

Smarter Than Einstein?

William James Sidis is recognized as the person with the highest IQ ever tested. He was acknowledged as a budding genius at the age of two and delivered lectures for renowned professors at the age of eleven. Despite all the predictions about his bright future as an academician, Sidis confounded the pundits when he pursued a completely different course in life than anyone had imagined.

It was a bright January morning in 1910 when hundreds of leading professors and mathematicians from the prestigious Harvard University gathered in the great lecture hall on their campus in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to listen to a lecturer named William James Sidis. For Sidis it was his first time speaking in public and his address got off to a bad start. He spoke rather quietly and nervously, punctuating his speech with churlish grins, just like a child speaking before a large audience of adults.

In fact, Sidis was a child—he was 11 years old at the time!

Progressing through his speech, the boy became more self-assured. As the audience picked up more of what he was saying, their eyes bulged and jaws dropped in amazement. Sidis was lecturing on a highly developed scientific theme that was familiar only to top mathematicians. Not even all the professors in this group of chosen listeners could follow the youth's complex line of reasoning.

As the boy concluded his address, a professor told the reporters who had gathered to cover the lecture that this young man, William James Sidis, would undoubtedly go on to become one of the greatest mathematicians in history. The national headlines the following day screamed about the child sensation.

In fact, it wasn't the first time this prodigy made the headlines around the nation. He

- Dov Levy

had already aroused the public's interest several years before when his astounding abilities as a young child first came to light.

From the Cradle

William James Sidis was born to Jewish parents who hailed from Kiev, Ukraine. Life in Russia under Czar Alexander III was horrific for Jews. They had been limited to an area called the Pale of Settlement, lived in dire poverty, were forbidden to own property or engage in work on Sunday and other Christian holidays, and were the target of numerous other laws enacted with the express purpose of making life miserable for the empire's Jews. On top of all that, government-incited pogroms also occurred at a fairly regular and alarming rate.

Boris Sidis himself was arrested and spent two years in prison, primarily because he had made the mistake of being born a Jew in Czarist Russia. Like so many other Jews of that time and locale, he decided he had had enough of the old country and immigrated to America, the land of the free. Boris arrived in 1887 after barely escaping a pogrom. Two years later, his wife Sarah and their children followed him to New York City.

In America, Boris Sidis picked up the English language fairly quickly and he then went on to study psychology. He became a master in the field and even authored a tome on the subject of diagnosing and treating various ailments of the mind. Mrs. Sidis also was well educated and became one of the few women in America at the time to earn a medical degree.

Despite their genius, the Sidises were viewed with a measure of skepticism by most of their peers. Much of Boris' research took place in an undeveloped field, including hypnosis and group psychology. Mr. Sidis was also a revolutionary in the development and use of hypnosis for dealing with psychiatric problems.

The elder Sidis had one

particular belief that greatly influenced the development of the young William James: Boris Sidis was convinced that the mind more readily incorporates new information at a very young age, the earlier the better.

On April 1, 1898, the Sidis family was blessed with the arrival of their new son, whom they named William James, after one of the most famous thinkers of the time and whom the elder Sidis had studied under. Friends of the family joked that the boy had been born into a laboratory and the father now had a subject on whom to test his various theories of psychology and the development of the human mind. Shortly after the boy first opened his eyes, his parents began working on his development, intentionally bombarding him with new information that his tender mind soaked up immediately.

Using the wooden blocks of the mobile that hung over the cradle, Boris taught William James the letters of the alphabet, using various techniques to coax the infant into verbalizing the names of the letters. Their efforts bore fruit. At six months, William spoke the word "door" and a month later he pointed to the sky and said "moon." At eight months, the parents



Czar Alexander III, a rabid anti-Semite.

proudly reported that their infant son had mastered the use of a spoon after two months of effort (most children do not master this talent before the age of three). He was also on the level of a four-year-old boy in identifying symbols and pictures.

Because of the Sidis' belief that a child's curiosity should be aggressively developed and encouraged, Sarah gave up her career in the medical world to devote herself fully to her infant's progress. She responded to every sign of interest in her son, and by the time he reached his first birthday, William James was perfecting his knowledge of English spelling. At 18 months he was reading the *New York Times*.

In the High Chair

While sitting in his high chair, William James learned to use a typewriter to type in English and French. He typed his own letter to a company to order a particular toy he was interested in. News of the child's incredible abilities leaked to the press and reporters began visiting to observe the boy, take his picture and write articles about him. He even appeared on the front page of the newspaper he himself read, the *New York Times*.

The toddler quickly outgrew any interest in toys. He preferred to spend his time with his father. As they rode together on the trolley, Boris taught William James the names of the streets and sights they passed, and even explained to him how the trolley operated and the system for transferring from one line to another. Before the age of five, William James could repeat all the times and stops on the rather complicated trolley timetable.

The boy's thirst for new information was endless, and he could read through entire volumes on advanced subjects such as medicine or physics. He enjoyed spending time with calendars and invented his own technique for calculating which day of the week a particular date occurred any time in the last 5,000 years.

William James began elementary school



Right: Boris Sidis. Left: William James Sidis as a young boy.

at age five, but just over six months later he graduated and was ready to begin high school. His teachers gaped at how he mastered in half a year what the other students learned over a period of seven years.

By the age of eight Sidis had mastered eight languages: Latin, Greek, French, Russian, German, Turkish, Armenian and Hebrew. He also conversed in a ninth language, but this was a language he himself had created in a book he wrote (actually the second one he authored). Called "Vandergood" by its inventor, this language was based largely on Latin and Greek with elements of German, French and other languages mixed in. In his language, the young Sidis differentiated between seven accepted conjugations and created an eighth of his own.

William James also created a new logarithmic table based on the number 12 rather than 10 as in the commonly used decimal system. The preference for the number 12 is because it is the smallest number with 4 different factors. If you are among our readers whose level of math does not allow them to follow the inherent logic in that statement, don't worry: most Americans are right there with you. But Sidis did understand and mathematicians are inclined to agree with him.

The elder Sidis wrote several articles for scientific journals describing his child's development and progress and the methods he had used. He took full credit for his son's outstanding abilities and brought the child as clear proof of the truth behind his theories of childrearing.