships" and "community values youth," taken from the *Search Institute Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors* survey, also were added this year.

Several items assessing how adults outside the family relate to teens were adapted from the institute's Adult-Youth Engagement Survey, which itself was developed based on its series of national Grading Grown-Ups/Other People's Kids studies in the early 2000s.<sup>13</sup> Some new items were created to measure ways of behaving in those adults who youth say "get" them. Finally, a measure of the quality of mentoring relationships was adapted from the Mentor Quality Survey developed by Zand et al. (2008).<sup>14</sup>

### Sample and Data Collection Procedures

**Sampling Procedures**—Harris Interactive, Inc., invited a stratified random sample through password-protected e-mail invitations to participate in a survey titled "We want to know about you and what you do!" Qualified respondents were 15-year-old U.S. residents. A representative sample of 1,860 15-year-old U.S. residents was surveyed online. Interviews averaged 20 minutes in length and were conducted between October 12 and November 9, 2009.

**Sample Selection**—Sample was obtained primarily from the Harris Poll Online (HPOL) opt-in panel of millions of respondents and supplemented with samples from trusted partners. Invitations for the HPOL panel were e-mailed to a stratified random sample identified as U.S. residents who were 15 years old or U.S. residents who were 18 years or older with a 15-year-old child in the household. In the case of the latter, invitations noted that the survey was intended for the 15-year-old child in the household.

The HPOL panel has been recruited through hundreds of sources using diverse recruitment methods in order to minimize selection bias, including: co-registration offers on partner Web sites; targeted e-mails sent by online partners to their audiences; graphical and text banner placements on partner Web sites; refer-a-friend programs; client supplied sample opt-ins; tradeshow presentations; targeted postal mail invitations; TV advertisements; and telephone recruitment of targeted populations.

**Sample Disposition**—A total of 53,470 invitations, excluding bounce backs, were sent to

panelists, resulting in 4,638 total respondents and 1,860 qualified respondents in the final sample.

*Control of the Sample*—To maintain the reliability and integrity in the sample, the following procedures were used:

- **Password protection.** Each invitation contained a password-protected link to the survey that was uniquely assigned to that e-mail address. Password protection ensures that a respondent completes the survey only one time.
- **Reminder invitations.** To increase the number of respondents in the survey, a reminder invitation was mailed two days after the initial invitation to those respondents who had not yet participated in the survey.
- **“Instant Results” of selected survey findings.** To improve overall response rates, respondents were invited to access results to pre-determined, selected questions after completing the survey.
- **HIPoints<sup>SM</sup> and HStakes<sup>SM</sup>.** HPOL panel members (aged 13 and older, and not recruited through parent) are enrolled in the HIPoints rewards program in which respondents earn points for completing surveys. These points can be redeemed for a variety of merchandise and gift certificates. In addition, survey respondents are offered entry in the monthly HStakes sweepstakes drawing.

*Online Interviewing Procedures*—Interviews were conducted using a self-administered online survey via Harris’ proprietary, Web-assisted interviewing software. The Harris Online interviewing system permits online data entry by the respondents.

Online questionnaires are programmed into the system with the following checks: question and response series; skip patterns; question rotation; range checks; mathematical checks; consistency checks; and special edit procedures. For questions with pre-coded responses, the system only permits answers within a specified range; for example, if a question has three possible answer choices (“Agree,” “Disagree,” “Not Sure”), the system will accept only one response from these choices.

*Weighting the Data*—Data were weighted to reflect the population of 15-year-olds in the U.S. according to three race/ethnicity groups: Hispanic/Latino, 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*—The results from any survey sample are subject to sampling variation. The magnitude of this 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 1,860 one could say with a ninety-five percent 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.

*Editing and Cleaning the Data*—The data processing staff performs machine edits and additional cleaning for the entire data set. Harris' edit programs act as a verification of the skip instructions and other data checks that are written into the program. The edit programs list any errors by case and type. These are then resolved by personnel who inspect the original file and make appropriate corrections. Complete records are kept of all such procedures.

*Non-Sampling Error*—Sampling error is only one way in which survey findings may vary from the findings that would result from interviewing every member of the relevant population. Survey research is susceptible to human and mechanical errors as well, such as data handling errors. However, the procedures used by Harris Interactive, including the data processing quality assurance process described earlier, keep these types of errors to a minimum.

*Data Analysis*—Harris Interactive conducted initial frequency and cross-tabulation analysis on all items, and prepared an initial report for Search Institute. Search Institute constructed the indexes and all component measures within the indexes, and conducted additional frequency, cross-tabulation, and analyses of variance on these measures, as well as drawing on the initial Harris report, to create the current report.

## The Indexes

Search Institute developed three indexes, which provide the analytic structure for this study. They are the Relationships and Opportunities Index (ROI), the Sparks Index, and the Teen Voice Index (TVI). The survey also included several measures of youth outcomes.

### RELATIONSHIPS AND OPPORTUNITIES INDEX (ROI)

The Relationships and Opportunities Index was created out of these variables:

1. General Supportive Actions of Others
2. (a) Specific Supportive Adult Actions; and (b) Other Adult Relationships
3. Adult Who "Gets" Youth or High-Quality Mentor Relationship
4. Youth as Resources
5. Community Values Youth
6. Participate Weekly in High-Quality After-School Programs
7. Connection of Talents to four themes in the Best Buy Children's Foundation's agenda: Lead, Love, Learn, Live
8. Perceived Racial Fairness

The items that measure these constructs are mostly about relational aspects, i.e., how youth perceive they are treated, or the quality of relationships and interactions they have.

Responses were scored by giving one point for each of these eight constructs, for a maximum index score of 8. However, if they had been “actively discouraged” from pursuing their sparks, one point was subtracted. For some analyses, we created low, medium, and high Relationship Index groups among those with 0–2, 3–5, and 6–8 index points. When “perceived racial fairness” was used as an outcome variable, it was dropped from the index, and the groups, from low to high, were those with 0–2, 3–4, and 5–7 index points.

Answering the questions for indicators 1 and 7 were contingent upon a youth saying they *did* have sparks, and so would have prevented any youth without sparks from getting a “high” on the Relationships Index. In order to avoid that penalty and losing all those data, we created a substitute or alternative Relationship Index score for those who said they did not have sparks, or who were unsure, using the indicators 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8 above. In this alternate index, a low score was 0–1 indicators, medium was 2–3, and high was 4–6. If they were “actively discouraged” from pursuing their sparks, one point was subtracted. And when “perceived racial fairness” was used as an outcome variable, it was dropped from the alternate index, and the groups, from low to high, were those with 0–1, 2–3, and 4–5 index points.

## SPARKS INDEX

The Sparks Index scores ranged from 0–3. If youth could not say they had at least one spark or passionate interest or talent in their lives, they received a 0, versus one point if they could identify a spark. If their spark was quite important in their lives and gave them a lot of joy, energy, purpose, and focus, they received another point. And if they took the initiative to develop their sparks, they received a third point. Sparks groups were created as follows: Low spark (0 points), Medium Spark (1 point), High Spark (2–3 points).

## THE TEEN VOICE INDEX (TVI)

**LEADERSHIP**—Has had a leadership role in the past year.

**PERSONAL POWER**—Has the ability to make good things happen in his or her life.

**COMFORT EXPRESSING VOICE**—Feels comfortable suggesting activities, sharing ideas about rules, and helping to organize activities.

**COMMUNITY PROBLEM SOLVING**—Believes he or she can help solve community problems.

**CIVIC INVOLVEMENT**—Plans to be involved, or has already been involved, in political and civic life.

## OUTCOMES MEASURES

Twelve outcomes were measured. The outcomes covered the four primary domains of youth development that typically are the targets of most youth development programs, and the outcomes measured in key positive youth development studies, including aspects of academic, psychological, social-emotional, and behavioral well-being. Measures were taken from known scales, and had acceptable to good alpha reliabilities, ranging from .73 to .89. The outcomes were school attendance, effort, mastery goals, grades, vandalism, purpose, prosocial values, civic engagement, ethnic identity, racial respect, and worries and concerns.



# TECHNICAL APPENDIX 2: THE QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

## Recruitment and Informed Consent

Respondents were obtained by the project's research advisers from samples of 15-year-old youth available to them. The research advisers are employed at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, and Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia.

In Michigan, participants were recruited through a local teen center in Ann Arbor. A graduate student of the research adviser conducted the interviews, which took place at the teen center. In Minnesota, the research adviser asked school and after-school personnel with whom he is associated to invite youth to participate. The interviews were done by the research adviser and a student he supervised, and they took place at the school or after-school program location in a safe, quiet area provided by the on-site program director. In Georgia, the research advisor selected the youth from a local high school with whom he has a working relationship with the staff.

Active parental consent was obtained for all youth who participated in the interviews. Teens themselves were also asked to assent to participating in the study. Youth received a \$25 gift card from Best Buy as a thank-you for their participation.

Youth were interviewed using a standard, open-ended interview protocol developed by Search Institute specifically for this project. The 20-question protocol complements the online quantitative survey findings with in-depth, qualitative data.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Several steps have been taken to ensure the anonymity of youth surveyed. Interview transcripts bear no identifying characteristics that would compromise participant confidentiality. Consent forms and the original interview logs are stored in a secure location by Search Institute.

## The Interview Sample

In-person interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of 30 15 year olds in three cities by the project's research advisors or their colleagues. The three cities were Ann Arbor, Michigan; Atlanta, Georgia; and Minneapolis, Minnesota. The sample included 14 males and 16 females; 16 white, 3 African American, 3 Hispanic/Latino youth, 4 Asian American youth; and 4 who self-identified as biracial or mixed. Their names have been changed in this report to protect their privacy.



# ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Bukowski, W., Newcomb, A., & Hartup, W. (Eds.) (1996), *The company they keep: Friendship in childhood and adolescence*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Scales, P. C., with Benson, P. L., Mannes, M., Hintz, N. R., Roehlkepartain, E. C., & Sullivan, T. K. (2003). *Other people's kids: Social expectations and American adults' involvement with children and adolescents*. New York: Kluwer Academic; and Scales, P. C., & Leffert, N. (2004). *Developmental assets: A synthesis of the scientific research on adolescent development, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.

<sup>2</sup> The Relationships and Opportunities Index was expanded from the 2009 study to look at a variety of adult interactions with teens in a variety of settings, both formal and informal. It addresses the quality of the interactions teens have with adults, how adults perceive youth, and youth participation in environments where they have opportunities to build relationships with adults outside their family, including high-quality after-school programs. It also accounts for broader social factors that affect relationships, including perceptions of racial fairness and whether the community values young people. For more on the construction and scoring of this index, see Technical Appendix 1.

<sup>3</sup> This definition of “mentor or role model” is broader than the formal or programmatic mentoring role, such as those in Big Brothers/Big Sisters. Previous Search Institute research estimated that only about 10 percent of youth have a formal mentoring relationship. For details on the study, see the America's Promise Alliance 2006 report, *Every Child, Every Promise*, available at [www.americaspromise.org](http://www.americaspromise.org), and Scales, P. C., Benson, P. L., Moore, K. A., Lippman, L., Brown, B., & Zaff, J. F. (2008). Promoting equal developmental opportunity and outcomes among America's children and youth: Results from the National Promises Study. *Journal of Primary Prevention*. 29 (2), 121–144.

<sup>4</sup> This figure is higher than for youth in formal mentoring programs. It is estimated that only about 50 percent of youth in formal mentoring programs describe their mentor relationship as long-term, frequent, and of a high quality (Conversation with Jean Rhodes, April 20, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> For details on these studies, see Scales, P. C. (with Benson, P. L., Mannes, M., Hintz, N. R., Roehlkepartain, E. C., Sullivan, T. K.) (2003). *Other people's kids: Social expectations and American adults' involvement with children and adolescents*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum; Scales, P. C., Benson, P. L., & Mannes, M. (2002). *Grading grown-ups 2002: How do American kids and adults relate?* A national study. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute; and Scales, P. C., Benson, P. L., & Mannes, M. (2002). *Grading grown-ups 2002: How do American kids and adults relate?* Key findings from a national study. *Assets Magazine*, 7(4), 12-page insert. Download from <http://www.search-institute.org/research/grading-grown-ups>.

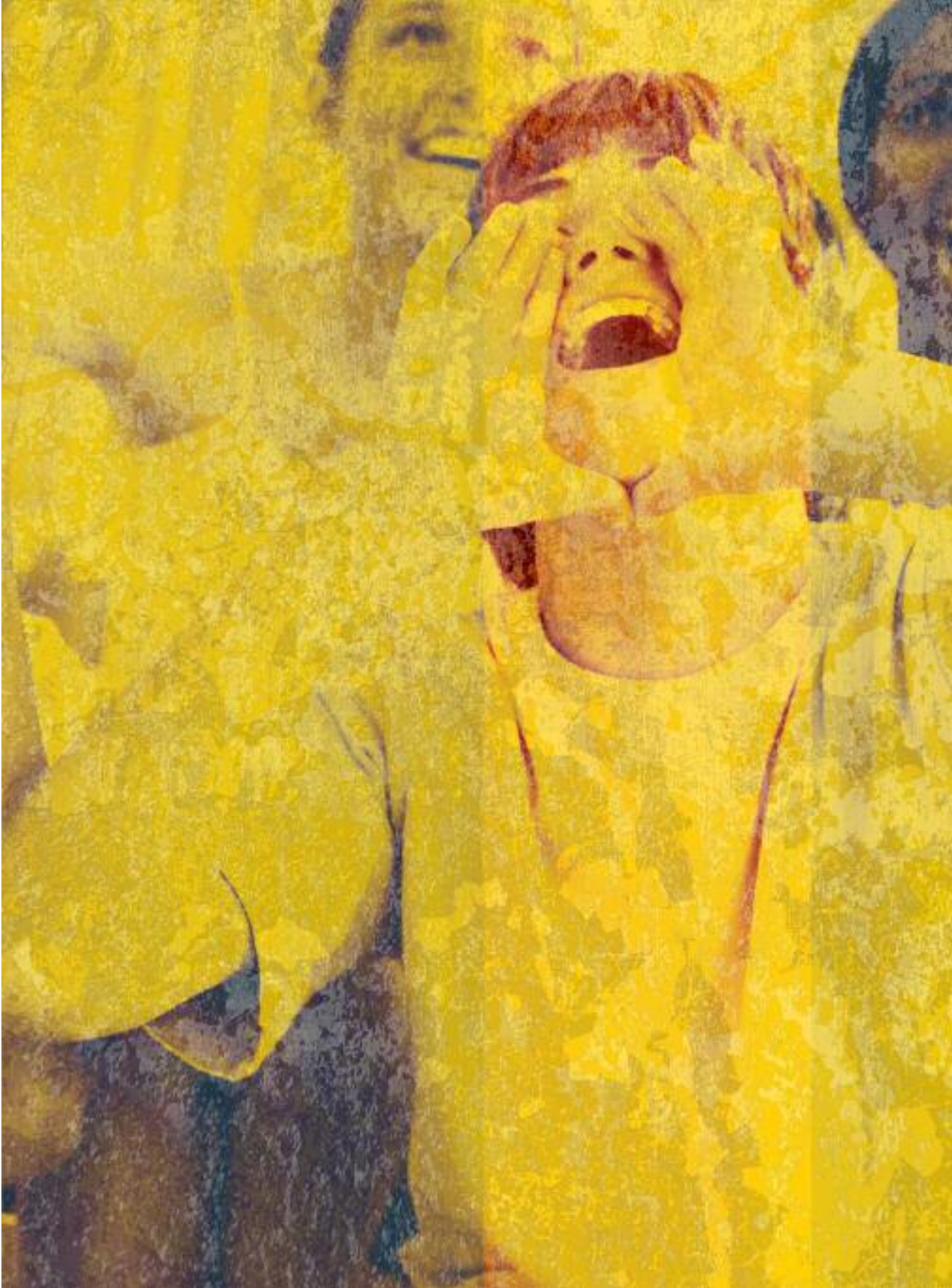
<sup>6</sup> For more information on the concept of sparks, see Benson, P. L. (2008). *Sparks: How parents can help ignite the hidden strengths of teenagers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; and Benson, P. L., & Scales, P. C. (2009). The definition and preliminary measurement of thriving in adolescence. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 4(1), 85–104.

<sup>7</sup> This percentage saying they have a spark is higher than the 66 percent who indicated that they have at least one spark in 2009. This difference is likely the result of refining the description of sparks, since there were fewer “not sure” responses in this year's survey.

- <sup>8</sup> For a review of this research, see Benson, P. L., Scales, P. C., Hamilton, S. H., & Sesma, A., Jr. (2006). "Positive youth development: Theory, research, and applications." In W. Damon & R.M. Lerner, Eds., *Handbook of child psychology*, vol. 1, 6th ed. (pp. 894–941). New York: Wiley.
- <sup>9</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census. (2009). Monthly postcensal resident population, by single year of age, sex, race, and Hispanic/Latino origin. Accessed Dec., 22, 2009, from <http://www.census.gov/popest/national/asrh/2008-nat-res.html>
- <sup>10</sup> These ideas are adapted from the thematic analysis of responses to the following open-ended questions: What did the adults do to make you feel as though your ideas were being heard? What made you comfortable about sharing your thoughts with them? What advice would you have for young people your age about overcoming the challenges? What is it about this person (an adult who "gets" you) that makes you comfortable being around her or him and confiding in her or him? What did he or she do to make you feel that they were listening to you? What does this adult do that lets you know that they really like you, and enjoy spending time with you? What does he or she do to help you pursue this spark?
- <sup>11</sup> Scales, P. C., Roehlkepartain, E. C., & Benson, P. L. (2009). *Teen voice 2009: The untapped strength of 15-year-olds*. Minneapolis: Search Institute and Best Buy Children's Foundation.
- <sup>12</sup> Scales, P. C., Benson, P. L., & Roehlkepartain. (2010). "Adolescent thriving: The role of sparks, relationships, and empowerment." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. Under review.
- <sup>13</sup> Scales, P. C. (with Benson, P. L., Mannes, M., Hintz, N. R., Roehlkepartain, E. C., Sullivan, T. K.) (2003). *Other people's kids: Social expectations and American adults' involvement with children and adolescents*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum; Scales, P. C., Benson, P. L., & Mannes, M. (2002). "Grading grown-ups 2002: How do American kids and adults relate? Key findings from a national study." *Assets Magazine*, 7(4), 12-page insert. Download from <http://www.search-institute.org/research/grading-grown-ups>.; and Scales, P. C., Benson, P. L., & Roehlkepartain, E. C. (2001). *Grading grown-ups: American adults report on their real relationships with youth*. Minneapolis: Lutheran Brotherhood and Search Institute.
- <sup>14</sup> Zand, D. H., Thompson, N., Cervantes, R., Espiritu, R., Klagholz, D., LaBlanc, L., & Taylor, A. (2008). "The mentor-youth alliance: The role of mentoring relationships in promoting youth competence." *Journal of Adolescence*, 32, 1–17.







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