

What Happens to Gifted Children

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By **David Brooks**

Opinion Columnist

What happens to the extremely intelligent? Do they go from success to success, powered by their natural brilliance? Or do they struggle in a world where they don't fit in?

There are two ways to answer these questions. The first is the social science answer. Social science researchers give promising children intelligence tests, and then they check in on them over the ensuing decades to see how much the students' early intelligence correlates with lifetime success.

I confess that I'd prefer to live in a world in which people's lives were not powerfully shaped by some trait they happened to have inherited. But we don't live in that world. The social science answer is that higher intelligence correlates strongly with positive educational and career outcomes.

The grandfather of these studies is Lewis Terman's Genetic Study of Geniuses, which, starting in the 1920s, tracked 1,521 highly intelligent kids through life. By the 1950s, two-thirds of the Terman kids had become college graduates, a figure 10 times that of the general population. In 1954 the men in the Terman group who held white-collar jobs made \$10,556 a year, [on average](#). That was far higher than the \$5,800 a year earned by American men in white-collar jobs overall.

More recent studies have produced similar results. For example, the Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth tracks students who scored in the top 1 percent of intelligence tests. This study enables us to move beyond the crude notion that there is only one thing called I.Q. and focus on three specific forms of intelligence: verbal, mathematical and spatial. (Spatial intelligence is the kind of object-oriented intelligence that helps you become a master carpenter, an engineer or an inventor.)

In a meta-analysis of a bunch of these more recent studies, Tarmo Strenze of the University of Tartu in Estonia [found](#) that superhigh intelligence correlates strongly with educational attainment and occupational success and moderately with higher incomes. The Center for Talented Youth is a program at Johns Hopkins for young people with very high scores on university entrance exams. Mark Zuckerberg, Sergey Brin and Lady Gaga all went through that program.

So, no surprise, intelligence really matters. These studies also show that highly intelligent people don't suffer from more mental health problems than anybody else. They are not more likely to be scrawny.

I used to assume that there was an intelligence threshold, that once you got above an I.Q. score of 120, it didn't help much if your score was over 150. But the S.M.P.Y. study rebuts that. People who score in the top quarter of the top 1 percent do better than people who score in the bottom quarter of the top 1 percent. In other words, extraordinarily smart people do better than very smart people.

Some people want to get rid of magnet high schools and accelerated programs for these kinds of precocious kids. But these programs are necessary if we're going to keep high-scoring students engaged and growing. I spoke with David Lubinski and Camilla Benbow, who direct the S.M.P.Y. study at Vanderbilt University. They observed that we have inherited an industrial model school system that sometimes treats children as interchangeable widgets — every child is supposed to learn reading at age 6.

They argued that we should do more to personalize education so it's tailored to the abilities of each child. They said we shouldn't think of schooling as a zero-sum enterprise; we can design programs for high scorers and also ones that are inclusive for students with different profiles. They emphasized that we currently do a poor job of recognizing students with exceptional spatial abilities and we should have more shop classes and other programs for those who think best with their hands.

So that's the social science view, based on what we can learn from statistical correlations across populations of people. But there is another way to look at precocious kids that is more personal and subjective. How is life actually lived by these talented people?

When you look at the people who went through the Terman study, you find that most of them had perfectly fine lives. They were doctors, lawyers and professors. But they mostly traveled well-worn paths. If you think that intelligence is all you need, then you can't help looking at the Terman results and asking: There aren't as many creative geniuses as you'd expect — where are the transformational thinkers and world changers? An atmosphere of slight disappointment hangs around the study because of this.

In 1968 a researcher named Melita Oden looked at some of the Terman kids who did not go on to become professionals and worked as salesclerks or in similar jobs. She found that such people had been rated as less energetic throughout their lives, less likely to take part in extracurricular activities as students.

In 2019 Brian O. Bernstein and others looked at 677 people who were intellectually precocious when young. The researchers estimated that 12 percent of them had achieved eminence in their careers by age 50. But that means that 88 percent had not. The researchers also looked at 605 science, technology, engineering and mathematics graduate students at the nation's top universities and found that 20 percent of those students had achieved eminence in their fields by age 50. But that means that 80 percent of these brilliant students at top graduate schools had not.

When you take a more granular, personal view of the lives of the gifted, you see that while intelligence matters, other things also matter a lot. Some brilliant people lack ambition. Some brilliant people don't want to spend their lives at work, slaving away for eminence. They have different values and prefer to do other things with their time.

Joan Freeman is a British researcher and the author of "Gifted Lives." For 35 years, she conducted face-to-face interviews with 210 people who had scored in the top 0.2 percent in intelligence. Her work didn't yield massive data sets, but she gives us a more human picture of what being really gifted is like.

One of her subjects, Jeremy, told her: “My being seen as gifted has produced awful deficiencies in me. I was emotionally scarred by being made to perform. All the time it was, ‘Look what Jeremy can do.’ I could do almost anything on demand, but I used to feel like a performing penguin.”

Jeremy was competitive while young and felt immense pressure to demonstrate gifted achievement every day. “I could only work in fear. Only the fear of failure made me work in the end,” he said. As a young adult, he was paralyzed by the number of life options in front of him. He went into medicine and spent about 13 years as a medical student and doctor but eventually was hit by depression so severe, he couldn’t function. He wound up as a musician — not celebrated but enjoying himself and paying the bills.

When the intelligence of another of Freeman’s subjects, Rachel, was measured at age 9, it was literally off the charts. Rachel felt immense pressure to prove herself over and over again. When she was a college student, she told Freeman, “My ambition was to get to Oxford, but when I got here, everything fell flat. My brain went to sleep after about four weeks, and it hasn’t woken up since.”

She was inept at building relationships and lacked a sense that she could control her life but eventually got married and had kids. At 37, she was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Her reaction was that the load she had been carrying all those years was too much to handle and that cancer offered her a convenient way out.

After her diagnosis, she came to faith. Her spirit became more tranquil, her countenance more joyful. At her funeral, her vicar said, “Many people get terminal cancer. Not many people become holy along the way. The last few weeks and months before Rachel died were utterly amazing and extraordinary, full of light and peace.”

When you get a glimpse of the real lives of gifted people, you see that it’s a mistake to separate this thing we call intelligence from all the other aspects of their lives. A person’s intelligence is embedded in and interacting with all that person’s other qualities — whether she is self-confident, conscientious, resilient or open to new experiences, whether she has experienced unconditional love, deep friendships, rich intellectual conversations. Just because some traits are easier to measure doesn’t mean we can isolate them and not see everything that goes into this precious and never-to-be-repeated person.

When you glimpse these lives, you also see the special power of drive. The people who change the world may be brilliant or not, but they almost all work their rear ends off. As Lubinski and Benbow [wrote](#) in one of their papers, “Arguably the most widely agreed-on finding in the talent development literature is the inordinate amount of time truly outstanding performers give to their craft.”

Great accomplishment is the marriage of ability and interest. The latter is what T.S. Eliot once called “the thrilling wire in the blood.” It’s the vital spark that makes people passionately curious about a subject, that makes them determined and relentless, that causes them to say to themselves: I’m going to figure this out, no matter what it takes. The people who contribute most aren’t worrying about how smart they are; they are focused on continual improvement, compounding what they learn day by day.

Freeman pointed out that it is easy to squelch this fire by stuffing children to the gills with school-type learning. It’s easy to ruin a life by treating a person, no matter how gifted, as a brain on a stick. “After all these years,” she wrote, “I am certain that to take just one aspect of a child’s life, giftedness, as a basis for making decisions which will affect them for the rest of their lives is to risk their emotional balance, and even their success in life.”

The bottom line is that we need to put intelligence in its place. We need to value it and put precocious children in settings where they are nurtured and stretched. But we don’t want to overvalue it. In my view, it’s crazy that many top universities look for students who scored over 1300 or 1400 on their SATs and reject most applicants below that. That’s placing too high a value on a narrow aspect of ability.

When you look at who really achieves great things, you notice that most of them were not prodigies. They didn’t wow people at age 18, but over the course of their adulthood they found some deep interest in something, and they achieved mastery. Many of society’s great contributors didn’t have an easily identifiable extraordinary ability; they had the right mixture of slight advantages and character traits that came together in the right way.

A recurring notion in Freeman’s book is “If I had stopped at” If she had stopped interviewing one person at 20, she wouldn’t have seen how a glittering childhood led to a sad adulthood. If she had stopped at 40, she wouldn’t have seen how a formerly lost person found his way. Lives are astonishingly nonlinear. In his book “Child Prodigies and Exceptional Early Achievers,” John Radford argued that it is nearly impossible to predict adult mastery from giftedness in childhood.

Yes, a child born extremely intelligent is lucky and likely to do well, but as Lubinski and Benbow mentioned in their conversation with me, we want to see each person whole. I’d put it this way: It’s nice to know who is good at taking intelligence tests, but it’s more important to know who is lit by an inner fire.

David Brooks has been a columnist with The Times since 2003. He is the author, most recently, of “How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/13/opinion/gifted-children-intelligence.html>

Having administered a few “intelligence” tests in my time—and having passed my own, getting an “A” (81)—I have sampled a bit of what David examines here. (It must be fun to be David Brooks, researching one interesting topic after another with the resources, experience, practice, and intellectual sophistication to produce high quality results.) When you are in the presence of cognitive genius, it is unmistakable and exciting. Standard IQ tests do only a middling job of mapping it out; genius is still caught best bare in flashes. Exceptional scores can also be produced by a solid profile across all subtests: my overall Wechsler score was four points higher than both my (equal) VIQ and PIQ scores, pushing the FSIQ into another range. A mind like mine is also not perfectly suited for such tests; on my WAIS, I wasn’t sure the grad student understood all my sometimes-idiosyncratic answers. On a recent little “cognitive” test for a prospective employer, I got bogged down on the Matrices-like questions, as well as the semantics ones, because I could see what the test designer single-mindedly intended to measure while there were nuances and different angles that suggested other “correct” answers. Speed is almost always rewarded in cognitive test scores, and I am not built for speed, ADHD or not. (My wife said I was, so I retorted “OK, but you’re ADD!” I believe to apply the diagnosis to a chronic “multitasker” like me who can hyperfocus is to abuse further an already badly-abused term.)

I once had a Personality Theory professor who resorted to only multiple choice testing; I used to drive him crazy when he went over exams later in class because I kept pointing out how other answer options could fit his questions. Multiple choice tests annoy me to the point of tempting me to give up when taking them. Because test-takers can get 25% just by guessing randomly, and can narrow choices down to 50% probability by eliminating the obviously-wrong options, question-writers, to obtain the desired profile of scores, resort to all sorts of intellectual gymnastics that only make “perfect sense” in their heads while proving “imperfect” in other differently-inclined and -gifted minds.

David’s informants are also correct in noting that cognitive testing typically does a poor job of identifying and measuring visual spatial abilities. From air traffic controllers to truck drivers, such abilities are crucial and should be used in selection and licensing. Someone navigating a B-Train through freeways, interchanges, city streets, and parking lots needs to have a very solid sense of his tractor-trailer’s “spacial presence.” Performance subtests can hint at it, but even with my strong PIQ, I do not want the likes of me juggling jumbo jets in the air over O’Hare Airport. I even gave up my 1A license a few years ago because someone like me (especially at my age) who hadn’t driven semi’s for decades should not be allowed behind the wheel of an 80 000 pound “missile” travelling 110 kilometres per hour. TJB

As well, as well-noted, people are much more than logical and rational cognitive beings. The old counsellor in me learned quickly that even the most brilliant and insightful cognitive “meaning making” intervention was worth nothing if it did not reach people in the intimate personal places where they can be freed to feel differently about themselves, others, the world they live in, and life itself. As Edna St. Vincent Millay observed “Love is not all: it is not meat nor drink/ ...Yet many a man is making friends with death/ Even as I speak, for lack of love alone.” I have always loved Edna.