

William James Sidis, The Broken Twig

KATHLEEN MONTOUR *Johns Hopkins University*

ABSTRACT: *This case history of William James Sidis is as concerned with the adverse impact his sorry example has had on special education for the intellectually gifted as it is with the dynamics that led to his tragic outcome. Sidis, the archetypal father-exploited prodigy, is examined in his social and historical context and is contrasted with another famous prodigy who had a similar background, Norbert Wiener. It is shown that Sidis, who as an 11-year-old special student at Harvard College attracted national attention in 1910 by delivering a lecture on higher mathematics before the Harvard Mathematical Club, was so driven to defy his father's efforts to make him the ideal man that he dropped out of academics and died an obscure clerk. Certain myths that grew about Sidis are debunked. By presenting cases of prodigies who entered college as early as Sidis but who succeeded, the author attempts to dissuade the public from its opposition to educational acceleration for precocious children, to which the "Sidis fallacy" has helped give rise.*

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for?

Robert Browning
from *Andrea del Sarto*

In 1909 William James Sidis, then a boy of only 11, was allowed to enter Harvard College. There, 3 months before his 12th birthday, he gave a lecture on higher mathematics. But he never reached the scientific stature that might have been expected of someone possessing his early brilliance. Instead, he died alone, obscure and destitute, and he left a troublesome legacy best termed the "Sidis fallacy"—that talent like his rarely matures or becomes productive. Legends and myths about this man whose intellectual grasp as a youth was

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Requests for reprints should be sent to Kathleen Montour, SMPY, Department of Psychology, The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland 21218.

made to exceed his emotional capacity still exert an adverse influence on the education of intellectually gifted children.

Opposition to Acceleration

The mention of educational acceleration, especially extreme acceleration for intellectual prodigies, conjures up in the minds of many people the image of some person like William James Sidis. While most people are often totally unfamiliar with the particulars of Sidis's unfortunate case, they are usually prejudiced against allowing an unusually precocious child to progress at the radically accelerated pace of which he or she is capable. Even those who claim to have some knowledge of Sidis probably are aware only of the untruths spread about him after his death. A writer arguing against educational acceleration for the Quiz Kids gave this description of Sidis, with its typical mixture of inaccuracies and invention plus one or two facts:

The brilliant William Sidis, who at five wrote a treatise on anatomy, gave lectures on astronomy at nine, spoke six languages at ten, and was graduated from Harvard, *summa cum laude*, when he was fifteen . . . ended up unhappily at forty-six an obscure, unsuccessful bookkeeper. (Hickok, 1947, p. 182)

EXAMPLES PAST AND PRESENT

The age-in-grade lockstep was already viewed as sacrosanct when the *Quiz Kids* radio program hit the airwaves in 1940. "He stays in his right grade at school," declared the father of one Quiz Kid who had been deemed ready for college at age 10 by University of Chicago psychologists, and "he wouldn't be happy if we pushed him ahead" (Hickok, 1947, p. 183). The wishes of this boy's family were favored by current sentiment and he stayed in grammar school. But what of the phenomenally precocious child of 8 or 9 who must move on to high school and college early for sufficient intellectual challenge? Such children would

often like to opt for the necessary acceleration but they are usually denied it.

How did one school system deal with a child having an IQ that exceeded the mean by *seven* standard deviations? The third-grade school life of V., a 7-year-old girl with an IQ of 212 and achievement test scores indicating a ninth-grade-level mastery of school subjects, was described by her mother as an endurance test without the necessary intellectual stimulation. The child's parents tried to correct this situation by asking the principal and the teacher to move her to a higher grade where she could get the necessary academic challenge. A leading expert on the gifted gave detailed, well-expressed advice on how to accelerate this girl without sacrificing her social needs, but the school ignored it and only gave her more books to read. These same educators would agree that to keep a retardate in his chronologically "right" grade would be cruel and harmful to him, but they are unwilling to reverse this line of reasoning and apply it to the fortunate deviates who can be equally harmed—namely, the gifted. Social psychology researchers (Haier & Solano, 1976, pp. 215–222; Pyryt, 1976) and educational psychologists (Fox, 1976, pp. 202–204) at The Johns Hopkins University have found these attitudes prevalent in schools.

How Does the Sidis Fallacy Operate?

Those concerned about brilliant children whose educational progress is being retarded by the reluctance of school authorities to accelerate them are up against tacit resistance, not actual policy obstacles, and thus they cannot hope to act on behalf of such children with a class action suit, as champions of other oppressed factions might. Freidenberg (1966), in using Nietzsche's concept of resentment to characterize the social antipathy found in America toward the gifted, describes the prejudice of which the Sidis fallacy is an offshoot. Those possessing this animus toward acceleration share the characteristics of the *ressentient*: The attitudes of both are rationalized, covert, diffuse, and unconscious (Freidenberg, 1966, p. 120). For example, in the face of all the empirical evidence to the contrary (e.g., Oden, 1968; Pressey, 1949; Worcester, 1956), they maintain their stance against acceleration by saying, "But I once knew someone like that who . . ." Like resentment, the "early ripe, early rot" dictum was part of a free-floating attitude without an example to attach it-

self to until William James Sidis came along; herein lies this prodigy's role in affecting policy decisions. To separate fact from myth and for the benefit of those who use acceleration as a means of facilitating the education of gifted children (via the Johns Hopkins University Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth, for instance), a fresh look at William James Sidis's life and the unusual part he played in educational history is needed.

The Prodigy and His Family

William James Sidis was the child of Boris and Sarah Sidis. Born on April 1, 1898, in New York and named after the Harvard College philosopher whose ideas Boris Sidis embraced, right from infancy he came to serve as a symbol of his father's extreme educational beliefs. Young William became prominent at a time in American history when free public education was becoming easily attainable and an early wave of enthusiasm for its great possibilities was gathering. Even without William's being the remarkable prodigy that he was, the background of the Sidis family would have been enough to inspire the egalitarian mood in those days. Boris Sidis was a Russian immigrant who arrived in the United States unable to speak English, but he eventually entered Harvard without any special help. There, in 1894, Sidis took his AB degree at age 27. The former mechanic then earned both a PhD and an MD degree and became an eminent medical psychologist. Sarah, though illiterate when she came out of Russia (it was Boris himself who taught her to read and write), also earned a medical degree. The two were married and opened up the Sidis Institute for Abnormal Psychiatry at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, after Sarah won her degree ("Dr. Sarah Sidis Dies," 1959). The success of these two and the apparent genius of their son must have seemed like living proof of the opportunities to be had in America.

The General Interest in Prodigies at the Time

During William James Sidis's childhood, one form taken by the widespread optimism generated by the potential of free schooling for American society was prodigy-making. The notion that any American boy or girl could be molded into a young genius if educated in the "right" way was widely

and willingly believed by press and public alike ("Training Supermen," 1914). This naive view would not be challenged until the systematic study of giftedness started in the 1920s (see Stanley, Keating, & Fox, 1974, pp. 1-22).

PARENT-PRODIGY INTERACTION

The effect that an apparent child genius has on parents has previously been overlooked. How such parents react to their offspring's astonishing brilliance and precocity determines the upbringing they give this kind of child. Sensible parents, when they realize the difficulty they will have in providing their son or daughter with a secure childhood and an education suited to the child's unique needs, usually try to foster their prodigy's development. On the other hand, the appearance of a wunderkind sometimes brings out exploitative tendencies in a misguided elder. These *creator parents* are convinced that their youngster did not happen by his brilliance naturally but that they themselves cultivated genius in an ordinary baby. This conceited belief that happenstance or heredity was not involved in any way is often accompanied by a frustrated ideology that the creator parent can finally express through exhibiting his child. Needless to say, this affects the child's emotional development, sometimes resulting in arrogance, and strains the child-parent relationship.

An extreme case of parental facilitation was reported by Deakin about a family of prodigies in Wales (Deakin, 1972). This family of devout Quakers settled into an isolated cottage on the moors where the mother began the "Process," a special environment she provides in her home that she hopes will one day allow her children to live as pacifists but cope with the outside world when they grow up. Employing Montessori educational methods and Piagetian psychology, she spends the children's every waking moments playing with them and guiding their progress. The two eldest boys are unquestionably prodigies, one mathematically and the other as a pianist, while even the two youngest show signs of brilliance. It is doubtful whether the mathematically talented boy needs the constant stimulation he is given, yet one famous mathematician, Henry J. S. Smith (Turnbull, 1929, p. 129), was also raised under these Brontë-like conditions.

The parents of several young prodigies of Sidis's day, such as Norbert Wiener, Adolph Berle, Jr.,

and Winifred Stoner, Jr., claimed to have stimulated their children so that they manifested the brilliance of which any "properly developed" child was capable (Bruce, 1911b). Like the parents of the prodigies in Wales, the Reverend and Mrs. Berle were sincerely motivated by religious and personal convictions regarding their children's welfare; they were not true creator parents, however, as Leo Wiener, Norbert's father, and Winifred Stoner, Sr., without question were (Bruce, 1911a). Mrs. Stoner, who was often called "Mother Stoner" by the press, had the typical domineering relationship with her daughter, whom she raised to be her chum (Moulton, 1915) by what she called "natural education." Miss Stoner, a poet at 3 and a playwright by age 7, espoused causes with her mother such as the promotion of Esperanto until her mother's death in 1928, after which the daughter apparently dropped out of sight.

CONDITIONS FOR OTHER GIFTED CHILDREN THEN

Preoccupation with the incompetent resulted from the natural tendency of human beings to notice whatever is giving them pain or annoyance, taking for granted that which proceeds in an orderly, agreeable manner Philanthropy, originally meaning love of man, degenerated to mean love of stupid and vicious man. (Hollingworth, 1926, preface)

Humanitarian and scientific interest had neglected to extend upward to the gifted until the researches of Leta Stetter Hollingworth and Lewis Terman in the 1920s. From his experiences with mental testing, the latter psychologist had made observations regarding the welfare of children with superior intelligence in 1916, when Sidis was around 18. Terman (1916) noted by then:

Through the leveling influences of the educational lockstep, such children are at present often lost in the masses. It is a rare child who is able to break this lockstep by extra promotions Psychological tests show that children of superior ability are very likely to be misunderstood. (pp. 12-13)

When Terman embarked upon the monumental *Genetic Studies of Genius* in 1921, the average age of his subjects was about 10. He found that "very few of the parents carried out any systematic scheme of child training" (Terman, 1925, p. 287) beyond encouraging their children's questions and being interested in what concerned them. The conditions of educational neglect from a decade

before, including insufficient acceleration, had not been improved, though. Terman (1925) said of school measures affecting the gifted, "Traditional methods have ignored the problem; their influence is negative rather than positive; the best that can be hoped for them is that they may not be as bad as they seem" (pp. 639-640).

Chronology of Events in the Life of William Sidis

To this day, William Sidis remains one of the most astonishing examples of intellectual precocity recorded. His father "began to train him in the use of his observational and reasoning faculties before he was two years old" (Bruce, 1910, p. 692), so that William was able to spell and read before age 3. The baby would amuse himself by spelling the titles of books in his father's library, such as *Effects of Anaesthesia*. Once, as a test of his ability, someone spelled out "Prince Mavrocordatos, a friend of Byron" in alphabet blocks before him. A week later William was asked "What was the name of Byron's friend I spelled out for you?" He answered by immediately producing the phrase, thereby demonstrating that, besides his amazing memory, he did more than recognize strings of letters when he "read."

When William was 3½ and already writing with a pencil, he saw his father typing a letter and demanded to be shown how to use the machine. Six months later he was able to type easily. When the boy was 5, his father gave him several calendars to teach him the idea of time and to familiarize him with numbers. By studying these, the child was able to devise his own method for predicting on what day of the week a date would fall. At the same age he had been taught to read Russian, French, and German as well as English. A year later, 6-year-old William could also read Hebrew words. Afterward, he was to learn Latin and Greek.

William had such a zeal for knowledge that he was willing to explore even other areas than those in which his father was instructing him. When the 6-year-old boy found the skeleton his father had used as a medical student, his natural ability was stimulated as it had been by the calendars. With an anatomy textbook, he studied the bones by comparing them with the illustration plates until, said his father, "He knew so much about the structure of the body that he could pass a

medical student's examination at six years of age" ("The Boy Prodigy of Harvard," 1910).

When the little boy who could type, read many foreign languages, and hold his own with medical students on anatomy reached legal school age, he was required to attend grammar school in the company of other children who had yet to learn to read English and to print. William was sent to a public school in Brookline, Massachusetts, where his family had moved. In a scant 6 months at the school, he passed quickly through all seven of its grades, leaving his teachers bewildered and revealing his precocity to the outside world.

The Sidises educated their son at home for the next 2 years. It was necessary for them to overcome the aversion to numbers that William had acquired in the grammar school. Boris invented games that required mathematical concepts in order to be played and conversed with his wife about the everyday importance of arithmetic until William was won over. The boy's usual curiosity and intellectual drive were aroused again. He took up the study of mathematics so assiduously that in a couple of years his knowledge of it surpassed his father's.

In his 8th year William chalked up even more admirable feats. Reportedly, he passed the entrance examination for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, devised a new table of logarithms using a base of 12 instead of 10, and passed the Harvard Medical School's anatomy examination. He was entered in Brookline High School; there he was a distinguished student who excelled in mathematics. His entire stay in the high school lasted 3 months before his parents removed him to study at home for another 2 years. His progress in mathematics was such that by age 10 he already knew algebra, trigonometry, geometry, and differential and integral calculus.

William had come the full circle of educational preparation and more, which most boys did not reach until their teens (if ever). Now that his son was finished with high school, Boris Sidis tried to have the 9-year-old enrolled at Harvard College, but he could not overcome the faculty's reluctance to admit so young a boy. William was rejected after another try, "by reason of his lack of years" (Fleishman, 1910). It wasn't until the 2 years of post-high-school home study had passed and Harvard was petitioned a third time that William was finally admitted. The 11-year-old boy was permitted to enroll as a special student in the fall of 1909. On January 5, 1910, William James

Sidis delivered his celebrated lecture on the fourth dimension before the Harvard Mathematical Club.

THE CHILD LECTURER OF HARVARD AND HIS FAME

Young Sidis's "Four-Dimensional Bodies" remains the nonpareil of achievements by a child prodigy. Before an audience of more than 75 men, the largest club meeting of that year, the boy delivered a paper based upon original theories he had worked out and presented to his tutors. Norbert Wiener, the future father of cybernetics and a 15-year-old Harvard graduate student then, wrote of the lecture given at Conant Hall: "The talk would have done credit to a first- or second-year graduate student of any age . . . Sidis had no access to existing sources [so] that the talk represented the triumph of the unaided efforts of a very brilliant child" (Wiener, 1953, pp. 131-132). That evening William had astounded the assemblage of professors, assistant professors, instructors, graduate students, and invited guests. He was to spend the rest of his growing years in the unflagging attention of the public eye.

An impression of how famous Sidis was as a child can be obtained by looking at the number of magazine articles that were published about the boy. An entry in 1907 ("An Infant Prodigy") in a feature called "The Editor's Diary" in the *North American Review* was one early example of the publicity he received. By then, William was attracting national attention as an 8-year-old high school freshman, and the *North American Review* gave its readers an account of his general behavior and early intellectual feats. In 1909, *The Outlook* described William at age 11 in an article entitled "A Wonderful Boy." It was another report of William's accomplishments and a statement of his father's educational philosophy. A 1910 *Harper's Weekly* issue contained a piece called "A Boy Prodigy and the Fourth Dimension" (Fleishman, 1910), the first national-magazine account of William as the 11-year-old lecturer of Harvard. Later that year, *The Independent* printed a commentary ("The Sidis Boy," 1910) on William's lecture in which it belittled the significance of his precocity, maintaining that any boy of his age (mistakenly given as 13) with the same good education could have done as well. Also in 1910, *Current Literature* devoted space to young Sidis's doings, featuring a lengthy interview with Dr. Sidis and another rehash of the younger Sidis's lecture ("The Boy Prodigy of Harvard," 1910). Dolbear (1912) de-

voted a section to him in her *Pedagogical Seminary* publication, much of which described his spoiled-child antics, such as disrupting classes at Harvard when he got bored.

The magazine articles on Sidis have the appearance of drawing heavily from newspaper sources. From the regularity with which the dailies print stories about child wonders, it is not difficult to believe that people must have read about him in these pages, too. It is possible to determine how newsworthy this prodigy was from the numerous headlines and editorials he commanded in the *New York Times* alone. In this world-stature publication, the first mention of many that Sidis would receive was a front-page description on January 6, 1910 ("Boy of Ten Addresses," 1910) of his Harvard lecture and an editorial comment the next day ("Illustrating a System," 1910). Master Sidis "Propounds New Theories" the *New York Times's* vast readership was told. Under the heading "Topics of the Times," Boris Sidis's bold educational claims and how his son's extraordinary achievements exemplified them were noted in a piece called "Illustrating a System of Education" (1910).

SIGNS OF HIS TRAGIC FUTURE APPEAR

By his spectacular childhood exploits, William inspired all manner of glowing predictions for his future. Superlatives fail to convey the excitement that the flowering of his talent must have aroused until they are contrasted with the knowledge that the amazing boy was to meet such a tragic end. How William declined from mathematical wunderkind to a woeful specimen of misspent brilliance is also chronicled in the *New York Times*. It began to report the news he made in his adolescence with an announcement in 1914 ("Harvard A.B. at 16") that Sidis was, at 16, the youngest man ever to receive an AB degree from Harvard. But by 1915, a *New York Times* editorial ("This Plan Is Full of Promise") was poking fun at 17-year-old Sidis's misogynistic outbursts. On May 3, 1919, it related that the youngest man ever to receive a Harvard degree had been arrested in Boston for being in a radical procession ("Four Boston Radicals"). A follow-up a few days later stating that Sidis had been sentenced to a year and a half in prison made the front page ("Young Sidis, 'Harvard Prodigy,' Sentenced," 1919). On May 15, 1919, the *New York Times* made one last editorial commentary upon William Sidis's conduct (be-

fore he was to drop out of sight); this pleaded for understanding over jail for "A Youthful Prodigy in Trouble."

At the same time there were some less striking indicators of the academic fall that William was about to make. While Sidis was still a mere 16 years old, it was becoming manifest that he was losing his intellectual direction. Though he had graduated cum laude in 1914, he spent only 1 year doing graduate study at Harvard, and there is no record that he received a graduate degree. He entered the Harvard Law School in 1916 and, although said to have done well, again did not take a degree. Presumably, his heart was still in mathematics. G. C. Evans, his mentor at Harvard, secured the 20-year-old a teaching position at the then new Rice Institute in Texas. But William failed to measure up to the responsibility, not possessing the maturity for the job. The youthful mathematics instructor was no longer able to brook the prying by reporters to which he was constantly subjected. His unsuccessful episode at Rice was followed by the May Day demonstration incident, which generated even more unfavorable publicity. A decade as a public figure since childhood was too much for him to bear. After he won an appeal against his conviction, William James Sidis dropped out of sight.

THE PERFECT LIFE

During those first years spent hiding from publicity, he sought his version of the perfect life that he had once expounded to reporters on his graduation day—total seclusion. As a child, Sidis seemingly thrived upon and enjoyed his academic environment, but as a bitter, disillusioned young man he formed an extreme reaction against academia, blaming it and his father for the shambles in which he found his life. For the remainder of his life he worked at various low-paying clerical jobs that did not require much thought (paradoxically, the one-time mathematical prodigy was proud of his ability to operate an adding machine expertly). So totally estranged from his family was Sidis that he refused to attend his father's funeral in 1923 and, likewise, was not acknowledged in his father's obituary ("Dr. Boris Sidis Dies," 1923). Sidis's attempts to lead a solitary, unassuming existence were in vain, however, as he constantly had to change jobs when his former identity was realized. His hopes for attaining privacy were finally dashed in 1924 when reporters

discovered 26-year-old Sidis working as a clerk in New York City for \$23 a week.

Once again, William began to earn unwanted notoriety in the *New York Times*. Their editorial, "Precocity Doesn't Wear Well" (1924), hammered home the points that Sidis was no longer capable of performing marvels and that his example should comfort the parents of ordinary boys. William Sidis's two books, however, mutely contradict the notion that he was incapable of using his gifts. His later work, a vanity volume called *Notes on the Collection of Transfers* (Sidis, 1926), is the generally better known one. Published under a pseudonym when Sidis was 28, it was the outgrowth of a childhood hobby. His earlier book is somewhat enigmatic. *The Animate and the Inanimate* (Sidis, 1925) was published in 1925, but the foreword signed with Sidis's name is dated much earlier, January 6, 1920, so that it was probably completed when he was 21. It may be that the book was partly written during Sidis's years underground or while he was at Rice, but the manuscript was not actually released as a book until Sidis was back in the news again. Unlike *Notes on the Collection of Transfers*, *The Animate and the Inanimate* is a serious treatment of a scientific topic; it involves the philosophy of science. The contrast in the content of these two works reflects the change that Sidis underwent, from scholar to cynical eccentric, hostile to intellectualism. Sidis's lone mature accomplishment in the philosophy of science, a proof of James's theory of reserve energy, is itself an ironic commentary on his childhood as a living experiment, as will be seen.

REDISCOVERED ONCE MORE

Whatever chance there was of the public's finally forgetting him was lost to Sidis in 1937 when his unhappy tale was resurrected for *New Yorker* readers (Manley, 1937). "April Fool," Jared Manley's update on the famous prodigy, was a piece for the feature, "Where Are They Now?" and is commonly held to be the best study done on him. Actually, it is far from being factually accurate, especially on the early details of the prodigy's life. A comparison of the facts in the actual sources available on Sidis with Manley's version of them shows his research to be faulty, but upon closer examination it appears that his mistakes may have arisen from unfamiliarity with the academic world. Manley relied upon the work

of another reporter in his description of Sidis as an adult, so one may more readily accept at least this part of the article as a fairly true representation of Sidis.

According to Manley's informant, William Sidis spent his adult years leading a totally broken life. Whereas he had once shown promise of becoming a mathematical giant, the sight of a formula now made him physically ill. His childhood enthusiasm for learning had been as remarkable as his precocious intellect, but as an adult the prospect of responsibility or difficult thought would cause him to burst into tears. He fled from one low-paying job to another and lived in dismal quarters in the shabbier parts of various cities as he tried to escape his former fame. As to what his personality had become over the years spent under these tragic circumstances, one person said that Sidis was possessed of the chronic bitterness common to lonely roomers, but another observer believed he had a certain childlike charm underlying his intense, erratic manner.

If "April Fool" had been written after the famous prodigy's death, then the tone of Manley's journalism would have seemed innocuous. But William was still living and, to his publicity-shy mind, any further intrusion was too cruel to bear. Not only had Manley violated Sidis's privacy, but the article had also dared to insinuate that he was not normal but eccentric. Sidis drew on his former legal training and sued the publishing company for libel and for invading his privacy. Trying to show that he was a normal human being, he carried his case all the way to the Supreme Court (which refused to review it) but lost. The *New Yorker's* counsel succeeded on a point of law, but the Circuit Court judges who ruled against Sidis were sympathetic toward him. In fact, one of them (Clark, 1941) saw the article as a merciless dissection of Sidis's personal life. This contention is backed up somewhat by James Thurber, who was on the *New Yorker* staff back then and who had prepared the version of Manley's article that appeared in the "Where Are They Now?" feature. Thurber was disappointed that his rewrite had been found "amusing and instructive," because his implicit intent had been "to curb the great American thrusting of talented children into the glare of fame or notoriety" (Thurber, 1957, p. 212). He had hoped to use this account of Sidis's misfortune as a parable of what he viewed as the general exploitation of gifted children, and he had obviously slanted the piece in this direction, slan-

dering the parents and benefactors of these children with the same brush he used to tar Boris Sidis.

Because he had no career that could have been jeopardized by Manley's article, Sidis did not have a suitable legal case. He sued once more over certain inaccuracies in the article (that the *New Yorker* had incorrectly reported that Sidis had attended Tufts and skipped his bail in Roxbury were judged minor slips by Thurber). The magazine settled out of court.

HIS FAME FINALLY ELUDED

Once more Sidis was left to try to regain his cherished anonymity, a task that had become doubly hard because still another generation had been made curious about him. It was not until July 17, 1944, that he at last found sanctuary; Sidis lapsed into a coma and died of an inner-cranial hemorrhage ("Sidis, a 'Wonder' in Childhood, Dies," 1944) at the age of 46. At the time of his death, he had been living alone in a Brookline, Massachusetts, boarding house, apparently destitute and unemployed ("The Hidden Genius," 1944). Unhappily, the rumor-mongering that dogged him all his life even followed him into the grave; the myth that William Sidis committed suicide persists.

How Can His Outcome Be Explained?

RELIABLE FIRST-HAND ACCOUNTS

Why did Sidis's life sink to such an abysmal level when he showed such great promise initially? There is an abundance of journalistic information on his childhood from which we might try to tease out clues, but however well-researched these accounts may have been, they remain mostly the observations of outsiders. Fortunately, certain more credible first-hand descriptions of Sidis do exist: an article by an educational writer who knew Sidis from the age of 7 (Bruce, 1910); a mention in *Ex-Prodigy: My Childhood and Youth* by Norbert Wiener, who knew him from his Harvard undergraduate days (Wiener, 1953); material in a book by his own father (Sidis, 1911); and the recollections of a close relative who was occasionally visited by the adult William Sidis.

H. Addington Bruce was a family friend of the Sidises and a prominent magazine writer of the day who specialized in psychological and educational topics. In 1910 he wrote an article called

"Bending the Twig" about Boris Sidis's ideas on child rearing and how they produced William's genius. The article said that the elder Sidis shared the philosopher William James's belief that an organism possessed stores of mental energy that could be tapped and put to use if the organism was forced, or forced itself, past an initial layer of fatigue. Boris Sidis also thought that conscious educational intervention should begin much earlier than it generally did, and he based his method of child training on the aforementioned Jamesian theory of "reserve energy" (Sidis, 1911, pp. 56-58).

Boris Sidis's opinion as to the origin and nature of William's phenomenal ability was based on this theory. He was certain that William's achievements were not due to hereditary disposition or precocity but were merely the output of the ease and power afforded to anyone who could draw upon his reserves of mental energy. The boy was capable of this because of the educational regime to which he had been subjected since birth and the concomitant love for learning that it developed. Sidis's method of education, as Bruce reported it, does not seem very severe; in fact, it resembles a commonsensical, though intensive, Montessori approach that many a progressive modern-day parent provides for his child. Bruce portrayed William as an industrious and mentally sturdy child who fitted in well at Harvard. His picture of William's general behavior is more flattering than other contemporary accounts, though. Bruce conceded only that the boy was more rambunctious than average and in some ways a bit more childish than his age-mates.

Up to the age of 12 (in 1910), then, William James Sidis was not seen to exhibit any recognizable sign that might have foreshadowed his final outcome; the crises that set him upon his unhappy course in life must have occurred sometime later. The laudatory magazine commentary on Sidis stopped at this point, and the only publicity he received any more in the *New York Times* until the May Day incident was not good. The abstruseness of this period, with its abrupt loss of publicity for the famous prodigy, is itself an indication that the cause of the trouble must have started here.

HIS "BREAKDOWN"

Both "April Fool" and the Sidis obituary in *Time* magazine ("Prodigious Failure," 1944) claim that Sidis suffered a nervous breakdown shortly after

giving his famous lecture. Evidence from the sketchy, but actual, sources written during or about this period seems to contradict this but does not really clarify whether a breakdown occurred and (if so) when it did. One magazine article states that "the eleven-year-old scientist of Harvard" was sick after he gave his lecture but that his studies weren't responsible ("The Boy Prodigy," 1910, p. 291). It also said that rumors about how he would never return to Harvard were always spread whenever he took a vacation. In 1911, when William was 12, his father wrote that many who opposed his method of education deluded themselves into believing that his son was being kept in a sanatorium (Sidis, 1911, pp. 87-88). In *Ex-Prodigy: My Childhood and Youth*, Norbert Wiener (1953) wrote that Sidis did break down, but after the May Day incident, not at Harvard. The misperception about Sidis's emotional health at the time may have arisen from the fact that he received his AB in 1914, after 5 years. Manley (1937) and *Time* ("Prodigious Failure," 1944) wrote that Sidis spent a year in his father's sanatorium, but the *New York Times* announcement of his graduation ("Harvard A.B. at 16," 1914) stated that he completed his full course of study in 1913 but was declared too young to receive his degree.

Sidis's nervous breakdown at an early age may have been no more authentic than his "suicide." That the teen-aged Sidis was shy, awkward, and distrustful during the latter half of his Harvard career may have been taken for evidence of his supposed stay in a sanatorium, but the description would fit any youth who reacted to adolescence by withdrawing. Even if Sidis did have a breakdown, many persons have been known to recover from such and later become famous (e.g., see Bell, 1937). Thus, Sidis's suffering a breakdown would not be enough to explain his subsequent behavior. The mental-breakdown theory is fraught with inconsistencies that render it too weak to explain the Sidis enigma alone.

HIS FATHER'S ROLE

Boris Sidis is usually seen as the villain of this unhappy story, the fanatic who sacrificed his own son in order to promulgate his views on education. Admittedly, the elder Sidis was a scurrilous critic of the state of education then, as evidenced by the tone of the writing throughout his book *Philistine and Genius* (Sidis, 1911), a venomous, un-

constructive attack that offered no alternatives for reform. Dr. Sidis was condemned as a crank (*Book Review Digest*, 1911) and was probably thought of in the same way by other contemporaries.

If Boris Sidis's vaunted method of child rearing was solely responsible for his son's disappointing end, why then were not nearly all those others who were raised in this manner unsuccessful? The parents of A. A. Berle, Jr., assistant secretary of state under President Franklin D. Roosevelt and William's classmate at Harvard, directly practiced Boris Sidis's ideas in bringing up Berle and his siblings (Bruce, 1912). The Berle children were almost as precocious as William but grew up to be prominent, fully functioning, normal adults ("Adolph A. Berle Dies," 1971).

If laying the blame on father Sidis's disastrous attempt at prodigy-making proves to be another too-pat explanation, like the alleged nervous breakdown, what is a more plausible reason for the younger Sidis's miserable outcome? According to a member of the family, it was not really due to the intellectual forcing of Dr. Sidis's educational system, but rather because Boris and Sarah were incapable of being good parents. This relative wrote:

Neither his mother nor his father had any *wisdom*, even any common sense. They were, except intellectually, fools . . . Boris and Sarah, though not cruel, had no truly paternal or maternal feeling: they could educate a child but not rear him, which is a different thing. (Fadiman, Note 1)

Boris and Sarah Sidis, it seems, could not provide William with even the most basic emotional security a child needs to grow up normally, let alone the special care that a child prodigy requires to face the rebuffs he is certain to encounter from the world (see Wiener, 1953, pp. 117-118). Having learned this about William James Sidis's childhood, one is not surprised that he lacked the emotional resiliency to cope with the ordeal his life became.

Another Harvard contemporary of the younger Sidis was schooled in a similar way by his father, who independently came to hold the same views as Boris Sidis. Unlike William James Sidis, that boy became one of the important scientists of the century. He was Norbert Wiener.

Comparison of the Precocity of Sidis and Wiener

There are certain pregnant similarities between the sons of Leo Wiener and Boris Sidis that reflect

their father's coexistent beliefs. Norbert and William had much in common: Their fathers were both Russian Jews, self-made men who utilized the opportunities in their adopted land to the utmost; both boys were used to illustrate their fathers' pet theories; both exhibited a great deal of social awkwardness; and both encountered academic difficulty in adolescence. Unlike Sidis, Wiener left behind two detailed autobiographies, *Ex-Prodigy: My Childhood and Youth* (1953) and *I Am A Mathematician* (1956), that tell us how he was able to make the transition (by about age 30) from a clumsy, father-dominated infant prodigy to an adult. The striking parallels between these two boys justify examining what Norbert Wiener wrote about his early life in order to probe the riddle Sidis's pitiful end poses, but it should be remembered that this analogy remains merely a device for abstracting insights from Wiener's life with which to illustrate Sidis's.

"Psychologists are on safe ground so long as they talk in abstractions about personality in general. Their real test comes when they attempt to explain (or guide or therapeutically treat) a single concrete life" (Allport, 1965, p. x). Any single concrete personality such as Sidis, Allport suggests, should be regarded as a single specimen that is part of the generality of human nature and yet individual and unique (Allport, 1965, p. 159). The task of psychohistorically examining William Sidis and his personal impact on the educations of gifted children is akin to the task of psychobiographical analysis as Allport saw it: to find the structures and laws of this man's being. This backward look at the untimely loss of a potential scientific genius requires insight into the nature of William James Sidis's own lawful regularity of his, and only his, pattern of life. What is involved here is perceptive hindsight that will explain one person, not a search for a generally predictive principle.

In *Ex-Prodigy: My Childhood and Youth*, Wiener's discussion of the effect on an infant prodigy of education at home by a dominant father touches upon one aspect of the creator parent phenomenon, namely, the kind of parent-child relationship that results from this extreme supervision (Wiener, 1953, pp. 71-72). In the examples Wiener cites, this type of relationship led to a suppressed feeling of revolt in the attitudes of such sons as John Stuart Mill, Edmund Gosse, and Samuel Butler (the same was true of Butler's creation, Ernest Pontifex). Such was the case for

William Sidis, whose rebellion against his father and his father's world, the realm of the intellect, was so strong that they remained completely and irrevocably estranged. All of these examples tie in neatly with what would ordinarily be expected by generalizing from this concept. However, the nearly symbiotic relationship between the Winifred Stoners and the unusual compatibility of their ideologies make the younger Winifred Stoner different from these other examples. As regards "personality in general," this mother and child shared the attributes of the other prodigy-makers and their children, but closer examination of them proves the value of Allport's admonition to consider individuality and uniqueness.

THEIR FATHERS' ACTIONS

Leo Wiener imposed peculiar conditions upon Norbert's life that added to the adjustment problems he faced as a child prodigy. Norbert Wiener (1956) wrote:

My own free curiosity was matched by my father's insistence that my training be disciplined . . . [All of these subjects had a certain interest for me but] no casual interest could satisfy my father's demands for precise and ready knowledge. (p. 18)

Despite the seeming mildness of his method of education as he outlined it, Boris Sidis also had harsh ideas, believing that childhood was wasted on "meaningless games and silly, objectless sports" (Bruce, 1912, p. 212). While both men were very hard on their children, the critical difference between their sons' situations seems to have been that Norbert had only to deal with pressure to succeed from his father, while William Sidis was actually exploited by his father.

Wiener's case was made less severe by his exposure to other children in public school (he was graduated from a small-town high school and was class valedictorian at age 11), but Sidis was educated for the most part at home until he came to Harvard. A very well-behaved boy while in high school, Norbert once was held in his teacher's lap during a lesson (Wiener, 1953, p. 93). William, the complete opposite, was such a high-strung, disagreeable child that his teachers were glad to see him leave Brookline High School ("Prodigious Failure," 1944).

The contrast in their school experiences was only one instance in which Wiener was able to over-

come a situation that Sidis could not. In general, compared with Leo Wiener, Boris Sidis badly mismanaged his son's life. Despite their similarities in thinking about child training, Boris's and Leo's attitudes about their sons' brilliance differed. Leo Wiener would always stress his son's ordinariness to him. He once kept William James's praise about one of Norbert's philosophical essays from being heard by the boy to prevent him from becoming conceited (Wiener, 1953, pp. 109-110). Dr. Sidis's statements to the press about his young genius's accomplishments, on the other hand, cultivated arrogance in William. Leo Wiener was aware of the potential effect of too much publicity, whereas the elder Sidis was a complete fool on this matter. Wiener chose Tufts College for his son in order to keep from making a spectacle of him by placing him at Harvard, and he saw to it that Norbert did not show off to reporters (Wiener, 1953, pp. 118-119).

Norbert Wiener admonished onlookers to the Sidis tragedy not to condemn Boris Sidis for his misguided treatment of his child. Norbert was obviously trying to keep others from making an unfavorable comparison with his own father. William Sidis never had any such concern in his heart for his father; there was not much of an emotional bond between them. When Norbert was in trouble, his father would leap to his defense, as he did when his son was accused of cheating on his Harvard examinations (Wiener, 1953, p. 172), whereas Boris disowned William for his problems. It is no wonder that William Sidis deliberately ruined his own life to thwart his father's efforts at making him the perfect man.

WEINER'S SUCCESS VERSUS SIDIS'S TRAGEDY

Sidis's difficult childhood, with its constant publicity and his father's rough treatment, left him with no way to make the most demanding adjustment of all, coping with his brilliance. Norbert Wiener shared the same type of ambitious, highly intellectual, ethnic background as William Sidis, and their fathers had the same egotistical belief that they created their sons' brilliance. Wiener (1956) related how that affected his assessment of his capacities:

With the inevitable isolation which my father's training gave me, I was a very self-conscious hobbledohoy, subject to alternate moods of conceit when I became aware of my abilities and of great disappointment when I accepted at their face value the strictures on my shortcomings, or

when I contemplated the long and uncertain road to achievement to which my highly eccentric bringing-up had condemned me. (p. 19)

With the support of his wife, Wiener was able to overcome the interference with his independence by his family. Sidis was never lucky enough to find a stronger influence on his life to fill this need because it would probably have been impossible for him to sustain a normal marriage sexually. His relative said that Sidis's development had been sexually arrested because "his parents' regime included no affective, no emotional component" (Fadiman, Note 1).

There were certain unique factors in Sidis's case that hindered him. His parents' phenomenal climb in status in America, his father's rapid success at Harvard, and his mother's rise from illiterate to MD must have made their expectations for their son unreasonably high. In turn, their distorted example, in combination with his lack of experience, further prevented him from making a realistic appraisal of his abilities. There were many serious blows to his confidence: his failure to earn an advanced degree, his fall from grace at Rice, his failure to get his book published in 1920, and his arrest in Roxbury, Massachusetts. As a result, his emotional makeup could not withstand the strain of academic competition, nor could he conquer the added difficulty of winning acceptance that he and Wiener faced as prodigies. Had he possessed the capacity to take these frustrations in stride, he might have continued his career.

Sidis's social maladjustment was probably an even greater handicap than his mental block against intellectual work, for which it may have been largely responsible. In *Ex-Prodigy: My Childhood and Youth*, Wiener (1953) recorded these observations about the boy prodigy:

Sidis was a child who was considerably behind the majority of children of his age in social development and social adaptability He was an infant with a full share of infatuosities of a grownup Dr. Johnson. (p. 132)

Although both of Sidis's parents were psychiatrists, nothing they did altered his tragic life course. On this matter, Wiener (1953) opined:

I have no doubt that even when I knew him at Harvard, competent psychoanalytic help of the sort that is readily available today could have saved young Sidis for a more useful and a happier career His father, . . . busy reading the fine print of the psychological map, was unable to read the inscription written on it in the largest

characters, stretching from one corner to the other. (p. 133)

In "Analysis of the Child Prodigy," Norbert Wiener (1957) implored the parents of prodigies to provide special protection for their unusual children in their vulnerable state. By seeking publicity instead of shielding William from perpetual intrusion, Boris Sidis clearly failed his son. John Stuart Mill had to come to grips with his unusual station in life at about the same age William Sidis did.¹ Mill went into a period of depression when he realized how hollow his life goals were. In his autobiography (Mill, 1873/1924) he wrote: "If I had loved anyone sufficiently to make confiding my griefs a necessity, I should not have been in the condition I was" (p. 95). Mill recovered from his depression. According to Wiener, Sidis reacted to the recognition of his alienation by turning against his family. In Wiener's words, he "broke down" (Wiener, 1953, p. 132).

HOW ELSE WAS HE HINDERED?

For the rest of his life, Sidis desperately fled his former notoriety. It might have been possible for him to reconstruct his shattered life if society had allowed him to settle into obscurity by respecting the privacy that he had won by accepting his defeat. But it was not his fate to obtain this needed rest. Instead, he was hounded from place to place and ridiculed for not living up to his father's boasts. His cousin considered Sidis truly emotionally disturbed, but it is hard to know whether, given the pressures Sidis bore, his odd behavior may not have been entirely appropriate. As well, by modern standards of college rebellion, young Sidis's political conduct would not be unseemly. So, as a Marxist adolescent, he may have been out of step with his time.

There were, then, many reasons why Sidis could not socially conform to a point sufficient for academic success. Certainly, those who took pleasure in holding his misadventures against him were as much to blame for his outcome as his father. For all that Norbert Wiener and William Sidis had in common, Wiener never had to deal with such unrelenting ridicule. As well, Wiener had a PhD to use as a safe base from which to establish his aca-

¹ He was 20 years old at the time. See Mill (1873/1924, pp. 93-128).

ademic position, and he could move on to more expansive and facilitative intellectual experiences. More acceleration, not less, might have helped Sidis obtain this needed degree, for he spent 5 years getting his Harvard AB after being held back earlier for an additional 2 years. Had he completed his baccalaureate in 3 years, as Wiener did at Tufts, he might have acquired his doctorate before his emotional trouble set in. At an age when he might have had his PhD, he was already in his decline and soon to meet personal disaster.

It was not extreme educational acceleration that destroyed William James Sidis emotionally and mentally, but instead an interaction of paternal exploitation and emotional starvation. Norbert Wiener had to surmount some of the same obstacles Sidis faced as a prodigy from a society that shunned them because of their early brilliance, but Wiener survived, his life pattern not being oriented toward self-destruction like Sidis's. If Wiener had had to face the rest of the debilitating influences that overwhelmed young Sidis, we might never have had cybernetics as we know it today. Who knows what we have lost because William James Sidis never realized his potential?

SIDIS'S CASE WAS UNIQUE

The tragedy of William James Sidis's life after his graduation from college does not seem ever to have been matched. Only one creator parent and his child have recently attracted the publicity that Boris Sidis and his son once did (Stern, 1971). In this case, the manipulated offspring, this time a daughter, rebelled against her father by studying mathematics, which was not her strongest area, instead of medicine, for which her father had groomed her. With the choice of mathematics, she was able to shut her father out of her intellectual life as she became more advanced. After dropping out of the PhD program of a midwestern university where she had been doing graduate work in mathematics, she finally rejected her father's domineering influence. However, by settling in a southeastern state and working her way up to the rank of senior associate programmer with IBM, this woman appears to have managed better than the unfortunate William Sidis.

Variations of the historimetrical method of biography searches for academic precocity in the backgrounds of eminent people from the past turn up a number of more encouraging cases to counterpoise that of Sidis (Montour, 1976d). However,

by employing newspaper and magazine reports of brilliant children who were accelerated as far back as 1920, one can gather a similar sample without the obvious bias that the use of historical figures entails. The progress of such individuals can be checked by locating them with the aid of biographical directories or sleuthing by mail. This method fails to turn up many females or persons below age 55, however. It should not be assumed that those not found in this way did not succeed. P. J. B. (Burks, Jensen, & Terman, 1930, pp. 340-357; Ohanian, in press) achieved more than did most women of her generation and is the mother of four talented progeny, yet she would have been missed by this study had she not identified herself.

Harvard College can provide a history of precocious alumni known to have succeeded vocationally and professionally. Two less familiar figures than the oft-cited cases of Increase and Cotton Mather were even younger than Sidis when they got their degrees from Harvard. Paul Dudley, who was really the youngest man to graduate from Harvard (not Sidis, as claimed), entered at age 10 (class of 1690) and took his first degree at age 14. Dudley led a full life at the college and became an eminent Massachusetts jurist who was appointed Chief Justice in 1745. Andrew Preston Peabody was another youthful Harvard graduate at age 15. Both an academic and a minister, he served as acting president of Harvard College in 1862 and was its overseer for 10 years (*Who Was Who in America*, 1967). Norbert Wiener, Adolph Berle, Jr., and the composer Roger Sessions, who were admitted to Harvard at ages 15 (as a PhD candidate), 14, and 14, respectively, were all youthful Harvard men like Sidis, but they all fared well in their careers.

Yale also had its contingent of extremely precocious undergraduates. The Trumbull family of Connecticut, like the Mathers, were notable for the number of sons they placed at Harvard and Yale Colleges at early ages. The most precocious, the poet John Trumbull, performed the feat of passing Yale's entrance examination at the tender age of 7 (Montour, 1976c). The young student waited until he was 13, though, before he matriculated at Yale. He spent 9 years there, taking his baccalaureate at age 17 and remaining as a tutor for some time. Trumbull eventually became a lawyer (Bowden, 1962).

In 1945, Merrill Kenneth Wolf became perhaps the youngest American to receive a bachelor's degree, taking his from Yale University when he was

barely 14. Wolf originally entered Western Reserve University when he was 10 and transferred to Yale because the composer, Paul Hindemith, had taken an interest in him. After graduating as a music major from Yale, Wolf studied on keyboard instruments privately under Artur Schnabel and others. At 21 he opted for medicine as a profession and entered the Western Reserve University Medical School (Montour, 1976a). Dr. Wolf is now an outstanding neuroanatomy professor in the East (Keating, 1976, see index).

Though other children have earned various degrees of notoriety as prodigies since William Sidis, seldom are we told what they became as adults. As a result of Sidis's spectacular decline, it is mistakenly believed that other prodigies must also have exhausted themselves mentally and dropped out of sight. Actually, though, a number of precocious matriculators to college who were publicized for bypassing narrow-minded opposition to acceleration at the elementary and high school levels contradict this misapprehension. An Ohio-born man who had a Stanford-Binet IQ of 197 at the age of 5 is one of these. Now a vice-president of an eastern financial concern at age 60, he was a high school valedictorian at 13 and graduated cum laude from Northwestern University when he was 17, having already earned Phi Beta Kappa honors before his 17th birthday. A follower of the stock market from age 4, he went into finance and became a registered brokerage representative while still a minor. At 28 he took a Bachelor of Divinity degree from the Chicago Theological Seminary in 2½ years. Another theologically oriented man with an IQ of 187 graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Columbia University in 1923 at age 14 and got his master's and doctoral degrees there in 1924 and 1931. This man, an Episcopalian minister, took three more theology degrees and received two honorary ones. He was Dean of Chapel at Cambridge University until he retired, and he presently resides in England.

Certain renowned American academics first came to public notice when they entered college as youths in their early teens. John Rader Platt was admitted to Northwestern at the age of 14 as one of a handful of 14- and 15-year-olds who comprised an experimental group of "prodigies" ("Five Prodigies," 1932). This now-famous essayist on science took his BS degree from Northwestern in 1936 when he was still 17 and got an MS the next year. At 22 he earned the PhD from the University of Michigan, where he is now the associate

director of its Mental Health Research Institute, as well as a professor of physics. Another faculty member at the University of Michigan, David Noel Freedman, was at 13 the youngest freshman at the City College of New York ("College Boy of Thirteen," 1935). He earned his AB at the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1939 when he was 17. Freedman, an expert on Semitic languages and literature, took a Bachelor of Theology degree from the Princeton Theological Seminary at 22 and received his PhD from Johns Hopkins University in 1948 when he was 26, after having held a number of fellowships.

Dr. Charles L. Fefferman, the first recipient of the National Science Foundation's Alan T. Waterman Award at 27, is a precocious professional on the order of mathematicians like Lagrange and Hamilton. At the University of Chicago in 1971, as a 22-year-old, Fefferman became the youngest full college professor in the United States and became the youngest full professor in Princeton University's history when he was named a professor of mathematics there in 1974. As well as being a brilliant researcher, Dr. Fefferman has gained a reputation for clarifying difficult mathematical topics. He began showing an interest in mathematics by the age of 9 and was already taking a course at a University of Maryland campus near his home at 12. He was 14 when he became a full-time student at Maryland and graduated there in 1966 at 17. He had already published his first scholarly article in 1965 and was a member of Phi Beta Kappa. He then went to Princeton where he earned his PhD in mathematics in 1969 by the time he was 20 (Montour, 1976b).

A more recent, preliminary study of highly mathematically precocious youths who entered The Johns Hopkins University 1 to 5 years early is reported by Stanley (1976, pp. 19-21). Young graduates and expected graduates ranging in age from 17 to 19 are carefully being followed by Johns Hopkins University's Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth, and thus far they seem to be progressing well academically, socially, and emotionally. The Feffermans, Platts, and Freedmans are rarely mentioned by those who readily condemn acceleration for gifted young men and women by flouting William Sidis's outcome.

Conclusion

That credulous reporters on William Sidis did not discover that Paul Dudley was in fact the young-

est man to graduate from Harvard might mean there may have been somewhat of a conspiracy to conceal facts about the case of William Sidis. That would render some of the arguments presented here invalid, but what cannot be obscured is that Sidis's life represents the traducement of an "honorably defeated . . . combatant in the battle for existence" (Wiener, 1953, p. 134). William James Sidis, a prodigy without suitable protection from his father and understanding or sympathy from the outside world, learned what a hell is. One may hope that he will be remembered in a better light and seen as a reminder that even giftedness as great as his can be thwarted.

The manner in which Sidis's terrible history was twisted to fit the traditional conception of the inevitable fate of the prodigy, as in Hesse's (1906) *Unterm rad* for example, represents a curious psychological phenomenon in itself. That the Sidis fallacy—the myth of "early ripe, early rot"—persists, reflects the need many persons have to believe that precocious youths must fail. While some of these misinformed people may bow to strong, clearly presented evidence to the contrary, others remain a challenge for social psychologists and educators of the gifted to overcome.

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