

## What Makes a Magician

We have all read biographical magazine articles about magicians. Interviewers always ask, “How did you get started in magic?” Lots of them answer the same way: “When I was in elementary school, a magician came to perform, and I was enthralled.” or “I saw a magician at a friend’s birthday party, and I knew that was what I wanted to be.”

So, if you see a magic show when you are young, then is that the incentive to become a magician later in life? It can’t be.

Why not? Because 249 other kids in your elementary school were at that same assembly and saw that same magic act. They did not become magicians.

In scientific theory, “correlation is not causation.” Seeing a magician or getting a magic set for a birthday present does not translate into you becoming a full-time professional magician. Lots of kids got magic sets. Most of them did not become magicians. What, then, makes someone become a magician?

There may be as many different answers as there are different performers. Every adult is a product of their childhood—upbringing, experiences, circumstances, genetics, and more. Usually, a combination of nature and nurture provides a path for children into adulthood. If you are born with long, strong legs and are a fast runner, and if other kids praise you and encourage you to be fast, you might grow up to excel in sports. However, if your fast legs are scorned and ridiculed by bullies in the neighborhood, maybe you will not become an athlete.

The reasons someone becomes a magician is often a complicated combination of personality and events, most likely stemming from childhood. It is often a reaction to outside stimuli such as the types of activities your parents and siblings are involved in or their reactions to things that you say and do.

Magic is a performing art, and some people are more extroverted, more naturally prone to enjoying the accolades of attention from performing. But it is also a secretive hobby—the collection of secret knowledge that, from early on, we are told not to share with others. “Magicians never tell their secrets” is often quoted by performers to audiences, and usually touted in the magic books for public consumption that are many a child’s first introduction to the field. So, the idea of doing magic will not appeal to everyone, but might be coveted by those who have a vested interest in having secret knowledge.

Suppose many of your behaviors as a child—playing baseball, collecting rocks, swinging on the jungle gym—were met with indifference by your parents. Nothing you did seemed to really spark your Mother’s interest in you. Then one day you did a magic trick that a friend taught you and your Mother lit up like a sunrise, praising you for being clever and wondering

how in the world you accomplished such an amazing feat. Would you be more likely to continue learning more magic or just drop it?

What if the school hosted a magic show and you happened to be sitting in the center near the front? The children next to you were not particularly good friends, so you decided to concentrate on the show instead of the others around you. Something you saw caught your attention more than the kids further back who had a hard time hearing everything clearly. Perhaps there was a particularly smart kid in your class at school and always seemed to know the answer to everything. He got a lot of attention, but you did not. Everybody liked him including the teacher because he always had the right answer. You might have felt left out or overlooked until one day you got a magic book from the library and tried out one of the pocket illusions on him. He acted awestruck and impressed. Now, all of a sudden, other people like you, and claim you are clever.

Suppose you were always a normally shy person and really dislike speaking out to others or being the center of attention. Then one day you have to perform something in front of everyone at a Cub Scout meeting in order to complete a merit badge. If it's successful and people like what they saw, you might be encouraged to continue looking into magic, but if you get tongue-tied and embarrassed and feel hot and nervous, then maybe you will drop magic like a burning stick and never pick it up again.

People have different personalities. Even in kindergarten children come into a school group vastly different in what they want and need. They might be generally shy, scared, happy, anxious, silly, reluctant, or stubborn. They might have an over-abundance of self-confidence or be starved for attention. They might be afraid to speak to other children or adults. Or they might plunge ahead and go do whatever they want, without waiting for rules or advice. Most children are born with particular tendencies typically inherited through their parents' genes. Then, they are nurtured and fostered by parents or caregivers who have their own desires, needs and expectations. They can be molded into being more shy or less outgoing, more active or less athletic. It is this combination of personality and upbringing that they bring to magic.

And now for the bad news. Unfortunately, there have been many people who have gone into magic through a flaw—a defect in character or personality. They enter the world of magic to fulfill a need, a psychological gap in their constitution. And, they bring that fault into their shows. Often, the flaw is an inferiority complex that sparks a need to for a person to try to gain acceptance by showing some superiority.

Because magic as a pastime involves special knowledge and also secret information, it is common for people to use magic to give the impression that they are superior to others. Knowing how a magic trick works and not telling anyone can feel like wielding power over others' knowledge or intelligence. Internally, it may feel like, "I am smarter than you, because I know something that you do not know." Or, "I am privy to secret information that I am not willing to share with others." Some people find magic as a child, just when they are

most vulnerable to the greater intelligence of older children and adults. A 10-year-old may bully a 7-year-old because he is not strong enough or smart enough. But if that 7-year-old can present something magical or has secret information on how a magic trick works, the 10-year-old may be more respectful. Even if the older child does not show the younger one any respect, it is easy for the younger one to become confident that he is in some way superior to the bigger child.

Some people come to magic because of these attributes. They perform it for others hoping that they look smarter or more informed or more talented. These people often stick with magic because every performance reinforces their thinking that they are “better” in some way. When audience members say things like “How did you do that?” or “I can’t figure that out,” they take it to mean that they have, in fact, proven their superiority.

Sadly, some of these types of performers lack vital social understanding, and often mis-read other’s reactions as approval. They continue to delude themselves in thinking that they are, in fact, superior to the people they “entertain” with their magic. If this happens, those magicians become increasingly poor performers. Some adults stay with magic for many years and continually blame audiences for not applauding loudly enough or clients for not hiring them often enough. Some never see through their own flaws and correct themselves. It is these types of performers that give magic and good magicians a bad reputation. And there are a lot of them out there.

But many seasoned performers have come to recognize that it may have been their personal shortcomings in their psyche that drove them into magic, and they have compensated for those faults by working on their presentational skills. They have become very good magicians because they saw that their need for attention or their desire to appear smart was not a positive trait to express in their performances. They have learned to avoid mocking spectators or using condescending tones, for example.

Luckily, the magic field has continually improved. It has built in the values of teaching and mentoring. From David Devant and Henning Nelms to David Kaye and Ken Weber, there have been thousands of books, lectures and directors who have helped teach why magic should be an art that pleases the audience, not a hobby that patronizes them.

Almost everyone crosses paths with magic as a child - a toy magic kit as a birthday present, a Sunday School teacher who shows the only trick he knows, even a magician on television or a live one at a friend’s party. These are normal childhood experiences, and those experiences do not make you a magician. Your personality and the behaviors and attitudes you bring to that moment are what may make you turn toward magic or away from it.