

Genie

The Story of the Wild Child

By Kendra Cherry

There have been a number of cases of feral children raised in social isolation with little or no human contact. Few have captured public and scientific attention like that of young girl called Genie. She spent almost her entire childhood locked in a bedroom, isolated and abused for over a decade. Genie's case was one of the first to put the critical period theory to the test. Could a child reared in utter deprivation and isolation develop language? Could a nurturing environment make up for a horrifying past?

Genie's Background

Genie's story came to light on November 4, 1970 in Los Angeles, California. A social worker discovered the 13-year old girl after her mother sought out services. The social worker soon discovered that the girl had been confined to a small room and an investigation by authorities quickly revealed that the child had spent most of her life in this room, often tied to a potty chair.

The girl was given the name Genie in her case files to protect her identity and privacy. "The case name is Genie. This is not the person's real name, but when we think about what a genie is, a genie is a creature that comes out of a bottle or whatever, but emerges into human society past childhood. We assume that it really isn't a creature that had a human childhood," explained Susan Curtiss in a 1997 Nova documentary titled *Secrets of the Wild Child*.

Both parents were charged with abuse, but Genie's father committed suicide the day before he was due to appear in court, leaving behind a note stating that "the world will never understand."

Genie's life prior to her discovery was one of utter deprivation. She spent most of her days tied naked to her potty chair only able to move her hands and feet. When she made noise, her father would beat her. Her father, mother, and older brother rarely spoke to her. The rare times her father did interact with her, it was to bark or growl.

The story of her case soon spread, drawing attention from both the public and the scientific community. The case was important, said psycholinguist and author Harlan Lee, because "our morality doesn't allow us to conduct deprivation experiments with human beings, these unfortunate people are all we have to go on."

With so much interest in her case, the question became what should be done with her. A team of psychologists and language experts began the process of rehabilitating Genie.

Teaching Genie

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) provided funding for scientific research on Genie's case.

"I think everybody who came in contact with her was attracted to her. She had a quality of somehow connecting with people, which developed more and more, but was present, really, from the start. She

had a way of reaching out without saying anything, but just somehow by the kind of look in her eyes, and people wanted to do things for her," said psychologist David Rigler, part of the "Genie team."

Her rehabilitation team also included graduate student Susan Curtiss and psychologist James Kent. Upon her initial arrival at UCLA, the team was met with a girl who weighed just 59 pounds and moved with a strange "bunny walk." She often spat and was unable to straighten her arms and legs. Silent, incontinent, and unable to chew, she initially seemed only able to recognize her own name and the word "sorry."

After conducting an assessment of Genie's emotional and cognitive abilities, Kent described her as "the most profoundly damaged child I've ever seen... Genie's life is a wasteland." Her silence and inability to use language made it difficult to assess her mental abilities, but on tests she scored at about the level of a one-year-old.

She soon began to make rapid progression in specific areas, quickly learning how to use the toilet and dress herself. Over the next few months, she began to experience more developmental progress, but remained poor in areas such as language. She enjoyed going out on day trips outside of the hospital, and explored her new environment with an intensity that amazed her caregivers and strangers alike. Curtiss suggested that Genie had a strong ability to communicate nonverbally, often receiving gifts from total strangers who seemed to understand the young girl's powerful need to explore the world around her.

Critical Period and Language Acquisition

Part of the reason why Genie's case fascinated psychologists and linguists so deeply was that it presented a unique opportunity to study a hotly contested debate about language development. Nativists believe that the capacity for language is innate, while empiricists suggest that it is environmental variables that play a key role. Essentially, it boils down to the age-old nature versus nurture debate. Do genetics or environment play a greater role in the development of language?

Nativist Noam Chomsky suggested that the acquisition of language could not be fully explained by learning alone. Instead, he proposed that children are born with a language acquisition device (LAD), an innate ability to understand the principles of language. Once exposed to language, the LAD allows children to learn the language at a remarkable pace.

Linguist Eric Lenneberg suggests that like many other human behaviors, the ability to acquire language is subject to what are known as critical periods. A critical period is a limited span of time during which an organism is sensitive to external stimuli and capable of acquiring certain skills. According to Lenneberg, the critical period for language acquisition lasts until around age 12. After the onset of puberty, he argued, the organization of the brain becomes set and no longer able to learn and utilize language in a fully functional manner.

Genie's case presented researchers with a unique opportunity. If given an enriched learning environment, could she overcome her deprived childhood and learn language even though she had missed the critical period? If she could, it would suggest that the critical period hypothesis of language development was wrong. If she could not, it would indicate that Lenneberg's theory was correct.

Genie's Language Progress

Despite scoring at the level of a one-year-old upon her initial assessment, Genie quickly began adding new words to her vocabulary. She started by learning single words and eventually began putting two words together much the way young children do. Curtiss began to feel that Genie would be fully capable of acquiring language.

After a year of treatment, she even started putting three words together occasionally. In children going through normal language development, this stage is followed by what is known as a language explosion. Children rapidly acquire new words and begin putting them together in novel ways. Unfortunately, this never happened for Genie. Her language abilities remained stuck at this stage and she appeared unable to apply grammatical rules and use language in a meaningful way. At this point, her progress leveled off and her acquisition of new language halted.

While Genie was able to learn some language after puberty, her inability to use grammar (which Chomsky suggests is what separates human language from animal communication) offers evidence for the critical period hypothesis.

Of course, Genie's case is not so simple. Not only did she miss the critical period for learning language, she was also horrifically abused. She was malnourished and deprived of cognitive stimulation for most of her childhood. Researchers were also never able to fully determine if Genie suffered from pre-existing cognitive deficits. As an infant, a pediatrician had identified her as having some type of mental delay. So researchers were left to wonder whether Genie had suffered from cognitive deficits caused by her years of abuse or if she had been born with some degree of mental retardation.

Arguments Over Genie's Care

Psychiatrist Jay Shurley helped assess Genie after she was first discovered, and he noted that since situations like hers were so rare, she quickly became the center of a battle between the researchers involved in her case. Arguments over the research and the course of her treatment soon erupted. Genie occasionally spent the night and the home of Jean Butler, one of her teachers. After an outbreak of measles, Genie was quarantined at her teacher's home. Butler soon became protective and began restricting access to Genie. Other members of the team felt that Butler's goal was to become famous from the case, at one point claiming that Butler had called herself the next Anne Sullivan, the teacher famous for helping Helen Keller learn to communicate.

Eventually, Genie was removed from Butler's care and went to live in the home of psychologist David Rigler, where she remained for the next four years. Despite some difficulties, she appeared to do well in the Rigler household. She enjoyed listening to classical music on the piano and loved to draw, often finding it easier to communicate through drawing than through other methods.

The Beginning of the End

NIMH withdrew funding in 1974, due to the lack of scientific findings. Linguist Susan Curtiss had found that while Genie could use words, she could not produce grammar. She could not arrange these words in a meaningful way, supporting the idea of a critical period in language development. Rigler's research was disorganized and largely anecdotal. Without funds to continue the research and care for Genie, she was moved from the Rigler's care.

In 1975, Genie returned to live with her birth mother. When her mother found the task too difficult, Genie was moved through a series of foster homes, where she was often subjected to further abuse and neglect. Genie's birth mother then sued the Children's Hospital of Los Angeles and the research team, charging them with excessive testing. While the lawsuit was eventually settled, it raised important questions about the treatment and care of Genie. Did the research interfere with the girl's therapeutic treatment?

Genie's situation continued to worsen. After spending a significant amount of time in foster homes, she returned to Children's Hospital. Unfortunately, the progress that had occurred during her first stay had been severely compromised by the subsequent treatment she received in foster care. Genie was afraid to open her mouth and had regressed back into silence.

Where is Genie Today?

Today, Genie lives in an adult foster care home somewhere in southern California. Little is known about her present condition, although an anonymous individual hired a private investigator to track her down in 2000 and described her as happy. This contrasts with the account of psychiatrist Jay Shurley who visited her on her 27th and 29th birthdays and characterized her as largely silent, depressed, and chronically institutionalized.

"What do we take away from this really sad story?" asked Harlan Lee in the NOVA documentary *The Secret of the Wild Child*. "Look, there's an ethical dilemma in this kind of research. If you want to do rigorous science, then Genie's interests are going to come second some of the time. If you only care about helping Genie, then you wouldn't do a lot of the scientific research. So, what are you going to do? To make matters worse, the two roles, scientist and therapist, were combined in one person, in her case. So, I think future generations are going to study Genie's case ... not only for what it can teach us about human development, but also for what it can teach us about the rewards and the risks of conducting 'the forbidden experiment.'"

Learn more about Genie's Story:

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