



The Genius in All of Us: New Insights into Genetics, Talent, and IQ

By *David Shenk*

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Is true greatness obtainable from everyday means and everyday genes? Conventional wisdom says no, that a lucky few are simply born with certain gifts. The new science of human potential suggests otherwise. Forget everything you think you know about genes, talent, and intelligence, and take a look at the amazing new evidence.

Here, interweaving cutting-edge research from numerous scientific fields, David Shenk offers a new view of human potential, giving readers more of a sense of ownership over their accomplishments, and freeing parents from the bonds of genetic determinism. As Shenk points out, our genes are not a “blueprint” that dictate individual destinies. Rather we are all the product of interplay between genes and outside stimuli—a dynamic that we can influence. It is a revolutionary and life-changing message.

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The Genius in All of Us: New Insights into Genetics, Talent, and IQ By David Shenk Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Louann Brizendine Reviews *The Genius In All of Us*

Louann Brizendine, M.D., author of *The Female Brain* and *The Male Brain*, is a diplomat of the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology and the National Board of Medical Examiners, and is clinical professor of psychiatry at UCSF. She is founder and director of the Women's Mood and Hormone Clinic and the Teen Girl Mood and Hormone Clinic. After receiving her medical degree from Yale University School of Medicine in New Haven, Connecticut, she completed an internship in medicine and neurology at Harvard Medical School's Brigham and Women's Hospital, and a residency in psychiatry at the Massachusetts Mental Health Center of Harvard Medical School. She sits on the boards of many prestigious peer reviewed journals and is the recipient of numerous honors and awards. Read Brizendine's guest review of *The Genius In All of Us*:



In *The Genius in All of Us* Shenk beautifully explains why the nature-nurture debate is dead. It is not just the genes we are born with, but how we are raised and what opportunities are open to us that determine how smart we will become. Nurture and experience reshape our genes, and thus our brain. Shenk argues that the idea we are either born with genius or talent, or we aren't, is simply untrue. The notion that relentless, deliberate practice changes the brain and thus our abilities has been undervalued over the past 30 years in favor of the concept of "innate giftedness." Practice, practice, practice (some say 10,000 hours or more) is what it takes. Shenk argues that it is just some fantasy that effortless, gifted genius is born and not made. He marshals evidence to show that genetic factors do not trump environmental factors but rather work in concert with them. Shenk notes that by the sweat of our brow we can train ourselves to be successful--even if we are born with only average genetic talent. Scientists know that how we are raised and how we are trained affects the expression of our genes. If you think you've reached your talent limit, think again, Shenk says. It's not just in your genes, he says, but in the intensity of your motivation. Ambition, persistence, and self-discipline are not just products of genes, but can be shaped by nurture and environment. Certainly it is important to have good genes, but that determines at most only 50 percent of your talent. He underscores the point that intelligence is made up of the skills that a person has developed--with an emphasis on "developed"--through hard work. Encouraging ourselves and our children to work hard requires being surrounded by others also wanting to achieve striving for excellence. Moreover, Shenk gives the hopeful message not just for kids, but also for adults. Happily for us, the human brain remains plastic, changeable and trainable well into old age. So no matter how old you are, if you'd like to be smarter--get to work! --Louann Brizendine

A Q&A with David Shenk



Question: Your book is called *The Genius in All of Us: Why Everything You've Been Told About Genetics, Talent, and IQ is Wrong*. That's a big claim. Everything and how so?

David Shenk: It is a bold statement, and it reflects how poorly the public has been served when it comes to understanding the relationship between biology and ability. The clichés we've been taught about genetic blueprints, IQ, and "giftedness" all come out of crude, early-20th century guesswork. The reality is so much more interesting and complex. Genes do have a powerful influence on everything we do, but they respond to their environments in all sorts of interesting ways. We've now learned a lot more about the developmental mechanisms that enable people to get really good at stuff. Intelligence and talent turn out to be about process, not about whether you were born with certain "gifts."

Question: In *The Genius in All of Us* you state that the concept of nature versus nurture is over. Scientists, cognitive psychologists, and geneticists are moving towards an idea of 'interactionism.' What does this mean? If the battle of genes versus environment is over, who has won? Which is more important?

David Shenk: They both won, because they're both vitally important. But the new science shows us that they do not act separately. Declaring that a person gets X-percent of his/her intelligence from genes and Y-percent from the environment is like saying that X-percent of Shakespeare's greatness can be found in his verbs, and Y-percent in his adjectives. There is no nature vs. nurture, or nature plus nurture; instead, it's nature interacting with nurture, which is often expressed by scientists as "GxE" (genes times intelligence). This is what "interactionism" refers to. A vanguard of geneticists, neuroscientists, and psychologists have stepped forward in recent years to articulate the importance of the dynamic interaction between genes and the environment.

Question: You describe genes and environment as a sound board. How so?

David Shenk: In the past, we've been taught that each distinct gene contains a certain dossier of information, which in turn determines a certain trait; if you have the blue-eyed gene, you get blue eyes. Period.

It turns out, though, that the information contained inside genes is only part of the story; another critical part is how often genes get "expressed," or turned on, by other genes and by outside forces. It's therefore helpful to think of your genome as a giant mixing board with thousands of knobs and switches. Genes are always getting turned on/off/up/down by hormones, nutrients, etc. People actually affect their own genome's behavior with their actions.

Question: How do these new findings affect the concept of the "The Bell Curve"--that we live in an increasingly stratified world where the "cognitive elite," those with the best genes, are more and more isolated from the cognitive/genetic underclass? Is that idea now completely obsolete?

David Shenk: Yes, it is obsolete. The idea that there is a genetic super-class that has a corner on high-IQ

genes is nonsense. This comes out of a profound misunderstanding of how genes work and how intelligence works, and also from a misreading of so-called "heritability" studies. I am not saying that genes don't affect intelligence. Genes affect everything. But by and large I think the evidence shows that people with low intelligence are missing out on key developmental advantages.

Question: Lewis Terman invented the IQ test at Stanford University in 1916. He declared it the ideal tool to determine a person's native intelligence. Are IQ tests accurate? What are the benefits and fallout of the IQ test?

David Shenk: IQ tests accurately rank academic achievement. That's quite different from identifying innate intelligence, which doesn't really exist. Tufts intelligence expert Robert Sternberg explains that "intelligence represents a set of competencies in development." In other words, intelligence isn't fixed. Intelligence isn't general. Intelligence is not a thing. Instead, intelligence is a dynamic, diffuse, and ongoing process.

The IQ test has valid uses. It can help teachers and principals understand how well students are doing and what they're missing. But the widespread belief that it defines what each of us are capable of (and limited to) is disabling for individuals and society. People simply cannot reach their full potential if they honestly believe that they are so severely restricted.

Question: How do we go about finding the genius in all of us? What steps we can take to unlock latent talent?

David Shenk: Find the thing you love to do, and work and work and work at it. Don't be discouraged by failure; realize that high achievers thrive on failure as a motivating mechanism and as instruction guide on how to get better.

(Photo © Alexandra Beers)

From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review Intent on burying the concept of inborn genius, Shenk uses the 128 pages of "The Argument" to drive home how mistaken the notion of being genetically destined at birth to be a Mozart or a Michael Jordan is. For genes aren't the inalterable essences that environmental effects merely help out; rather, genes and environment interact to realize a person's potential in a constant and complicated process that Shenk attractively exemplifies through the athletic life of Ted Williams, who began hitting practice at age six and, equally important, never gave it up; also, considered to have magically sharp sight, he tested only high normal upon entering naval aviation—the thing was, he developed himself to, as Ty Cobb said, "see more of the ball than any man alive." En route to the startling revelation that Lamarckism (variation by inheritance, not Darwinian natural selection) has truth in it, after all, Shenk corrects common knowledge about what twin studies and IQ tests really show; clarifies the arguably most misunderstood genetics term, heritable; and scientifically revives faith in not just practice and determination but also parenting and lifestyle as crucial factors, along with genes, in the realization of talents. Since this flies in the face of a century of genetic determinism, Shenk employs the equally engrossing 141 pages of "The Evidence" to cite, quote, paraphrase, and comment upon the sources for virtually every assertion in "The Argument." --Ray Olson

Review

"[Shenk] tells engaging stories, lucidly explains complex research and offers fresh insights in the nature of exceptional performance,,,such efforts have resulted in a deeply interesting and important book. David Shenk

may not be a genius yet, but give him time."-- *New York Times Book Review*

"Inspired...*The Genius in All of Us* has quietly blown my mind."--*Salon*

"...a welcome new book...you'll find [Shenk] a fluid, easy writer...*The Genius in All of Us* is a quick, compelling read."

-- *The Boston Globe*

"Empowering...myth-busting...highly readable...entertaining."

-- KIRKUS REVIEWS

"Intent on burying the concept of inborn genius, Shenk uses the 128 pages of "The Argument" to drive home how mistaken the notion of being genetically destined at birth to be a Mozart or a Michael Jordan is. For genes aren't the inalterable essences that environmental effects merely help out; rather, genes and environment interact to realize a person's potential in a constant and complicated process that Shenk attractively exemplifies through the athletic life of Ted Williams, who began hitting practice at age six and, equally important, never gave it up; also, considered to have magically sharp sight, he tested only high normal upon entering naval aviation—the thing was, he developed himself to, as Ty Cobb said, "see more of the ball than any man alive." En route to the startling revelation that Lamarckism (variation by inheritance, not Darwinian natural selection) has truth in it, after all, Shenk corrects common knowledge about what twin studies and IQ tests really show; clarifies the arguably most misunderstood genetics term, *heritable*; and scientifically revives faith in not just practice and determination but also parenting and lifestyle as crucial factors, along with genes, in the realization of talents. Since this flies in the face of a century of genetic determinism, Shenk employs the equally engrossing 141 pages of "The Evidence" to cite, quote, paraphrase, and comment upon the sources for virtually every assertion in "The Argument."

--*Booklist*, starred review

"An inspiring and liberating book. It's a powerful antidote to the genetic determinism rampant in the Age of the Genome, and an instructive guide, grounded in science, to living a more enriching life."

--STEVEN JOHNSON, author of *The Invention of Air*, *Ghost Map*, *Everything Bad is Good for You*, *Mind Wide Open*, *Emergence*, and *Interface Culture*

"This book, both rigorous and accessible, is a close study of the idea of genius, an investigation of popular misconceptions about genetics, and an examination of the American virtue of self-determination. It is written with assurance, insight, clarity, and wit." -- ANDREW SOLOMON, author of *The Noonday Demon* (National Book Award Winner, 2001)

"A great book. David Shenk handily dispels the myth that one must be born a genius. From consistently whacking the ball out of the park to composing ethereal piano sonatas, Shenk convincingly makes the case for the potential genius that lies in all of us." -- RUDOLPH E. TANZI, PH.D., Joseph P. and Rose F. Kennedy Professor of Neurology, Harvard Medical School; Director, Genetics and Aging Research Unit, Massachusetts General Hospital

"David Shenk sweeps aside decades of misconceptions about genetics -- and shows that by overstating the importance of genes, we've understated the potential of ourselves. This is a persuasive and inspiring book that will make you think anew about your own life and our shared future." -- DANIEL H. PINK, author of *Drive* and *A Whole New Mind*

"In clear, forceful language, backed up by a boatload of science, David Shenk delivers a message that should be read by every parent, educator, and policy-maker who cares about the future of our children. *The Genius in All of Us* convincingly debunks the "genes are destiny" argument when it comes to human talent, and will force you to rethink everything from IQ tests and twins studies to child-rearing practices. Shenk's book turns Baby Mozart on his head, and will give pause--a hopeful, empowering pause--to parents who wish to nurture excellence in their children."

-- STEPHEN S. HALL, author of *Wisdom: From Philosophy to Neuroscience*

"David Shenk freshens and transforms a familiar subject to reveal all the interacting forces and factors that make us who we are. Development is a tricky business and Shenk understands this. By focusing his considerable writing talents on this terribly important topic, he has provided parents, policymakers, and educators with a book that will help them cut through the noise and make sense of every child's development."

-- MARK. S. BLUMBERG, Ph.D., F. Wendell Miller Professor of Psychology, University of Iowa; editor-in-chief, *Behavioral Neuroscience*; and author, *Freaks of Nature: What Anomalies Tell Us about Development and Evolution*

"The importance of David Shenk's book is that he has made accessible to a wide audience the advances in the understanding of how each person develops. I congratulate him." -- SIR PATRICK BATESON, FRS, Emeritus Professor of Ethology, Cambridge University; former Biological Secretary of the Royal Society (UK); and co-author, *Design For A Life: How Behaviour Develops*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Luke Shaffer:

Book is to be different for each and every grade. Book for children until finally adult are different content. To be sure that book is very important normally. The book *The Genius in All of Us: New Insights into Genetics, Talent, and IQ* has been making you to know about other know-how and of course you can take more information. It is rather advantages for you. The publication *The Genius in All of Us: New Insights into Genetics, Talent, and IQ* is not only giving you far more new information but also to be your friend when you experience bored. You can spend your spend time to read your book. Try to make relationship while using book *The Genius in All of Us: New Insights into Genetics, Talent, and IQ*. You never really feel lose out for everything should you read some books.

Allen Mullinax:

Reading a reserve tends to be new life style on this era globalization. With studying you can get a lot of information that will give you benefit in your life. Together with book everyone in this world can share their idea. Guides can also inspire a lot of people. Many author can inspire their very own reader with their story or perhaps their experience. Not only situation that share in the books. But also they write about the information about something that you need illustration. How to get the good score toefl, or how to teach your young ones, there are many kinds of book that you can get now. The authors nowadays always try to improve their expertise in writing, they also doing some research before they write to their book. One of them is this The Genius in All of Us: New Insights into Genetics, Talent, and IQ.

Mark Sawyers:

The actual book The Genius in All of Us: New Insights into Genetics, Talent, and IQ has a lot associated with on it. So when you read this book you can get a lot of gain. The book was written by the very famous author. Tom makes some research ahead of write this book. That book very easy to read you can obtain the point easily after looking over this book.

Thomas Mitchell:

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