

"Secret of the Wild Child" – Video Transcript

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"Secret of the Wild Child" – Video Quizz

Question 1. When and in which place was Genie seen for the first time?

Genie was discovered in Los Angeles in November 1970, when Genie's 50-year-old mother ran away from her 70-year-old husband after a violent quarrel and took the child along. They escaped to her grandmother's home, where she and Genie stayed for three weeks. Meanwhile Genie's mother, who was partially blind, was applying for public assistance. The social worker at the welfare office took one look at Genie and called her supervisor, who called the police. So, Genie was taken into custody. When Genie was discovered, she weighed 59 pounds, measuring 54 inches tall, and was 13 years and 7 months of age.

Question 2. Describe the conditions under which this wild child had been held.

Genie was born a normal child. At the age of 3 months, she was taken to a paediatrician, her weight was 12 pounds, 2 1/4 ounces, and her height was 23 inches, normal for her age. Then, she was taken back to the paediatrician regularly for her the sixth months and appeared healthy. After her 6-month visitation, Genie was not brought back to the paediatrician until she was 11 months old. At that visit, she weighed only 17 pounds and was below the 16th percentile for her age and sex. Despite that, Genie was described as alert with normal primary dentition for her age. At 14 months, she developed pneumonia and was taken to see a different paediatrician. She was feverish, listless and unresponsive. The physician stated that she showed signs of possible retardation, but because of the fever, it was difficult to assess her development. Genie's father used this statement of "possible

retardation' as justification for the subsequent isolation and abuse Genie suffered. The living conditions of Genie were deplorable at best. She was confined to a small bedroom at the back of the house, usually harnessed to an infant's potty seat. Unclad except for the harness, Genie was left to sit on that chair, unable to move anything except her fingers, hands, feet, and toes. At night, if she was not forgotten, she was removed from her harness only to be placed into another restraining garment, a sleeping bag fashioned to act like a straight jacket. She was then placed in a bed with wire mesh sides and a wire mesh cover overhead. These were her primary experiences for 13 years.

Since the father had an intolerance for noise, there was no radio or TV and conversation was little and at a low volume. Genie heard little to no language outside her door, and did not receive practically any auditory stimulation, aside from bathroom noises. The only exception was that one window in her room was kept open several inches, so she may have heard some occasional environmental noises. Genie's father did not allow anyone to speak to her.

Early on in her life, Genie learned to keep silent because her father would beat her whenever she made noise, or he would bark and growl like a dog to warn her that he was outside the door. Many wondered where Genie's mother was at this time. Records indicate that her mother had become blind, so the father and brother were Genie's primary caretakers. Genie was fed three times a day, if she wasn't being punished. Her diet consisted of baby foods, cereals, and an occasional soft-boiled egg. When the social worker discovered her, Genie was uttering infantile noises and wearing diapers.

Question 3. Where did they take Genie once she was discovered?

Genie was taken to Children's Hospital in Los Angeles. Genie was with the researchers for about four years. Then the funding stopped, and she ended up in a several foster homes, where she met with further abuses. Finally, she was back to an institution where she lives today. In 1997 she was 24 years old. There appears to be no information on her present conditions or if she is still alive.

Question 4. What particular question of importance to science and society (and to this course!) was it thought that the careful study of Genie might be able to answer?

An important question in society and science is how children acquire language. But answering this question is very difficult because normal children are exposed to language from the very beginning of their lives. Genie is one of those exceptional children who are not exposed to language, so scientists could make experiments and know how she could learn to speak, but about all, Genie was going to prove Lenneberg's hypothesis as she was 13 years old and she was at the end of the so called critical period hypothesis because of the age.

But Genie was much dramatised because of her childhood and scientists wanted to know if a good environment could eliminate those horrible reminiscences, and if they could socialize her.

With Genie, there were two interests: treatment and guidance for her, and secondly, research, specifically, her cognitive and linguistic development.

Her discovery aroused curiosity among psychologists, linguists, neurologists, and others who study brain development. They wanted to know what Genie's mental level was at the time she was found and whether she would be capable of developing her faculties. “It is a terribly important case”, says Harlan Lane, a psycholinguist at Northeastern University who wrote *The Wild Boy of Aveyron*. “Since our morality doesn't allow us to conduct deprivation experiments with human beings, these unfortunate people are all we have to go on.”

Question 5. Explain the connection that Susan Curtiss had with the case.

When Genie went into the hospital, psychologists did not really know how much she understood nor did they know how to evaluate whatever language she had. They asked Victoria A. Fromkin, a UCLA psycholinguistic, to study Genie's language abilities. Fromkin brought a graduate student, Susan Curtiss, who is nowadays professor at UCLA. She became so fascinated by Genie that she devoted much of the following seven years of her life researching the girl's linguistic development. Curtiss and

several other doctors and professionals set out to rehabilitate and educate her to the fullest extent as possible.

Susan Curtiss wrote in 1977 *Genie: A Psycholinguistic Study of a Modern-day Wild Child* in New York, in which she synthesizes the linguistic research carried out through her own experiences in studying and working with Genie. In her book, she also tries to answer several questions with this particular case.

Question 6. Describe Genie's general appearance and behaviour just after her "discovery."

When Genie was discovered, as a result of her confinement, she could not walk correctly, because she walked like a bunny, and her eyes could not focus beyond the boundaries of her room. She was malnourished, incontinent, and salivated constantly. When frightened or frustrated she would erupt into silent frenzies of rage — flailing about, scratching, spitting, throwing objects, but never uttering a sound. Aside from not speaking, her lack of socialization was apparent in her behaviour: She would urinate in unacceptable places, go up to someone in a store and take whatever she liked of theirs, and peer intently into the faces of strangers at close range. She could not straighten her arms or legs. She did not know how to chew. And she was eerily silent.

Question 7. Describe Genie's apparent linguistic abilities at the time of her "discovery." What explanation is given for the state of her language?

At the time of her discovery, she did not make any noises. Genie's father did not allow anyone to speak to her so she learned to keep silent because her father would also beat her with a stick whenever she made any noise, or he would bark and growl at her like a dog. The only language Genie heard was an occasional obscenity from her father. Among all things, Genie had no language. She could only say the handful of words including "stop-it" and "no-more", which she said as single words and which her father frequently yelled in her presence.

We could say that she was repressed in order to learn language, because any time she would have wanted to produce any noise she had been hurt by her father, and language would have negative connections to her.

Question 8. Who was (is) James Kent? What personal characteristics did Genie have that captivated her caregivers?

One of the people who were in contact with Genie was James Kent, her psychologist. As Genie passed her childhood locked in a room without human contact, when she was freed, it was as if she were discovering the outside world. People were captivated by her story and then, when they met her, they became more interested in her. She has the quality of eliciting rescue fantasies. For the caregivers and those people who were in contact with children, like Genie, the experience was a characteristic that grabbed lots of them.

Question 9. What was (is) Jay Shurley's special interest in Genie? According to Shurley, how long does it take for the effects of solitary confinement to appear in most people?

Jay Shurley was a psychiatrist *from* Oklahoma. He was an expert in social isolation, and Genie had been almost her 13 years of life confined. As Shurley explained, solitary confinement is "diabolical" and the most severe punishment. It causes psychological trauma over long periods of time. For some people the symptoms develop in 15 minutes or an hour, or may be in two or three days. But trying to expand this short time to almost the thirteen years of Genie was very surprising to Jay Shurley.

Question 10. How did Shurley interpret the presence of "sleep spindles" in Genie's brain activity during sleep?

As Jay Shurley was so impressed by the time of isolation of Genie, he tried to gather information on her brain waves. He tried to measure the electrical activity in Genie's brain while she slept. Shurley found a usually high number of sleep spindles.

This indicated an abnormal brain wave pattern. This provoked a dualist question, that is, if Genie was brain damaged from her years of abuse and isolation or Genie's brain had been retarded from birth. This ambiguous question was puzzled over time by Genie's team.

Question 11. What further information about Genie's family came to light after the beginning of her treatment?

Genie was born into a family where abuse was already common. Genie's father repeatedly threatened to kill his wife, beating her regularly over the years. Despite the fact that her husband disliked children, Genie's mother gave birth to four children. Genie's father hated children and tried to strangle his wife while she was pregnant of her first child. When a baby girl was born, he put the child in the garage because he could not stand her crying: the baby died of pneumonia at two-and-a half months. A second child, a boy, died two days after birth, allegedly from choking on his own mucus. A third child was rescued and cared for by his grandmother when he was three years old. Genie, the fourth and last child, was denied such help, however, because shortly after she was born, her grandmother was hit by a truck and killed.

As we have said before, at the age of 14 months Genie developed pneumonia and was taken to the paediatrician. The physician stated that she showed signs of possible retardation, although with the fever it was difficult to assess her development. Genie's father used this statement by the physician of "possible retardation" as justification for the subsequent isolation and abuse suffered by Genie. Many wondered where Genie's mother was at this time. Records indicate that her mother had become blind, so the father and brother were Genie's primary caretakers. Charges of wilful abuse were filed against both her parents, according to Los Angeles Times. On the day he was due to appear in court, however, Genie's father shot himself to death. He left a note in which he wrote: "The world will never understand." The father's constant abuse made the entire family live in fear and isolation. His suicide added more interest in Genie's case. At the end of Genie's case, in 1978, Genie's mother became her legal guardian. During all the years of Genie's rehabilitation, her mother had also received help. She recovered her sight and a social worker tried to improve her behaviour toward her daughter. Genie's mother had never been held legally responsible for the child's inhuman treatment. Charges of child abuse were dismissed in 1970, when her lawyer argued that she "was, herself, a victim of the same psychotic individual"—her husband.

Nevertheless, for many years the court assigned a guardian for Genie. Shortly after Genie's mother was named guardian, she astounded the therapists and researchers who had worked with Genie by filing a suit against Curtiss and the Children's Hospital among others.

Question 12. What was James Kent's idea about how to get Genie to learn and to develop socially? Did this idea seem to be working?

With this reaction, James Kent came to the idea that Genie could learn language by making relations between different things at which she was exposed to. It seems that this idea was useful, but we have to think that as they did not know how to interact or treat with her, any idea seemed to be useful at that moment, it was as a light of hope, as they did not know very well what to do in order to make her learn language or make any sound.

Question 13. What is the date of Genie's first utterance? Figure out how old she was then. What was her passive vocabulary at that point?

Genie's first utterance was in May in 1971, about six months later of her discovery. That moment was recorded by Jean Butler, her special education teacher. This was a moment researchers were waiting for from the very beginning. Genie's words were “doctor” and “tie”, although by that time she had learned more than a hundred words. But those words were her passive. By the time she produced her first word she was 14 years and a month. Since that moment, Genie began to talk by repetition of different words.

The Wild Boy of Aveyron as a precedent:

Question 14. What year was Victor, the "Wild Boy of Aveyron," discovered? What country is Aveyron in? What was his behaviour and appearance like? What did his appearance indicate about how long he had lived in the wild?

Victor was found in 1800, although some documents say that it was in 1799. He was discovered when citizens of Aveyron found a remarkable creature that was looking for roots in the Woods in Aveyron. He was taken by three sportsmen to a neighbouring town, where he lived with a widow, escaping after a week, but returning back to civilisation of his own accord. He was an animal in behaviour, as he was naked and behaved like animals in freedom. He was mute and he walked with his feet and his hands. Victor had yellow teeth, long fingernails, matted by hair. By his behaviour, we could say he had been all his life in the forest isolated from people and without any type of socialization.

Question 15. How old was Victor guessed to be when he was discovered? What was Victor's language like?

Citizens from the village where Victor was discovered, Aveyron, guessed he could be twelve years old, although later experiments indicated that he was eleven years old. Victor had no language, people thought he was deaf and mute because he did not react to sounds. The majority of his communication consisted of grunts and howls.

Question 16. What peculiar response to temperature did the local physician report in Victor? What does Harlan Lane conclude about responses to temperature on the basis of this observation?

Victor had been a long time in the forest alone and he was habituated to the cold and the heat. One day, Bonaterre, a biology professor who took care of him, took him off his clothes and he was so happy that he went out. The exterior of the house was all surrounded by snow and this increased his joy as he was happier. He was naked in the snow but he did not feel the cold. Professor Bonaterre, and later Harlan Lane, deduced that our sensitivity to temperature is very much influenced by our life experiences, as well as our personality.

Question 17. What major question was being debated in the intellectual atmosphere of the time? What answers had been proposed and rejected? What is "the forbidden experiment"?

By the end of the 18^m century, it was the end of the Age of Enlightenment, which was a time of discoveries and debates on many different things. Philosophers were debating what differs animals from human beings. The main questions were what makes us human, or what differs human from beasts or even questions about the human appearance.

Victor appeared in this situation and he didn't walk upright nor had language. He could learn to walk correctly, and he also could learn language. So, philosophers and anatomists were convinced that a study on Victor could answer all their questions and doubts.

For them to study a person with no language and a later study on that person could answer all their questions on human beings as was something they could not believe when Victor appeared. They did not create this situation on purpose. For this reason, it was called "the forbidden experiment".

Question 18. Who was Jean-Marc Itard in relation to Victor?

When Victor arrived at school, that is, the National Institute for the Deaf, the director was very surprised when he saw Victor as he was not accustomed to see boys like him. Abbey Sicard, the director, did not know what to do with him, so he hired a young physician from the military hospital, his name was Itard, Jean-Marc Itard. He studied medicine and philosophy. Jean-Marc Itard was a twenty-six-year old medical student and he wanted to be important, so he thought that Victor could give him that opportunity.

Question 19. What role did David Rigler have in the research project to study Genie?

David Rigler decided how to focus the research with Genie by the time of her first

birthday at Children's Hospital. By this time, Genie was fourteen years old. Rigler wanted to know if a teenager could still learn to talk, .because by the time Genie was discovered, this was a crucial debate. This debate began with Noam Chomsky.

Question 20. What proposal had Eric Lenneberg made regarding the capacity for language acquisition?

He said that if a first language is not acquired by puberty, it may be too late. Lenneberg argued that the language acquisition device, like other biological functions, works successfully only when it is stimulated at the right time, a time which is referred to as the "critical period". There are two versions to this critical period. The strong version is that children must acquire their first language by puberty or they will never be able to learn from subsequent exposure.

What name is given to this idea in the tape?

The Critical Period Hypothesis.

Question 21. In what ways did Genie's vocabulary differ from that of a small child?

From the very beginning, Genie's vocabulary revealed an extraordinary attention to the visual world, which is the special province of the right hemisphere— to color, shape, and size. All of her first two-word phrases were about static objects. While normal children usually start talking about people and actions or about the relations between people and objects, Genie spoke primarily about the attributes of things: "black shoe," "lot bread."

Sometimes Susan Curtiss realized the amount of vocabulary she knew and those words were important to know when they are acquiring their first language. It was vocabulary about emotions -angry, sad, happy - color words, shape words, etc.

Question 22. At this point in the project, what was Curtiss' view about the likelihood of Genie's acquiring a language and what were the implications for the existence of a Critical Period?

Although Genie had passed that deadline or border, the critical age of puberty, she seemed to be learning a first language. Because of this, Curtiss began to doubt the idea proposed by Lenneberg.

Question 23. Did Victor respond well to Itard's methods of teaching language? How did Itard test Victor's ability to go beyond memorisation -- that is, to use language (more or less) "creatively"?

Victor responded successfully to the methods used for the deaf and also used by Itard with him. Victor had to put the letters in the right places and the complexity increased gradually.

Itard tried to teach Victor simple sentences; he read the sentence then and he wrote it down and later he did what the sentence was, that is, the action. Itard expected Victor to do the same, and he did it well. Itard suspected it could be Victor's memory what made him do it well.

Question 24. How did Victor's case conclude? Did he ever learn to talk? When did he die?

Truffaut made his own version of the story. The film reported how Victor tried to read simple words, but he never learned to talk. Victor lived his last days in the Deaf School in Paris. He died in his forties.

Back to Genie.

Question 25. What central question continued to "plague" the Genie Team?

What was Jay Shurley's position on this question and what was his evidence for this position? What was Susan Curtiss' position on the question and what was her evidence for her position?

As Genie did not learn to speak and she used many gestures to communicate, the Riglers taught her sign language. Because of the time they were engaged in this case and the results, scientists began to think again that Genie was brain damaged from birth, the same question and doubt from the beginning of this case.

Jay Shurley continued to think the same, as he made her the exam of the sleep spindles and the result she obtained was typical of severe mental retardation.

On the other hand, Susan Curtiss had been with her and all these new experiences and she thought she was not mentally retarded. Curtiss noted that Genie's performance had increased consistently over the years.

Question 26. When did NIMH drop their funding of the Genie Project? When did the Riglers end their foster-parent relationship with Genie?

Because of the ambiguities of the case, the government agency that was funding the project grew uneasy. The National Institute of National Health wanted the money given to the research project of Genie. So, at the end, in the autumn of 1974, the NIMH stopped funding the project.

Question 27. Give an example of a statement in the tape that Genie produced. What general Stage of child language acquisition (Babbling, One-word, Two-word, Telegraphic) does this statement represent? Give an example of a question that Genie produced in the tape.

In this stage we can see early word combinations and the presence of syntactic categories although they are still unclear. One example of question produced by Genie is: What red blue is *my*? She was not able to put words in a grammatical order. This seems to support the idea of the Critical Period Hypothesis for acquiring a language.

Question 28. When did the language study end? How many years was this past Genie's first exposure to language on a regular basis -- that is, after her "discovery"? How old was Genie at this time? In summary, according to Curtiss, what was Genie "good at" and what was she not "good at"?

The language study was completed by 1975. Genie had had an exposure of five years, since 1970 when she was discovered. Susan Curtiss said she was very good at vocabulary, that is, in conveying messages but if you look at the entire sentences, she was unable to put words in order.