

NOVA: “THE SECRET OF THE WILD CHILD” (1994)

- On November 25, 1970, social workers in Los Angeles discovered a modern-day “wild child,” a 13-year-old girl who had been locked in her room and socially isolated for most of her life. She had been forced to sit alone, day after day and year after year, strapped to a potty-chair. She was unable to talk and barely able to walk.
- Researchers hoped her case could help them to answer a pressing scientific question: Can a nurturing environment make up for a long history of abuse and neglect? Can children make up for lost time in their development? Or are there windows of opportunity (critical periods) that, once passed, can never be reopened? The scientist gave the young girl the pseudonym Genie, with hopes that this Genie would “emerge” from her tragic past.
- Genie did not vocalize at all when she was 1st discovered.
- Genie’s brain waves were measured while she slept and scientist found an unusually high number of sleep spindles.
 - The question: Was Genie born mentally retarded or did the isolation and abuse she endured cause the retardation.
 1. When she was a baby her father decided she was retarded and he kept her in isolation because of her retardation.
- Could a teenager learn to talk?
 1. Noam Chomsky (Linguist): Theorized that we are born with the principles of language in our genes (Language Acquisition Device, LAD). We learn language because of our nature and not just because of our nurture.
 2. Eric Lenneberg (Neuropsychologist, 1967): We are born with the principles of language but there is a deadline in applying them. If a first language is not acquired by puberty it may be too late.
 3. Critical Period Hypothesis: Researchers needed more direct evidence for this hypothesis.
- Genie’s Language Development (Susan Curtis):
 1. Genie spoke for the first time since her discovery on May 21, 1971.
 2. Genie’s first words were different from children who learn their first language early in life.
 3. Genie was also taught sign language to avoid making the same mistakes as were make with Victor.
 - One can acquire language without being able to speak.
 4. Genie was never able to acquire grammar.
- Ethical Dilemma:
 1. If you want to do rigorous science then Genie’s interest will have to come 2nd some of the time.
 2. If you really care about helping Genie then you would not do a lot of this research.
- Wild Child Victor: He was discovered nearly 200 years before Genie (1800) in Southern France. He was believed to be 12 years old when discovered, after living most of his life in the wild.
 1. Piercing Question of the time: What is it that makes us human? Language?
 2. Victor was brought to the National Institute of the Deaf where he worked on language development Dr. Par E. M. Itard for approximately 6 years.
 3. Itard called off the experiment when Victor no longer appeared to be learning. Although he learned to read simple words, Victor never learned to talk. Victor did appear to have some grasp of grammar.