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Children Need Support to Find Their 'Spark,' Speaker Says

Tara Brown gave parents tips on how to empower their kids to create the life they want. By [Lisa Buchman](#)

"Do you know the one thing that makes your kids feel alive?"

Educator Tara Brown posed this question to an audience of about 150 parents who attended the [Rippowam Cisqua](#) Foundations of Education lecture on April 11.

Delivered with a preacher-like cadence and punctuated with the occasional "can I get an Amen," the native Tennessean's talk emphasized the role parents and other caring adults have in helping children find their passion, a purpose in life and eventually, careers that touch others' lives.

Brown, author of *Different Cultures, Common Ground: 85 Proven Strategies to Connect in Your Classroom*, quoted Bill Milliken, the founder of Communities in Schools, a national dropout prevention program, who said "Programs don't change kids—relationships do," and cited this statistic: When a child has one caring adult in their life, their level of confidence in the classroom increases by 65 percent.

"Now there's a whole lot of kids for whom there isn't a chance in the world they're going to have a caring adult at home," Brown said of her work with low-income schools and communities where some students' basic needs are not met.

Acknowledging that the Bedford area's student population likely had a strong base of support at home and at school, she challenged the audience—composed mostly of moms from schools in Bedford, Katonah-Lewisboro and Greenwich—to maintain positive connections with their children when so many kids are connected with technological devices for longer periods of the day.

She also asked parents to think about what prejudices or judgements they may have around things about which their children may be passionate, noting "sometimes it takes courage to let them become who it is they are supposed to be."

Brown's multi-media presentation included famous examples of children whose families encouraged them to explore their passion and develop their talents, then went on to use their talent in ways that touched many lives, from filmmaker Steven Spielberg, who established the USC Shoah Foundation to singer Lady Gaga, a childhood misfit who started playing piano at age three and now, with 22 million Twitter followers, has established the Born This Way Foundation, which strives to stamp out bullying and create a more accepting society.

Brown gave parents five provided ways to help their kids figure out "who it is they were meant to be":

Begin a dialogue: Help kids understand that no one else on the earth has the talent and skills they have. Ask them what they are good at, what they're doing when they lose track of time. What do they care deeply about? What's a quality people tell them that makes them special? Use social media to ask friends for websites, groups or individuals who share similar passions and qualities and hook them up.

Identify your own prejudices, judgements and stereotypes: Kids throw a lot our way to see our reactions, Brown said. They need to know parents support them and their home is a safe environment to explore ideas and possible career paths.

Help kids understand it's not whether they are smart, it's *how* they are smart: Brown gave participants a take-home quiz based on Howard Gardiner's theory of multiple intelligences which

document how students possess different kinds of minds and therefore learn, remember, perform, and understand in different ways. She encouraged families to understand different types of intelligence to understand and focus on one's strengths.

Set aside time to be grateful: Brown encouraged parents to help their kids create "gratitude journals." Some kids don't know how blessed they are, and this helps them to develop a frame of reference, she said, adding that this awareness has been shown to reduce risk of depression and have a positive affect on all relationships.

Find opportunities for service: Brown said community service provides another chance to make connections with people and lets kids experience what it feels like to do something for someone else. She said the increase in bullying is due to a lack of empathy in kids. Brown's talk was followed by a Q&A. Extra-curricular activities emerged as a topic of interest, with one parent concerned about her child playing soccer because of her father's interest, not her own passion; another parent asked what to do when one child's talent and passion took too much time away from the other children in the family.

"Trust your instincts," said Brown. She encouraged families to have open communication and balance interests of the whole family. Above all, let them know you support them.

"Don't underestimate the power of your blessing," she said. "Give them the love they need to show the world who they are."



Tara Brown showed a clip from the TV show Glee to emphasize how parents can help children develop their passion.