

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Perception of Genius

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We tend to share specific stereotypes of the intellectually gifted. Genius is seen as being "*akin to insanity*." Intellectually gifted people are stereotyped as being physically "*puny*." Many people believe that high intelligence has little to do with success in later life. Are these beliefs true?

To test these statements, psychologist **Louis Terman** began a study in 1921, which has become a classic in its field. Terman and his associates screened approximately 250,000 junior high students (11-13 years of age) in the Los Angeles area to identify about 1500 children with IQ's of 140 or above. (This is the *top one percent* of the population as far as intelligence is concerned. The mean (average) IQ for his select group was 150. (Only one person in 5000 would have an IQ that high by chance.)

As they grew older, these "*gifted children*" were repeatedly interviewed and tested by Terman. His work was carried on by Robert and Pauline Sears at Stanford University. They interviewed Terman's gifted group as late as 1977, and in the 1980s, they still maintained contact with those still living. (During that decade, most members of the gifted group were in their 70s.)

The stereotype of the gifted person as being physically "*puny*" was contradicted by Terman's study. In fact, gifted persons were found to be significantly *taller, heavier* and *healthier* than their average peers.

In addition to physical traits, the gifted group excelled in psychological adjustment. In other words, genius is not "*akin to insanity*." Follow-up interviews demonstrated that there was *less divorce and suicide* and *fewer mental disorders* compared to the population as a whole. If you think of it, it sounds very logical. One of the definitions of intelligence involves superior problem-solving abilities. If you are more able to solve problems related to life and marriage, you are less likely to be suicidal, mentally disordered or divorced. All in all, gifted people were found to be better-adjusted socially and psychologically than the average.

Still many people believe that superior intelligence is limited to a narrow area (like math) or is not related to success in later life. In contrast to these views, Terman's gifted subjects outpaced typical students by two to four grades and excelled in *all* courses, refuting the belief in narrow specialization.

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**Overall, when compared to the average population, gifted children lead more fulfilling and productive lives.**

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As adults, the gifted group continued to be more successful than average. (Since relatively few women were employed during this period, the following data applies only to the 850 men in the gifted group.) As adults, 126 had earned doctorates (M.D. or Ph.D.), 85 were lawyers, and 74 had become college or university professors. By the time they were 40 years old (about 1950), they had published 93 books, 375 plays, novelettes and short stories and 2000 scientific, technical and professional articles. In addition, they had registered over 230 patents for various inventions. As you probably have guessed, these accomplishments are much greater than could be expected from the population as a whole.

Of course, high intelligence alone does *not guarantee success*, it just makes it easier to obtain. To demonstrate the vast differences in successes among the gifted, a study was done in 1960, when the group was in their early fifties. The 100 most successful of the gifted were compared to the 100 least successful. The top group had an average annual income of \$24,000, while the bottom averaged \$7,200. If this sounds low, you need to remember that the median annual income was only \$5,000 at that time. (In other words, half of the United States' population earned more than \$5,000 and half earned less.)

Being intellectually gifted also has disadvantages. Many gifted children are born into homes or social environments that discourage their development. They may be viewed as "*know-it-alls*" and be resented, envied and even feared by parents, average peers and teachers. If placed in regular school settings, they may be bored by the unchallenging work and become lazy or discipline problems. If they are accelerated to put them among their intellectual equals, they may be socially out of place. (An extreme example is the rare 13-year-old, who is a full-time college student.)

Although we may envy the ease with which gifted children adapt to school and work situations, this should not lead to rejecting them or labeling them as "*weird*" or "*deviant*." More likely than not, they will be the majority of our nation's leaders. We need all the intelligent leaders we can get.

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