

A 1st-Century Roman Teacher on How to Raise a Genius

We often marvel at the handful of students who get top ACT scores and land scholarships at Ivy League universities. And with good cause, for it seems the number of geniuses these days are few and far between.

But could we have a lot more “geniuses” in this country than we realize?

That seems to be the idea advanced by the rhetorician Quintilian in first-century Rome. In his [*Institutes of Oratory*](#), Quintilian opines that genius is buried in many children, but failure to cultivate it through good education and hard work rarely makes it visible:

“For there is absolutely no foundation for the complaint that but few men have the power to take in the knowledge that is imparted to them, and that the majority are so slow of understanding that education is a waste of time and labour. On the contrary you will find that most are quick to reason and ready to learn. Reasoning comes as naturally to man as flying to birds, speed to horses and ferocity to beasts of prey: our minds are endowed by nature with such activity and sagacity that the soul is believed to proceed from heaven. Those who are dull and unteachable are as abnormal as prodigious births and monstrosities, and are but few in number. A proof of what I say is to be found in the fact that boys commonly show promise of many accomplishments, and when such promise dies away as they grow up, this is plainly due not to the failure of natural gifts, but to lack of the requisite care.”

Quintilian goes on to list several ways in which parents can cultivate their child’s reasoning abilities, turning him into

a well-adjusted, highly respected individual. In summary, these include:

1. Childhood caregivers who model correct speech.
2. Parents who value education.
3. Careful attention to the child's friends (good morals are a must).
4. Instruction in Greek and Latin.
5. Provision of good teachers.
6. Instruction in diligence.
7. Exposure to a wide variety of academic subjects.

Over the last decade or so, many have begun to suspect that the methods of today's education system are [stifling children and hindering](#) them from expanding their reasoning skills and educational abilities. Would we see an increase in the number of students acing the ACT and generally excelling if more parents and teachers began to follow Quintilian's advice and cultivate the natural genius in their children?

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