

Finalist, Non-Fiction

A Father's Pride
By William Cushing

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This is definitely a father's "attaboy" story.

Gabriel was a tad over six years old and deeply involved in the numbers he had, since infancy, shown a fascination for. Although restricted to a wheelchair and unable to speak because of a stroke he suffered in the womb, he was in kindergarten and quite active despite a professional diagnosis of "developmental delay." On this occasion, he proved just how incorrect that assessment might be.

About a month after his birthday, Val, a teacher's aide in his classroom, was testing Gabriel's math skills. She had a stack of the old style flashcards, those laminated handheld boards with a problem on one side and the solution on the other, and she held up the cards to show Gabriel the problem he was to solve. He, in turn, would respond through the digitally synthesized keyboard he used to communicate. The exercise began tentatively: he would answer some of the problems correctly; others he was either off base or refused to answer at all.

Soon though, Val noticed that Gabriel was slowing down in his response time, meditating on the situation. He would look at the problem in front of him, lean over in his wheelchair to cup his sharp chin in a small, meaty right hand, and then type in his answer to the question.

It worked.

By taking his time, thinking over the problem in front of him, and deliberating the answer, he began getting them. One after another, Val would show Gabriel an equation

of some sort, and one after another, he would stop, lean—chin in palm, to answer the question correctly.

The progress she saw encouraged her. Gabriel was answering math problems, each successively more difficult than the last. She marveled at how thoughtful and measured each response was as well as how comfortable he was in handling the task.

It was almost too good to be true, which in fact, it was.

Val noticed that Gabriel's ritual became more regular, almost predictable. She held up a card; he stopped, leaned, and answered.

Correctly.

Everytime.

Without hesitation.

That was the “tell.” Val picked up another card, and this time, rather than *listening* for Gabriel’s response, she watched him. As he leaned to the side, she saw his eyes fix on a point behind her. She laid down the cards and swiveled her chair to find herself staring at her own reflection in a large mirror mounted on the back wall.

Gabriel had been peering into the mirror, reading the reflected answer to each problem, mentally reversing the exposed information, then answering the question.

Here he was, gaming the system at six years old.

Like I said: "Attaboy."

Right: Gabriel Cushing with his communication device. [In photo: a young boy sits at a table with glue and craft supplies. He glances at a black, blue, and purple screen propped up to face him.]

