

## Lesson 3. Child Prodigies: Myths and Misunderstandings

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1. Do you think you would be happy being a child prodigy, someone who is truly gifted in something at a very young age?

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2. Maybe you would, and maybe you wouldn't.

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3. However, we live in a society that generally accepts the idea that giftedness leads to success, and success guarantees a life full of happiness.

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4. Does giftedness guarantee future success? Here are two ways to answer this question.

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5. One is simply to track the achievements of precocious kids.

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6. There is a mid-1980s study of adults who attended New York City's highly regarded Hunter College Elementary School, which was founded in the 1920s as a training ground for America's future intellectual elite and only admitted children with an IQ of 155 or above.

7. Yet the fate of the Hunter College child geniuses in the study was not greatness; it was simply being okay.

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8. Thirty years down the road, the Hunter graduates were all doing pretty well and were reasonably well adjusted and happy.

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9. Most of them had good jobs and many had advanced degrees.

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10. But surprisingly, none of the Hunter graduates became CEOs of world-famous corporations, prominent politicians, well-known writers, or Nobel Prize winners; there were no people who were nationally known in their fields.

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11. They were genius kids, but they were not genius adults.

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12. A similar pattern emerged in Ontario, Canada, in the 1970s.

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13. There was an elementary school with a team of elite runners.

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14. At that time, there were 15 nationally-ranked runners who were 13 and 14 years old.

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15. According to research done ten years later, only one runner from that group became a top runner at the age of 24.

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16. In fact, the number-one runner at the age of 24 was someone known as a poor runner when he was young, Doug Consiglio.

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17. Doug was thought to be an awkward kid.

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18. When he was 14, all the other kids asked, "Why does he even bother?"

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19. Another way to look at precocity is to work backwards — to look at adult geniuses and see what they were like as kids.

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20. A number of studies have taken this approach, and they found a similar pattern.

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21. A study of 200 highly accomplished adults found that just 34 percent had been considered precocious as children.

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22. There is also a long list of historical geniuses who were quite ordinary as children; the list includes Copernicus, Rembrandt, Bach, Newton, Beethoven, Kant, and Leonardo da Vinci.

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23. None of these geniuses would have made it into Hunter College Elementary School.

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24. As you can see from these studies, precocity is a trickier subject than people may ordinarily think.

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25. The benefits of earlier mastery are often overestimated.

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26. There are many people who either started out good and went bad or started bad and ended up good.

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27. Early acquisition of skills — which is often what we mean by precocity — may be a misleading indicator of later success.

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28. When we call a child precocious, we have a very inaccurate definition of what we mean.

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29. Generally, what we mean is that a person has an unusual level of intellectual or physical ability for his or her age.

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30. Adult success has a lot to do with more than that.

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31. In our obsession with precocity, we are exaggerating the importance of being talented.

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32. Rather, deliberate practice toward a goal is much more important than natural-born ability.

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33. For example, when we say that a great musician is naturally gifted, does that tell us that he or she practices a lot, wants to practice a lot, or likes to practice a lot?

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34. People often cite Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart as a child prodigy, someone who acquired his musical skills very early.

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35. He started to compose music at the age of four.

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36. By six, he traveled around Europe giving special performances with his father, Leopold.

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37. He is, therefore, the perfect example of a precocious child.

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38. However, there are faults in the Mozart myth.

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39. First of all, the music he composed at four isn't any good.

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40. His childhood works are basically arrangements of works by other composers.

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41. Also, rather suspiciously, they were written down by his father.

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42. Leopold was the 18th-century version of a modern day parent who goes all out to make his or her child a star.

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43. Indeed Wolfgang's legendary precocity was exaggerated somewhat by his father's probable lying about his age.

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44. Young Mozart's incredible musical ability might better be attributed to practice, practice, practice.

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45. Compelled to practice three hours a day from age three on, by age six, the young Wolfgang had practiced an astonishing 3,500 hours — three times more than anybody else in his peer group.

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46. Mozart's famous precocity as a musician was not so much natural musical ability as his ability to work hard, his circumstances, and a father that pushed him to do so.

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47. A better example for what precocity really is may be the famous intellectual late-bloomer, Einstein.

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48. According to one biographer's description of the future physicist, Einstein displayed no remarkable native intelligence as a child.

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49. His success seems to have come from certain habits and personality traits — curiosity, resolve, and determination.

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50. No doubt, these traits are not particularly fascinating, but they are, perhaps, the more essential components of genius.

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51. As seen from studies of precocity, a precocious child may not become a talented adult.

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52. Furthermore, a talented adult may not have been a precocious child.

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53. Predictions from childhood about adult performance cannot be made based on relatively fixed traits such as IQ and early acquisition of skills.

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54. Instead, many of the traits that really matter in predicting adult success are variable traits like creativity, determination, and leadership.

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55. Thus, if you want to know whether a 14-year-old runner will be a good runner when he or she is 24, you must simply wait ten years to find out how truly successful he or she has become.

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< Main idea > :