

Raising Genius

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Brian Avery



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Acknowledgments

To my mother, Virginia Avery, for providing needed direction in my seventh-grade year—my turning point from wayward to goal-oriented.

To my wife, Marina Avery, for her dedication in keeping three energetic children focused on their goals and being the example to which they might aspire.

To Alex, Katrina, and Victoria, your mother and I are so proud of your dedication to your respective journeys—we love each of you so much!

Introduction

My wife and I entered parenting with clear hopes for our children's academic success and career prospects. We wanted our kids to excel academically and get their college educations paid for on merit. We also wanted them to pursue fields of study that would place them in high demand. As we are in the final stages of becoming "empty-nesters," it seems our dreams are materializing. Our goals for our children are commonly shared—nothing out of the ordinary. Perhaps the methods we employed to support those goals were unique. If you have similar hopes for your children, we think we have something to share. In our case, three for three seems to be a good batting average and serves to validate the conscious approach we took toward educating our children and giving them a great start.

To establish credibility, I present the kids: Alex, nineteen, an academic senior at Auburn University with a 3.93 GPA in electrical engineering; Katrina, eighteen, is in her first year, also at Auburn, studying chemical engineering as an academic sophomore. Her college GPA after one semester is a 4.00. She is a National Merit Finalist and was salutatorian of her high school graduating class. Victoria, sixteen, is currently in her senior year of high school and is dually enrolled at the University of Alabama at Huntsville. At a minimum, she will receive a full academic scholarship to Auburn, as did her siblings.

Alex's ACT score was 33, Katrina's was 34, and Victoria's score was 34. Alex and Katrina had no focused training for the exam. Their scores represent their first and only attempt at taking the test. Victoria was persistent. She scored 32 on her first try (good enough for a full scholarship at Auburn). She took it again and hit a 33. In spite of our advice to leave it alone, she got a 34 on her third try. As of this writing, she's not planning a fourth attempt. Her tenacity is admired.

Our kids' test results reflect an approach to education that was established early. The ACT scores were merely a side benefit. All three scores represent immediate presidential scholarships for an in-state public university waiving tuition expenses as long as they maintain at least a 3.0 GPA while in college.

Alex was awarded a multitude of additional scholarships, as was Katrina. Alex had never received a grade lower than an A, until his fourth college semester when he received his first B. Katrina has earned all As. Victoria has received a few Bs.

One last point regarding our three children—each will graduate college early. Alex will graduate at the end of the fall semester in 2015, at the age of twenty, also having completed a full year of professional co-op experience for a power engineering company. Alex will likely enjoy at least several lucrative offers upon graduation without much of a search effort. The girls are aiming for chemical engineering and, if they do as well as we hope, they too will have lucrative options upon graduation. All three will have zero debt in the form of college loans because their college educations will have been funded entirely with academic scholarships.

Let me encourage you that our children are normal. They were not born with exceptional abilities. Just as easily, they could have ended up with mediocre results fumbling their way through school and drifting into lackluster career paths by default. Every

parent has the greatest impact on how their children will track in their early lives and beyond. Hoping for their success is typical. Taking clear steps to promote successful behavior is not typical. That is why I wrote this book. I want to help parents take a more formative role in the education of their children and steer them toward high-demand pursuits.

Before anyone accuses me of sounding arrogant, allow me to qualify. We are not perfect parents (just ask the kids). We believe the methods we applied in helping the kids learn contributed in large part to their early success. Moreover, we believe we shared our views on career prospects in such a way that they bought into the idea of being able to earn a good living as a foundation for the lives they would lead. We are simply sharing this information. Should you choose to incorporate what we share, you will find your own style of applying the methods presented in this book.

Some will view our methods as imposing parental bias on children who otherwise might choose another path. To an extent, I confess our guilt. In our defense, I will repeat often that scholastic and career success is less limiting than it is expanding with regard to a person's choices in life.

I feel compelled to address an oft-heard concern other parents openly express to us. "What about their social development?" That's a red herring. I wouldn't waste a minute defending our approach by addressing a pointless concern save the fact that I hear it so often. I wonder if this question is born of rationalizing mediocre performance and being unable to face that reality. I will put this point to rest by stating that the time invested to help your child shine academically is not excessive and does not prevent your child from having a "normal" upbringing and social life. Should you be confronted with this comment, politely suggest that all is well with your children, and point out that their achievements have enhanced their social web.

It is painful watching parents sacrifice their retirement savings by financing expensive college educations for directionless children. Typically, college coincides with your most lucrative earning years. Depleting your retirement money for your children's college education is not an obligation, nor is college something you must provide for your children. Your children do not need to take care of you in the future either. That is in your hands. Don't miss your best opportunity to take care of yourself by earning and saving as much as you can in the prime years of your career.

Following the approach presented in this book will boost your child's performance in academics but also in much that they do. Success is largely personal. Habits leading to success in one area are portable. Just as sloth knows no bounds, so does initiative. You are the most crucial influence in how your child approaches life. Nature versus nurture arguments will be debated for millennia. Recognizing there is some of each, our jobs as parents is to ensure the latter gets its due. You will be rewarded for it, society will be rewarded for it, and most importantly, your child will reap the rewards of a fuller and richer life.

Lastly, I will share approaches we used to get the children's buy-in. You cannot be an overbearing dictator very successfully—at least not for long. The start of the process focuses on children following expectations, but in time, the children take the reins and drive the process. Accomplishments cannot be forced from start to finish. Your children must be internally driven to cross the finish line successfully.

Chapter One—Aiming Well

It's interesting to consider what happens in a person's life between entering preschool and choosing a career fifteen to twenty years later. What choices were made that led this person to choose a certain path toward earning a living? What influences a person's decisions at each stage of development?

I will say that for the most part, parents in the United States entrust the education of their children to a school district and hope that their children's abilities and interests will eventually lead them toward a certain career path. In many households, parents lay down the law if grades slip too far and reward a good report card. Many parents still encourage college for their kids, but things get vague regarding degree programs and post-graduation goals. Generally speaking, that's the extent of the framework that guides a child in the evolution from schoolwork toward earning a living as an adult.

Direction and focus haven't changed much since I was a college freshman in the 1980s. Majors are often chosen at random with the idea that a college degree will provide opportunity. Little thought is given toward a degree program until graduation is looming and the question of "What am I going to do?" finally materializes. The difference between the 1980s and current times is the original premise of a college degree de facto holding intrinsic value is dated. The labor-market is tighter now, and specific degree programs may offer great opportunities while

many others don't. Commodity production is more of a global dynamic than it was thirty years ago. A wider spectrum of talented candidates is available to those who hire.

We parents can do a better job of setting our children up for success by preparing them for careers that are in need, starting with helping them succeed academically and excel in the right disciplines. I think today's prescription for raising children in the United States leans too heavily on self-direction and chance. The job market is saturated with candidates possessing college diplomas. Earning the right diploma and/or the right trade or skill is more critical than ever. Expect this trend to continue.

A 2012 Johns Hopkins study supports the notion that the children of immigrants tend to outperform those having deeper roots in the United States. Immigrant parents approach education and career differently than most Americans. They see the opportunities offered in the United States and take full advantage of those. Immigrant parents push their children to perform, and most choose post-secondary education in more lucrative fields. Their children are typically the top performers in their classes and graduate with honors. Immigrant children often follow their education with successful careers. By contrast, however, third-generation children tend to dabble in school, resent intrusiveness from their parents, wander in their career pursuits, and reap the associated rewards of mediocrity.

What can we learn from these trends? Reverence for individual choice is generally fantastic. A little tweak in the approach may be worth considering. Our immigrant friends may have a keener awareness that to reap the benefits of a free society you really need to invest incredible amounts of focus and effort in the right direction. I think that's where many of us are off course. To set your children up for success, it's imperative to

teach them to differentiate themselves early in the right arena. Your guidance will make the difference.

I am writing a book to give you something to think about when you sit down to consider options for your children. My first assertion is that you want your children to lead successful lives. My second assertion is that you are not quite sure what that means. At the risk of stirring controversy, I am to a certain extent defining success as how your children perform academically and the career choices they make. Playing a strong hand in guiding your children on a certain journey is something I think we can learn from immigrant parents.

Many of us fantasize that our children will one day shine in entertainment or sports. In contemporary America, we spend lots of time and money with our children's sporting, dance, and theater activities. There is nothing wrong with this save the fact that some parents lose context and perhaps focus a little too much energy on extracurricular activities that might be better spent on academics.

On the subject of sports, here are a few points you might want to consider:

- 1) Of all male high school baseball players, 0.015 percent will one day be awarded a position in the major leagues. That's about one in every 6,700. The odds of a thief guessing your ATM PIN on the first attempt are roughly the same.
- 2) Of all high school basketball players, 0.03 percent reach the NBA.
- 3) Of all high school football players, about 0.09 percent eventually make it to the NFL.
- 4) There is a 0.7 percent chance that a senior on a high school baseball team wanting to play in college will

receive a complete athletic scholarship for a division one program.

An ACT score of 32 for a high school student promises admission to many universities and likely qualifies for a full academic scholarship to an in-state school (accompanied by a decent transcript). The top 4 percent of ACT participants hit this number. Apparently, a college academic scholarship based on ACT results is 267 times more likely than a major league baseball career and about six times more likely than a baseball scholarship to a division one school for the same high school baseball star.

Of the 4 percent of ACT participants hitting the scholarship threshold, not all of them studied very hard specifically for the ACT. Most who earn sports scholarships put in far more effort. I choose to contrast academic odds with athletic to point out the absurd obsession so many parents have with sports. Sports activities are fantastic and encouraged, but let's keep things in context. If you're interested in reducing your child's tuition bill and increasing his or her career success, academics are how you get there—not baseball!

So why is all of this important? Perhaps most parents are satisfied to let their children set their own expectations and pursue whatever interests them. The results of that approach seldom match up with their hopes and dreams for their children, however.

Furthermore, after graduation, your child will be competing in a global economy. That revelation is dated, but I want to review for your benefit what that means. Every company, corporation, and virtually any commercial effort based abroad or in the United States has access to the best talent globally. We live in exciting times! Opportunity is greater than it's ever been for certain skill

sets. Those skill sets, however, are not limited geographically. Again, this is nothing new, but the ebb and flow of talent across national boundaries will only increase. Educational discussions require us to consider what is happening outside the United States.

An international assessment effort named Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, hereinafter referred to as OECD, is comprised of thirty-four member countries. Every three years, the OECD administers an international assessment to member and non-member countries. The assessment is called the Program for International Student Assessment, or PISA. The last exam was given in 2012, with the results published in December 2013. Sixty-five nations or provinces of nations partook. Fifteen-year-old secondary students were assessed on math, science, and reading. The United States finished thirty-sixth in math, twenty-eighth in science, and twenty-fourth in reading. Yet we Americans outspend all other nations when it comes to educating our children. The OECD statistics show the United States as spending over \$11,000 a year per student in the secondary education system. The OECD average is \$9,313 a year per student. Remember, OECD represents developed nations. There were twenty-nine non-OECD nations or provinces competing. Taiwan finishing fourth in the 2012 assessment for math spends less than \$1,000 USD per student per year. Apparently, how much we spend on education has little correlation with the results.

Houston, we have a problem. Speculate all you want. The Department of Education, politics, whatever the problem may be—the system is failing our kids on a national level. I will make a suggestion: you can make all the difference in your child's life. I can write a separate book about what is wrong with the “system,” and how I think it might be fixed, but that will not help your

child today. You will make the difference where it counts. Your direct involvement with your child's education is a must.

So, leaving your child's education entirely up to a marginal system is probably not such a good idea. This is not to say home schooling or a private academy is a necessity. Your help with your child's formal learning is a necessity. It won't take much time.

Many parents today have a strange outlook on their child's upbringing. Beginning with buying the best strollers, clothes, and toys for the little one, we progress to paying for and attending each and every dance lesson, soccer tournament, hockey game, and so on. This level of dedication might even be classified as suffocating. Yet ask the same parent to spend an hour a week providing math lessons, and the answer is, "That's what teachers are for!" Parents will splurge on all kinds of things including private tutors but have a meltdown at straining their own brain to help Junior.

Tomorrow's economic realities will be harsh for many and very promising for those who prepare. Technological innovation continues to accelerate. It doesn't seem possible. What's just over the horizon in microelectronics, wearable computers, mechanized infantry, and new directions in nuclear energy is mind blowing. It's exciting! Again, though, future innovation will be largely devoid of national boundaries. Competing companies will have access to the smartest kids globally. If you are content to have your child perform marginally, he or she will not stand a chance.

It is fair to say that many children progress from childhood to college without a plan or a strategy. What is the likelihood of success if the arrow is not well aimed? A vibrant business climate pulls from many disciplines, and in good times, a modicum of success in any field may lead to a good career track. I'd like to suggest that macroeconomics will drive tremendous opportunity

in a few select fields, and economic evolution will leave scant opportunity for many other fields of study.

So far, I've attempted to illustrate that academic scholarships are much more attainable than the remote possibility of an athletic scholarship, and I've broached the concept that on average our high-school-aged children are not internationally competitive academically. Another way of looking at it is that it's not hard to be an academic standout in the United States. A critical step in your child's path toward great career options is performing well relative to fellow students.

It's important to realize how slow academia is to adapt or change to accommodate real world needs. If there is a shift in the marketplace relative to skill demand, there is a noticeable lack of response (or at least timely response) in secondary and post-secondary education. Businesses are impacted. Those who pay careful attention may benefit. Our children most often do not have the vantage point we have as adults. I work in industry. I see professions where hiring is difficult due to lack of talent. Typically, these are rapidly expanding fields. The lag between market signals and general awareness is huge. People with related training are able to leverage this advantage with regard to salary and benefits. Often we are interviewing a pool of one to fill a critical spot. Understanding where the opportunities lie gives you an advantage in guiding your children. Career counseling through the school system is typically disconnected.

Promising career options as viewed through the eyes of this author are detailed in Chapter Seven. Coupling this information with your own research will give your child lucrative options to pursue. None of us can be certain of the future, but it is possible to form an educated guess on how the world will look and what careers will be in demand. Is there anything wrong with taking a clinical look at fields offering more promise and helping your

children understand the value of pursuing those fields? We admire those who prospered via strategic planning in their lives, but often we are loath to apply the same for our children, fearing we might blunt their ambition. The usual false premise is that they actually have specific ambition. It pays to remember that they are children; passing whims and singular ambition have nothing in common.

I am promoting a deeper involvement on your part with regard to your child's early education and career planning. I'm not asking you to run their lives at all. A little help, a little encouragement, setting a few expectations, and opening their eyes relative to choices can change outcomes in your children's success.

I've only touched on the benefits of having your children leave the crowd behind academically to set themselves up vocationally—obviously, money and opportunity await them, and a sizeable impact to you relative to your retirement funds. Skeptics will blanch at the idea that you pushed your offspring in any direction and will accuse you of shaping them to your vision of life's journey, thereby denying them the opportunity to discover life for themselves. My answer is that without some level of pressure, many of us fail to achieve our potential. Accomplishing one goal implies elimination of other choices. To some extent, this can be argued, but generally applying yourself and accomplishing one goal does not eliminate other options. I might instead argue that having money and opportunity creates more options. I will venture, too, that many kids today are "plugged in" excessively, and the opportunity cost for putting the iPad down a few hours a day is nothing. It won't cost them their dreams.

Anecdotal illustration: our son Alex loves music—a lot! Some might argue he should follow his "true passion" and his

life would be fulfilled. Money would be merely a byproduct of his focused energies, and really, monetary reward would be beside the point. Nice dream—very naïve. Somewhere in late middle school, the idea of a music education appealed. We spent a good deal of time showing and explaining the wealth of talent versus the dearth of opportunity in the music industry. Further, since he was mathematically inclined, we illustrated that the right engineering pursuit would allow him to finance his own sound studio and buy all of the right music equipment. If he truly loved music to the point of wanting a formal education, nothing would stop him from going back to school after he'd established a way to pay for his fun. He was hooked on the idea. His music has continued to advance while he is finishing his degree and working. Alex will have more resources at his disposal toward achieving his musical aspirations than if he had focused singularly on music. Now, he will have the means to make a great living just in case his musical ambitions don't work out.

As a parent, part of your job is to ensure that your kids will be able to make a living, and while they are at it, how about a great living? My message includes the idea that your frame of reference is more apt in the fields that provide a great living. I am not wholesale rejecting the idea of letting your children chase their own dreams, but I am suggesting that they will have options never considered if they choose a successful career path first. Few of us are so well disciplined that we make the best use of allotted time anyway. You and they have time to spare—really!

So I've danced around the issue for too long—much easier to blurt it out. Your child can have a rich life materially and in terms of opportunity. You need to play an early role in guiding them to get the process started. Discipline and sacrifice will be required, but not as much as you might fear. The advice I will give you will run in direct contrast to conventional wisdom that your children

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should “follow their passions.” Most kids lack this supposed passion. While they are searching, you can get them tracking for success. Life after iPhone addiction, misguided obsession with sports, and excessive social connectivity isn’t pretty. Catching up from behind is generally a losing proposition. Jumping ahead and accelerating unveils opportunity like nothing else.

If you are the parent of a rare and perhaps gifted child who demonstrates prodigious talent in a particular area, I am not asking you to squash this in favor of pursuing a more conventional path. You are the statistical anomaly, and you should nurture this talent. Most of us have an average amount of theatrical or athletic talent, if any at all. You may want your children to be standouts in these arenas, but what if they aren’t? It is better to ensure that they develop marketable skills that will serve them well and allow them to serve others, thereby making a great living in return. Exceptional talent is not necessary for this. Planning and assistance from you is necessary. Let the journey begin.

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