by Jennifer L. Jolly, Ph.D., and Justin Bruno

The Public's Fascination With Prodigious Youth

The past several centuries have presented well-documented cases of prodigious youth. Many represented extreme examples of children who had burned brightly and then faded into obscurity, succumbed to a mental illness or an early death, or entered into a career deemed below their mental capacity. These very public displays of mental prowess caused speculation about children's mental health and the source and longevity of their ability, resulting in myths and misunderstandings about prodigious youth. This mythology existed long before the formal field of gifted education was established and provided a foundation for many of the first research studies undertaken by researchers such as Lewis Terman, Guy Whipple, and Leta Hollingworth.

Early Examples

Christian Heinrich Heineken

One of the first widely published accounts of a child prodigy was that of Christian Heinrich Heineken, a profoundly gifted child born in Lubeck, Germany, in 1721. By the age of 10 months, Heineken had impressed his parents with his keen sense of observation and speech, leading them to enlist a tutor to aid in his educational development. While still a baby, he learned to recite from memory several Biblical stories, establishing a foundation for his eventual wide knowledge of world history, arithmetic, and anatomy. According to his tutor, at the age of 4, Heineken could recite 1,500 Latin proverbs and speak colloquially in French, a nice addition to his ability to already speak, read, and write in his native German (Whipple, 1924).

Heineken's popularity was enhanced due to Europeans' access to disseminated information. The advent of the printing press and a citizenry inching toward higher literacy rates provided the young Heineken, along with his parents and tutor, an opportunity to display his prowess. With widespread exposure came widespread clamor—the boy's fame quickly spread across Europe. Multitudes gathered to gawk at the boy's incredible abilities. He even once entertained the King of Denmark during a royal visit. Although Heineken's mental feats had enraptured all of Europe, his legacy would be established during his only 4 years and 4 months of life. Unfortunately, the modernizing world that created the context for his fame could not save his life. Thought to have suffered from an undiagnosed disorder, Heineken passed away, leaving his tutor to proclaim him "a wonder for all time" (Whipple, 1924, p. 3).

As little is known about his life, Heineken leaves many questions unanswered regarding the totality and nature of his intellect, as well as the rigor of his education and its relationship to his superior abilities. Whipple (1924) asked an invariably important question, applicable not only to Heineken's case, but also to all prodigious children, "Is there danger of 'forcing' his mental development at the expense of his physical or social development?" (p. 3). That is to ask, were his parents and tutor sensitive to and mindful of the effects that this newfound fame would have on such a young child, regardless of his status as a *wunderkind*? Also, might they have been too instru-

mental in his finding fame? Because of the limited information available, these questions may never be fully answered to satisfaction. Facets of Heineken's case, though, seem to be replicated in similar scenarios.

John Stuart Mill

John Stuart Mill, renowned English philosopher and political theorist, was admittedly the product of a strict and rigorous education undertaken by his father. Rigid homeschooling had been a popular practice in Victorian England, and Mill's father, a man of erudition and an historical scholar, sought to extend the application to his son. By age 3, he was studying ancient Greek; by age 8, he had read the histories of Herodotus, Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, and several of the dialogues of Plato, in Greek (Quart, 2006). His strict regimen demanded that he be isolated from his peers, leaving Mill clueless to the notion that he was not only unique, but also profoundly gifted.

The brand of education that James Mill had subjected upon his son, though, gave no attention to the areas of social or emotional need, leaving the younger Mill with both a sense of misdirection and an undesirable requisite to live up to his father's astronomical expectations. He would later recall that his father, "in all his teaching, demanded of me not only the utmost that I could do, but much that I could by no possibility have done" ("Autobiography," n.d., para. 4). By his 20s, Mill would fall into a deep depression, a result of finding no purposeful end to his means, and no avenues of application for his wealth of knowledge and intellect. He recalls:

> My education, which was wholly his work, had been conducted without any regard to the possibility of its ending in this result; and I saw no use in giving him the pain of thinking that his plans had failed, when the failure was probably irremediable, and, at all events, beyond the power of his remedies. Of other friends, I had at that time none to whom I had any hope of making my condition intelligible. It was, however, abundantly intelligible to myself; and the more I dwelt upon it, the more hopeless it appeared. ("Autobiography," n.d., para. 58)

His depression would eventually recede, as he learned to find contentedness in the smaller pleasures in life. Mill's father had not intended to rear an exceptional offspring for the purpose of fame. The fact that his father's purposes were not exploitive (although perhaps misguided) may explain Mill's prolific output later in life, achieving prominence as a thinker in the fields of philosophy, political theory, and economics. His life remains a rich and valuable source of study for those concerned with the education of child prodigies, particularly the pitfalls of neglecting basic social and environmental needs of the gifted, both of which have been well-established as important factors in a child's health and happiness. A similar, yet more unfortunate, tale from the last century lies in the case of William James Sidis.

William James Sidis

Montour (1977) described in detail William Sidis' upbringing. Born in 1898, Sidis was the child of Russian immigrants. His father, Boris, had achieved an education at Harvard, forming the basis of his eventual career in medical psychology. The elder Sidis, dissatisfied with the inadequacies of the American public school system, sought to rear William James in much the same way James Mill had trained his own son. Before his second birthday, Sidis was educated to hone his skills of observation and reasoning (Bruce, 1910). By the age of 3, he could spell and read, and would be able to write and type by his fourth birthday. His capacities were not limited to a singular domain: He took interest in languages, and could read Russian, French, and German by age 5; he could also, as his father proclaimed, pass a medical student examination based upon his extensive knowledge of anatomy (Wheeler, 1910). Having passed all seven grades of the public school in 6 months, Sidis was kept at home for schooling for 2 years, during which his father strove to arouse and maintain the boy's curiosity and proclivity for mathematics. Besides a 3-month stint in high school, all of William's schooling occurred at home, allowing him to achieve more incredible feats, including the creation of a new table of logarithms and an intense knowledge of algebra, trigonometry, geometry, and calculus. The media also had taken notice, evidenced by newspaper and magazine articles detailing the young prodigy's experience (Montour, 1977).

His father, clearly aware of the school system's inability to effectively educate his son, attempted to enroll William at Harvard College at age 9, although he was not admitted until age 11 after a series of denied applications. While at Harvard, Sidis' propensity for mathematics and science flourished, culminating in his paper on and presentation of his original theories entitled "Four-Dimensional Bodies." With greater success came greater fame, as magazine and newspaper articles soon made Sidis a fixture in the public consciousness. Attached to that fixture always was the presence of the boy's father, seemingly ever ready to explain his son's phenomenal success. Bruce (1910) noted the elder Sidis' declaration that William's

mental development was not the result "of heredity, not of exceptional native talent, but of a special education he has received, an education having as its chief purpose the training of the child to make facile, habitual, and profitable use of his hidden energies" (p. 692). Because there was a steadily rising focus upon child prodigies in the news, there was always ample opportunity for Dr. Boris Sidis to showcase the exceptional talent and intellect of his son, as well as his methodology in shaping the boy wonder. Articles on Sidis appeared in *North American Review*, *The Outlook, Harper's Weekly*, *The Independent*, *Current Literature*, and the *New York Times* (Montour, 1977). The media fire having been lit, a nationwide awareness grew to expectation, as Americans wondered how high the boy's star would rise.

Unfortunately, the same media that followed his impressive rise to fame and academic success would chronicle in detail his failure to meet those expectations. Sidis, much like Mill, had lost academic direction; even at one point attempting to study at Harvard Law School, only to soon after teach mathematics at Rice University. Newspaper articles focused upon his misdeeds rather than accomplishments, with editorials and news stories concentrating on his faults, including an arrest in 1919. Discontent with public life, Sidis went into hiding, in an effort to study and work in seclusion. He lived the remainder of his life working in low-paying jobs and became estranged from his family, including the father who had been so instrumental in his early success and celebrity. Until his death in 1944, he was hounded by media attention, with publications, the *New York Times* and *New Yorker* magazine foremost among them, proclaiming his life an apparent failure due to his nondescript status in society. His final years were spent in deliberating libel suits against the latter publication, also claiming a violation of privacy (Montour, 1977). Sidis' parenting was both negligent and unmindful to the sensitivities of his gifted son.

Tiny Intelligentsia

The specific needs of the gifted had not even been fully conceived or set forth by Lewis Terman and Leta Hollingworth when these early prodigies appeared. However, the early 20th century brought about a new understanding of prodigious youth, or as they were now more commonly referred, gifted children. The work of Terman and Hollingworth did much to influence how the general public and educators perceived gifted children, and 20 years after the formalized field of gifted education was established another example of prodigious youth emerged and appeared to support the longitudinal research findings of Terman and Hollingworth—gifted children, despite their intellectual prowess, were well rounded, well liked, and were both physically and mentally robust (Jolly, 2005). The public's interest in the unusual or outliers continued but instead of being ogled out of curiosity, Americans celebrated their intellectual gifts and charming personalities.

The *Quiz Kids* radio program debuted on June 28, 1940, and at the height of its popularity had 10 million listeners. It was a staple of American popular culture, spawning a cottage industry of Quiz Kids paper dolls, lunch boxes, dictionaries, and even a magazine. Some teachers assigned listening to the Quiz Kids as homework on its broadcast night, Wednesdays (Bolding, 1941). While on promotional tours and selling war bonds during World War II, crowds as large as 15,000 turned out to get a glimpse of these "tiny intelligentsia" and a sampling of their mental prowess (Feldman, 1982; Hickok, 1947).

The public's interest in the unusual or outliers continued but instead of being ogled out of curiosity, Americans celebrated their intellectual gifts and charming personalities.

The Quiz Kids were predominantly White children from a variety of home backgrounds in and around the Chicago area. Several hundred children appeared on the program over its 13-year run, with the average number of appearances being five. Some of the more successful and popular Quiz Kids included Gerard Darrow, Joan Bishop, Joel Kupperman, Ruthie Duskin, and Richard Williams, with more than 100 appearances each. Teachers initially recommended children for the first broadcasts and eventually the show would receive 50 applications a week from children all over the country. IQ was a determinant (several had recorded IQs of 200) of acceptance but

a questionnaire also was required and often more influential than IQ (Hickok, 1947). One out of 25 applicants had a chance of being accepted on the show, with a "girl shortage" being a constant worry (Hickok, 1947, p. 31), as few were deemed to possess a wide enough knowledge to compete. The program format consisted of Quizmaster Joe Kelly, volleying questions at the "young Euclids" ranging from mathematics, history, opera, Shakespeare, and the Bible, to name a few topics. Their knowledge in many cases appeared to be boundless. Occasionally professors from Northwestern University, U.S. senators and congressmen, and popular figures of the day such as Bing Crosby and Bob Hope would appear as guest Quizmasters (Hickok, 1947).

There were those who questioned the appropriateness and value of such exposure for these children and even referenced the case of Sidis as a cautionary tale, questioning the delicate balance between encouragement and forcefulness of development (Lyon, 1941). However, Witty countered:

> What gifted children need are suitable challenging opportunities and this great problem of the school and the home. Such challenging opportunities are provided for a considerable number of very bright children on the Quiz Kids program. It also gives them a chance to reveal and develop their abilities. Some people may question the form of expression, but none can deny its value in revealing the children's potentialities—nor stimulation it provides for all children who listen to the program. (as cited in Hickok, 1947, p. 191)

Most Quiz Kids attended public schools in the Chicago area or The University of Chicago Lab School. Many had advanced one or two grades, resulting in early entrance to colleges such as Northwestern University, Columbia University, MIT, The University of Chicago, and Harvard University. Savings bonds earned during their run on the radio show helped to fund their college educations. Those who chose to pursue artistic careers used their earning to finance dance, singing, and music lessons (Feldman, 1982). Being a part of the *Quiz Kids* program did not guarantee these children a future of "early ripe, early rot," or as some suggested, " . . . that when there is too much positive acceleration in the learning process very often a mental plateau is reached where further learning slows down or slumps" (Lyon, 1941, p. 293). The Quiz Kids appeared to be well adjusted and after their tenure on the show pursued a variety of careers similar to Terman's Termites but never achieved the level of eminence that was predicted and/or expected for gifted children. The only real exception was James Watson, who was awarded the 1962 Nobel Prize in Physiology for his groundbreaking work on DNA. However, many chose professions where they found success as lawyers, doctors, CEOs, professors, professional artists and performers, and teachers. Many of the females in adult life listed their profession as housewife (Feldman, 1982).

Despite the overall positive well-being and trajectory of the Quiz Kids, their social and emotional needs were overlooked in many cases. Hollingworth touched upon the social and emotional needs of gifted children in her seminal research, but this facet of gifted children was not fully explored until the latter part of the 20th century (Jolly, 2007; Peterson, 2009). In fact, in many ways these researchers almost did too good of a job in demythologizing the gifted and "may also have contributed to the notion that high capability means solid mental and physical health and success and satisfaction in career and relationships" (Peterson, 2009, p. 280) rather than recognizing that social and emotional needs of gifted children often were directly correlated with their extreme intellect and unusual understanding of the world around them. The Quiz Kids unknowingly may have contributed to this lack of awareness themselves. Northwestern University's Paul Witty cited that the Quiz Kids "eras[ed] any idea that the gifted child is usually a peculiar, eccentric misfit" ("Radio & TV: The Kids," 1952, para. 1), which is true but those included in Ruth Duskin Feldman's book *What Happened to the Quiz Kids?* revealed that there were real issues that stemmed from their extreme intellect and asynchronous development that was only exacerbated at times by their *Quiz Kids* legacy. Several of the males found it difficult to date in high school and college, and females were not often counseled or mentored to pursue careers outside of the home. Others resented their tenure on the *Quiz Kids* program or chose careers out of expectation rather than true interest (Feldman, 1982).

Conclusion

More recently, TV shows such as *Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader?* and *Our Little Geniuses* have raised new questions about the exposure of gifted children to the media and to what benefit. *Our Little Geniuses*, which has been planned for release in early 2010, appears to be the more egregious of the two by first using a label such as genius (a term not commonly used in the present-day field of gifted education) and resting an entire family's financial future on a child's performance. The show's format "will allow parents of young geniuses —age 6 to 12—to put their kids' knowledge to use by answering increasingly difficult questions as they work their

way up to win their family hundreds of thousands of dollars" (Wyatt, 2009, para. 1). Parents also will have access to Ivy League professors and medical doctors in order to gauge their child's performance (Wyatt, 2009). (Author note: Perhaps the producers have had their own misgivings about the show as, at the time of this writing, it has been put on hold after taping several episodes.) These types of programs and other public forums, much like their predecessors, focus solely on gifted children's keen intellect and present a one-dimensional and stereotypical portrait, resulting in a no greater qualitative understanding of gifted children's capabilities and their correlation to their social and emotional needs. GCT

References

Autobiography by John Stuart Mill (1873). (n.d.). Retrieved from http://www.utilitarianism.com/millauto

Bolding, A. W. (1941). Editorial postscript. *The Journal of Education, 124,* 294.

Bruce, H. A. (1910). Bending the twig: The education of the eleven-year-old boy who lectured before the Harvard professors on the fourth dimension. *American Magazine, 69,* 690–695.

Feldman, R. D. (1982). *Whatever happened to the Quiz Kids?* Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press.

Hickok, E. M. (1947). *Quiz Kids*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Jolly, J. L. (2005). Pioneering definitions and theoretical positions in the field of gifted education. *Gifted Child Today, 28*(3), 38–44.

Jolly, J. L. (2007). The research legacy of Leta S. Hollingworth. *Gifted Child Today, 30*(3), 57–64.

Lyon, G. W. (1941). Is it good for the "Quiz Kids"? *The Journal of Education, 124,* 293–294.

Montour, K. (1977). William James Sidis: The broken twig. *American Psychologist, 32,* 265–279.

Peterson, J. S. (2009). Myth 17: Gifted and talented individuals do not have unique social and emotional needs. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 53,* 280–282.

Quart, A. (2006). *Hothouse kids*: *The dilemma of the gifted child*. New York, NY: The Penguin Press.

Radio & TV: The kids. (1952, July 7). *Time Magazine*. Retrieved from http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,888747,00.html

Wheeler, J. (Ed.). (1910). The boy prodigy of Harvard. *Current Literature, 48,* 291–293.

Whipple, G. M. (1924). Historical and introductory. In G. Whipple (Ed.), *The twenty-third yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education. Part I: Report of the Society's Committee on the Education of Gifted Children* (pp. 1–25). Bloomington, IL: Public School Publishing.

Wyatt, E. (2009). *Coming to Fox: "Our Little Geniuses."* Retrieved from http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/11/11/coming-to-fox-our-little-genius

---

continued from page 16

References

A Thin Line. (2009). *A thin line*. Retrieved from http://www.athinline.org/about#research

AP MTV. (2009). *A thin line: 2009 AP MTV digital abuse study*. Retrieved from http://www.athinline.org/MTV-AP_Digital_Abuse_Study_Executive_Summary.pdf

Estell, D. B., Farmer, T. W., Irvin, M. J., Crowther, A., Akos, P., & Boudah, D. J. (2009). Students with exceptionalities and the peer group context of bullying and victimization in late elementary school. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 18,* 136–150. doi: 10.1007/s10826-008-9214-1

Gable, R. K., Ludlow, L., Kite, S., & McCoach, D. B. (2009, April). *Development and validation of the Survey of Internet Risk and Behavior*. Round-table presentation at the 2009 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, CA.

Goodstein, A. (2008). Cyberbullying: The new bathroom wall. *Duke Gifted Letter, 8*(2). Retrieved from http://www.dukegiftedletter.com/articles/vol8no2_tm.html

Hinduja, S., & Patchin, J. W. (2009a). *Preventing cyberbullying: Top ten tips for educators*. Retrieved from http://www.cyberbullying.us/Top_Ten_Tips_Educators_Cyberbullying_Prevention.pdf

Hinduja, S., & Patchin, J. W. (2009b). *Preventing cyberbullying: Top ten tips for parents*. Retrieved from http://www.cyberbullying.us/Top_Ten_Tips_Parents_Cyberbullying_Prevention.pdf

Peterson, J. S., & Ray, K. E. (2006). Bullying and the gifted: Victims, perpetrators, prevalence, and effects. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 50,* 148–168. doi: 10.1177/001698620605000206

Stephey, M. J. (2009). *The top 10 everything of 2009: Top 10 buzzwords*. Retrieved from http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1945379_1944799,00.html

Willard, N. (2007). *Educator's guide to cyberbullying and cyberthreats*. Retrieved from http://www.cyberbully.org/cyberbully/docs/cbcteducator.pdf

Zetter, K. (2009). *Parents of dead teen sue school over sexting images*. Retrieved from http://www.wired.com/threatlevel/2009/12/sexting-suit