

Chapter 1

The Problem with Testing

When Tim was just three years old his mother, Janet, knew he was going to have problems getting into one of the elite private schools in Washington, D.C. Tim's father had gone to one of the best and was eager for his son to go there, too, but the competition among the children of Washington politicians, scientists, lawyers, and business families was fierce. Janet worried most about the IQ test Tim would have to take to get into kindergarten.

"There's something about [testing] three-year-olds that makes you feel dirty being involved," said Janet, an easygoing, pretty woman in her late thirties.

Worse than feeling dirty, Janet got an inkling early that Tim was a bad test-taker when she took him to an independent school consultant, an expert who would guide Tim's family through the complicated process of applying to private schools. Such consultants charge thousands of dollars, promising to evaluate the tiny candidates and explain the differences in philosophies among the schools. They also often administer an IQ test—or at least bits of one—to see how the child is going to perform and then recommend schools they think would be a good match. The higher the score, the fancier and more competitive the school. At the very outset of the process, IQ test scores are dictating where the children will apply.

The consultant asked Janet to leave her office while she tested Tim. After about half an hour, she called Janet back in with some bad news. The only school she could recommend for Tim was one

for children with language disorders in the remote suburbs. To a family like Janet's—all East Coast—educated at the best schools—it was like shooting for the Ivy League but ending up studying agriculture at a satellite campus of the University of Nebraska.

“I felt terrible,” Janet said, remembering the experience. “I cried for three days. She told me he was a moron,” she said, unwittingly using a term that long ago entered the vernacular from technical, IQ-based classifications. Then Janet paused and realized that the consultant hadn't actually said Tim was a moron; it just felt as if she had. “She basically told me he was kind of limited in intelligence.”

The consultant had also recommended that Tim should be in speech therapy, so while Tim was still in preschool Janet signed him up for it twice a week. Early on in his therapy the therapist asked Tim to make up a story, but he was completely stumped, coming up with nothing. And when he did speak, the “ums” flowed like bullets from a Gatling gun.

“Um, no, no, um, um, um, um, my, um, I, I don't have a farm. Yeah, yeah, I have a farm at my house. Yeah. Um, no. Know what?! I have a, um, um, I have a um, um, um, um a, I have a no, no no farm.”

Even an articulate kid of that age can sound like a cold motorcycle in need of repeated kick-starts, especially when answering questions from someone he doesn't know (and about a farm, of all things). But Tim often had problems expressing himself, and on a test of verbal ability administered by the therapist he scored in the 2nd percentile—just a wee step from those scoring the worst. This boded ill for Tim, and Janet knew it, for in Washington, private schools rely heavily on IQ tests for admissions. And for a hundred years, IQ tests have largely been based on verbal ability, so the outlook for Tim wasn't good.

Washington parents receive mixed messages from school administrators about the importance of tests in the elementary school admissions process. On the one hand, they're told to relax: IQ scores aren't that important, there are many factors in admissions. At the same time, administrators tell parents not to take their

child in for testing if she is sick, grumpy, or sad on the day of testing—a clear implication that the tests matter. In fact, test scores matter more than parents are told, but school administrators know that parents will become tense if their fears are not assuaged. To the schools, relying heavily on IQ scores makes institutional sense. After all, most of the very young children applying are well groomed, well spoken, and bright, and come from white, wealthy, and hypereducated families. How else are these schools supposed to “weed out,” as one local psychologist put it, the overabundant attractive and able three- and four-year-olds?

A parent’s nightmare is if her child simply isn’t in the mood to play along with the psychologist administering the test, as exemplified by Mary, a brown-haired young girl in Washington, D.C. Mary walked out of a psychologist’s office and into the waiting room, with a therapist in her early thirties in tow.

“Mary, what’s the difference between a horse and a pony?” the therapist asked earnestly.

Mary paid her no attention, but simply sat down on a couch to play with her doll next to me as I waited for an interview.

“Mary, what’s the difference between a horse and a pony?” she was asked again, but Mary knew the value of selective hearing better than someone married for thirty years. There’s no convincing a stubborn young girl that although the pony-horse distinction may seem frivolous, this is a test, and it’s important. By the time the psychologist doggedly posed her taxonomic question a third time, Mary had had enough. She turned to me and said, proffering her playmate in a pointed snub to the tester, “Will you put a diaper on my doll?”

Who knows how Mary’s score was affected? For tests that are supposed to measure innate ability in large part, it’s an open secret that a child’s mood will affect her score. For generations, critics of IQ tests have worried that it’s the good kids, those willing to follow adult rules, who do well on the tests. Good psychologists try to take a child’s mood and energy level into account when administering these tests, but there’s only so much they can do when they see her only once.

As Tim's speech therapy moved along, Janet was unsure how it was progressing. She thought the therapist was good, "but not a warm and fuzzy woman. Once [the therapist] was watching him draw and she said, right in front of him, 'That's not normal.'"

"They want you to draw a stick figure at a certain age and he couldn't," Janet explained. So Janet sent Tim to an occupational therapist to do fine and gross motor skill work as well, although she found it a little odd. She had heard that occupational therapy helps, but she wasn't convinced it had been "scientifically proven." The therapist gave her a brush to use on Tim's skin, essentially so he would get comfortable in his own skin. Janet and her husband were supposed to do it every day, but they wondered at its efficacy and didn't do it very often.

"So at one point," Janet said, "he was going to speech therapy twice a week and occupational therapy twice a week." Either despite or because of all this therapy, Tim began to stutter. "His face would get all contorted," she said raising both hands near her face, so she asked the speech therapist to work on stuttering as well.

The IQ test outlook was really not looking good for Tim. Nevertheless, most families like Tim's don't view the Washington public school system as a tenable option for their children. The schools are mainly for the working class, and their statistics are often depressing: fewer than half of the students are at grade level in reading and mathematics, and only about 60 percent make it to high school graduation. And so, amid all this therapy and with considerable trepidation, Janet made an appointment with a local psychologist for an IQ test. A few months before his fifth birthday, Tim's first IQ test was the WPPSI, pronounced "whipsee" and standing for the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence, which is the standard exam for young children.

"He was immediately talkative and curious about what we were going to do together, and rapport was easily established," the psychologist found. She asked him commonsense questions such as, What happens to water when it gets cold? She gave him a puzzle and a timed pegs-in-the-holes test. She asked him to name animals in pictures and build with blocks; she noted the size of his vocabulary.

Although Tim was at first open and enthusiastic, things quickly turned sour for him. “As items became tougher, particularly during question-and-answer periods, [Tim] was reluctant to take a guess, and frequently struggled to find words. At those times he became very frustrated, asking his mother if they could go home ‘now,’ and on at least two occasions [Tim] became tearful, throwing himself in his mother’s arms and responding to comforting from her,” the psychologist wrote about the meeting.

In the end, Janet’s fears about Tim’s IQ turned out to be well founded. Already at age four, Tim was very good with computers, but computer skills aren’t on IQ tests. Ever since their inception, IQ tests for little kids have emphasized language and motor skills. In these two areas, compared to other kids his age (which is how IQ tests measure intelligence), Tim was bad. He scored in the 34th percentile, an improvement over the 2nd percentile on his verbal test, for sure, but by no means Washington private school caliber.

“If you’re trying to get into one of the private schools and if [your children] don’t do well on these tests, forget about it. You don’t get in with a 34th percentile,” said Janet. Most parents feel that for their children to attend one of the top schools they’ve got to be scoring in the nineties. School admission officers don’t talk about whether there is a threshold, but there probably is. As one psychologist put it, if Sidwell Friends (one of the best private schools in the country and located in Northwest D.C.) “can have their pick of the kids who are in the 90th percentiles . . . they fill it with kids like that. I don’t know why they wouldn’t. The people that I know that go there are very well connected people who are the cream of the crop of the city.”

After receiving his test scores, Tim’s parents didn’t bother applying to his father’s alma mater for kindergarten; they just sent him to a public elementary school that doesn’t have such a bad reputation. The facilities were not as nice as the private schools’, and parents had to pool together their own funds to hire a music teacher. For years the administration had been asking the city for physical improvements, to no effect. But there were some excellent

teachers, some of the best, Janet thought, especially in the lower years. Just before Tim started kindergarten, Janet decided to take him out of all his therapy.

“I will say that the therapy worked, but he might have just outgrown his problems, too,” she said. Whatever the case, Tim stopped stuttering after leaving therapy. Nevertheless, when she met Tim’s kindergarten teacher for the first time, Janet warned her that her son was a great kid but that he had lots of learning issues. A few weeks later, the same teacher made a point of taking her aside and telling Janet that she had got it wrong. “He doesn’t have a lot of problems,” said the teacher. Tim was just a normal kid. The relief Janet felt, and the frustration with the experts, were palpable when she recounted this story. All fears that Tim actually was a moron had melted away.

“He’s pretty much thrived ever since,” Janet said of Tim. One year, Tim’s public school teachers wrote in his report card that he “continues to be extremely strong in all academic subjects such as reading, math and writing. In addition, we have noticed that [Tim] really seems to enjoy science. He is very inquisitive and is getting comfortable mastering the scientific process.”

Tim was happy at the public elementary school, and Janet was happy to have him there. Besides, she felt sure Tim would “get in somewhere” when the time came for the inevitable switchover to private school, but her husband still wanted him at his alma mater as quickly as possible. There’s a perception in Washington that the longer families wait to send their kid to the private school, the harder it is to get in. So Janet took Tim to a new psychologist and he retook the WPPSI test when he was six. This time he got in the 79th percentile, still not a stellar score, but perhaps within fancy private school striking distance, especially since the family had a legacy. Nevertheless, Janet and her husband decided to keep him in public school and have him tested a year later.

When Tim was seven, Janet took him back again, this time for the WISC (the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, an exam for the next age group up from the WPPSI). In the four years since

he had first started speech therapy, Tim had come a long way from his initial days of “um-ing” through an exam. The psychologist found him to be “intent, focused and eager to do his best, he was serious about his performance, determined and sometimes a little impatient with himself.” Tim excelled, especially at nonverbal tasks such as duplicating designs with colored blocks and completing pictures.

On the WISC, Tim scored in the 98th percentile overall, fully 64 percentile points up from just three years previously. With this score, Tim was ready to apply to the fanciest schools around, and in a recent early spring he was accepted at his father’s old school. The Ivy League, although years away, had just gotten a whole lot closer.

Tim had some verbal developmental problems, but he was the same kid when he scored in the 34th percentile and the 98th percentile. Such differences in scores are uncommon, say psychologists, although they admit that IQ scores generally don’t “settle” until children are in adolescence.

“Any IQ estimate before the age of five is obviously going to be unstable because children are going through such rapid cognitive development,” said Diane Coalson, who is senior research director at Harcourt Assessment, the company that produces the WPPSI and the WISC. According to Coalson, it’s not until adolescence, “let’s say age sixteen and up [that] IQ is more stable.”

How did schools, businesses, and governments decide that these rough, narrow estimates of innate intelligence, these stress-producing tests consisting of a series of discrete little problems, are the best way to decide who is worthy and unworthy in countless settings? In a word, puffery.

