

# Response to Story: The Boy Who Played with Fusion

## STEVEN PFEIFFER – LESSONS LEARNED FROM WORKING WITH GIFTED STUDENTS

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I love the story about Taylor Wilson, and how his parents figured out how to best support their extremely gifted son's early passion for science and nuclear physics. These are the kind of success stories that keep those of us in the gifted field excited, enthusiastic, and pumped-up about our own work supporting intellectually precocious children and youth.

I have worked with high-ability students for over 30 years in a variety of capacities. In my clinical practice, I have advised and counseled many gifted kids and their parents. In my academic world at Florida State University, I teach a course on the gifted and direct a research lab that conducts research on the social and emotional needs of the gifted. And for a number of years, I served as Executive Director of the Duke TIP program, sister program to the summer academy at Johns Hopkins that Mark Zuckerberg, Sergey Brin, and Lady Gaga attended.

Two lessons stand out as particularly poignant in my 30-plus year career as a psychologist working with very bright students. The first lesson is that development of talent requires more than intellectual ability. The second lesson is that success in life requires both head strengths and heart strengths. Let me very briefly explain what I mean.

With young gifted students, we can at best only predict the likelihood of later outstanding accomplishment, such as Taylor Wilson's fabulous success story. A great many students identified as gifted when young grow up and, as adults, demonstrate no special or extraordinary talent. Not everyone turns out to be a Mark Zuckerberg or a Sergey Brin. Or even a Taylor Wilson. And many students not recognized as having any special gifts when young are "late bloomers," and astound us with extraordinary inventions and accomplishments as adults. Many factors, in addition to high intelligence, contribute to extraordinary accomplishments in later life. The development of talent at its highest levels requires, in most professions and fields, more than simply high intellectual ability. Developing a gifted child's talent to its highest levels requires hard work, a tremendous amount of practice, patience and stick-with-it-ness, a great deal of frustration tolerance, and an unswerving passion to excel and not give up.

I have also come to appreciate that, as adults, gifted individuals' happiness, sense of well-being, and feelings of fulfillment, requires both head strengths and heart strengths. I have kept in touch with a great many former gifted students over the years; I have followed with great interest their career paths and also their personal life trajectories. Not all of these gifted individuals are doing well as adults. Some dropped out of college, and others were admitted to but did not finish medical school, law school, or architecture school. Some have struggled with feelings of loneliness, depression, alcoholism, drug abuse, or lack of meaning in their lives. Some have even

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acknowledged thoughts of suicide. What I have learned is not all gifted kids successfully navigate the turbulent waters of adolescence and find a safe harbor in adult life. Not all of them turn out to be successful adults. Gifted kids, by definition, all possess impressive intellectual abilities. And many also possess a good dosage of creativity – head strengths.

What some of these gifted kids lack in equal measure are strengths-of-the-heart. Strengths of the heart are not emphasized in today's classrooms, with our emphasis on academics, learning, and STEM. We are very focused on head strengths, both in the USA and internationally, but we've all but forgot about heart strengths. I have found five heart strengths to be particularly important in the lives of gifted kids as they grow up. These heart strengths are: humility, compassion, gratitude, enthusiasm, and playfulness. Our research and experience indicates that these signature strengths of the heart often can make a real difference in whether a gifted kid grows up to be a well-adjusted, happy, and successful adult.