

Albert Einstein was no boob

Damn. The rotten news for parents was put succinctly in a New York Times headline: "Einstein Revealed as Brilliant in Youth." That may not strike you as any sort of news, but it is, and it blasts a hope that has sustained some of us.

It has long been said that Einstein was a slow starter. The legend, to which many parents have clung for comfort, was that Einstein was dim in

speak, but once he got the hang of it he said attention-getting things. As the Will children fill the dinner hour with ad hominem remarks about one another, spiced with digressions concerning the enveloped subject of Michael Jackson, my mind turns to this fact: Young Einstein was given to wondering aloud, "What would the world look like if I were riding on a beam of light?" (Don't say, "Blurry." Einstein was being serious, and the correct answer is: "Frozen." Jacob Bronowski explains it: Suppose you are riding away from a clock tower on the beam of light with which you were seeing that the clock reads "noon." You will travel 186,000 miles away from the clock in a second. But the clock, as you will see it over your shoulder, will not change at all, not even a second. Why not? By keeping up with the beam of light, you have escaped from the passage of time.)

When asked on his 74th birthday whether the compass and the geometry book really influenced his growth, Einstein said he thought so: "But a man has little insight into what goes on within him. When a young puppy sees a compass for the first time, it may have no similar influence, nor on many a child." I love the equation of puppies and children. And I wonder: What about the second time the puppy sees the compass?

You can, Einstein said, postulate theories, but you will never find the answer to the riddle of what determines the reaction of individuals to particular influences. So, parents, the science of parenting is, it seems, severely circumscribed.

Thank God. How intolerable would be the burden of responsibility, and how sad would be the death of mystery, were we able to control the maturation of creatures we let loose on the world.

So it is cheerfully that I, with a flourish that puts me on a par with Einstein at, oh, age four, offer this sunburst: Parenting is a science of single instances.

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George Will

primary and secondary school and even failed his college-entrance examinations. He did fail those examinations, but primarily because he had trouble learning French, trouble I consider a sign of superior spirit.

The rest of the legend turns out to derive from a misreading of the grading system at his Swiss school. It now has been learned, as a result of the preparation of his papers for publication, that the kid was something of a prodigy. He excelled at college physics before he was 11, was gifted at Latin and Greek, and was a "brilliant" violinist.

The science (or so we are invited to regard it) of "parenting" incites the hope that we can learn practical lessons from conspicuous successes. So I have been looking into the rearing of little Al Einstein. My findings are not entirely encouraging.

At age five he was tutored at home, but only briefly — until he had a tantrum and threw a chair at the unfortunate woman doing the tutoring. So far, so good: The Will children certainly have had that Einsteinian phase.

Now for the bad news.

It is said that when at age four or five he received a compass from his father, he trembled and became cold from the thrill of thinking: Because the needle always points in the same direction, something unseen in space must be compelling it; therefore space is not empty.

He was stirred to the depths of his soul (it had more depth than I usually see in children's souls) by a book of Euclidean geometry which, he thought, gave him a glimpse of perfection.

Now, admit it: If you gave your child a book of geometry, he or she would not take his or her nose out of the Michael Jackson biography he or she is reading. If you give him or her a compass at 9 a.m., and it has not been lost by 10 a.m., by 11 a.m. it will have been traded for a Moosehead beer can. Little Einstein was perhaps slow to

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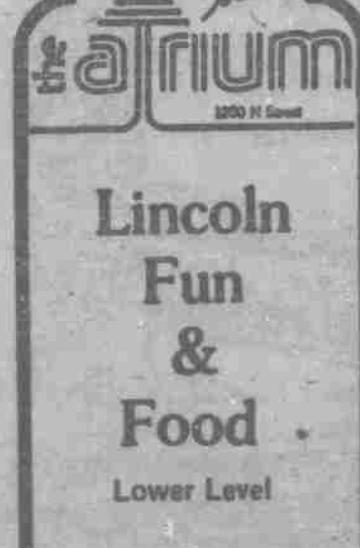
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