

Homeschooling: The environment for genius

Dr. Jay Wile

What is a genius?

“One with exceptional intellectual or creative power or other natural ability” (Oxford English Dictionary)

There are specialists (like Einstein) who are geniuses, and there are generalists (like Michael Card) who are geniuses. Some geniuses (like Edison) create new technology or new science, while others (like Michelangelo) create new art.

Dr. Harold McCurdy’s study on the childhoods of twenty geniuses

[Harold McCurdy, “The Childhood Pattern of Genius,” *Journal of the Elisha Mitchell Scientific Society* **73(2)**:448-462, 1957

McCurdy used biographies to study the childhoods of 20 geniuses like John Stuart Mill, Blaise Pascal, and John Quincy Adams. He found three things common to all of them:

First commonality:

A high degree of attention focused upon the child by parents and other adults, expressed in intensive educational measures and, usually, abundant love.

“Yet it is not the educational program itself which requires our notice so much as it is the intimate and constant association with adults with which it entails.”

Why does this develop genius?

One-on-one attention by adults helps the student focus on what is important. Enthusiasm and interest is also easier to maintain, especially if the adult knows the child.

Please note that none of the parents of the geniuses in the study were considered geniuses. It doesn’t take geniuses to produce geniuses.

Second commonality:

Reduced contact with the peer group.

“...Not only were these boys often in the company of adults, as genuine companions; they were to a significant extent cut off from the society of other children.”

Why does this develop genius?

The peer group is not very wise. It emphasizes short-term pleasure at the expense of long-term fulfillment. Adults provide a much wiser, long-term approach to learning, as well as life in general.

Please note: This is not complete isolation, but reducing influence of peers.

Third commonality:

A significant amount of imaginative play

“My point is that phantasy is probably an important aspect of the development of genius...Instead of becoming proficient in taking and giving the hard knocks of social relations with his contemporaries, the child of genius is thrown back on the resources of his imagination, and through it becomes aware of his own depth, self-conscious in the fullest sense, and essentially independent.”

Why does this promote genius?

When a child uses his or her imagination, it produces a tendency to “think outside the box.” This can end up bringing originality into nearly any endeavor.

As a child gets older, the definition of play changes. If your teens are in a co-op, for example, extending the amount of time they can spend enjoying team sports (such as basketball) would encourage teamwork and problem-solving, which will aid them in their academic pursuits.

Sir Ken Robinson, Ted Talks, “Do schools kill creativity?”

Why don't we get the best out of people? Sir Ken Robinson argues that it's because we've been educated to become *good workers*, rather than *creative thinkers*. Students with restless minds and bodies -- far from being cultivated for their energy and curiosity -- are ignored or even stigmatized, with terrible consequences. **“We are educating people out of their creativity,” Robinson says.**

Suggestion: Limit to one hour per day all electronic devices, which will free up time for imaginative play!

Here’s what thinking outside the box can accomplish. . .

Ten-year-old Clara Lazen was at a Montessori school (which emphasizes student independence, freedom to explore, and respect for a child’s individual development) learning about chemical bonds. She was given a molecular model kit and told to “play” with it, following some simple rules about bonding.

She ended up making a model of a molecule her teacher had never seen. He contacted Dr. Robert W. Zoellner, a chemistry professor at Humboldt State University, and showed the model to him. The professor had not seen anything like it, either. He did some calculations and realized it should be stable. The three of them published a paper in the *Journal of Computational and Theoretical Chemistry*. Based on the energetics of the molecule, it could be used in batteries or even explosives. As a result, Dr. Zoellner is trying to find someone to attempt to synthesize the molecule.

An interesting observation by Dr. McCurdy:

"It might be remarked that the mass education of our public school system is, in its way, a vast experiment on the effect of reducing all three of the above factors to minimal values, and should, accordingly, tend to suppress the occurrence of genius."