

Language and The Brain | Genie – The Story of the Wild Child.

There have been a number of cases of **feral¹ children** raised in social isolation with little or no human contact. Few have captured public and scientific attention like that of a young girl called Genie. She spent almost her entire childhood locked in a bedroom and isolated. Genie's case was one of the first to put the critical period theory to the test. Could a child reared in utter deprivation and isolation develop language?

• Genie's Background

Genie's story came to light on November 4, 1970 in Los Angeles, California. A social worker discovered the 13-year-old girl after her mother sought out services. The social worker soon discovered that the girl had been confined to a small room and an investigation by authorities quickly revealed that the child had spent most of her life in this room, often tied to a potty chair. The girl was given the name Genie in her case files to protect her identity and privacy.



Genie's life prior to her discovery was one of utter deprivation. Her father, mother, and older brother rarely spoke to her. The rare times her father did interact with her, it was to bark or growl. With so much interest in her case, the question became what should be done with her. A team of psychologists and language experts began the process of rehabilitating Genie.

• Teaching Genie

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) provided funding for scientific research on Genie's case. Her rehabilitation team also included graduate student Susan Curtiss and psychologist James Kent. Upon her initial arrival at UCLA, the team was met with a girl who weighed just 59 pounds and moved with a strange "bunny walk." Silent, she initially seemed only able to recognize her own name and the word "sorry." Her silence and inability to use language made it difficult to **assess²** her mental abilities. Over the next few months, she began to experience more developmental progress, but remained poor in areas such as language.

• Critical Period and Language Acquisition

Part of the reason why Genie's case fascinated psychologists and linguists so deeply was that it presented a unique opportunity to study a hotly contested debate about language development. **Linguist Eric Lenneberg suggests that like many other human behaviours, the ability to acquire language is subject to what are known as critical periods.** A critical period is a limited span of time³ during which an organism is sensitive to external stimuli and capable of acquiring certain skills. According to Lenneberg, the critical period for language acquisition lasts until around age 12. After the onset of puberty, he argued, the organization of the brain becomes set and no longer able to learn and utilize language in a fully functional manner. Genie's case presented researchers with a unique opportunity. If given an enriched learning environment, could she overcome her deprived childhood and learn language even though she had missed the critical period? If she could, it would suggest that the critical period hypothesis of language development was wrong. If she could not, it would indicate that Lenneberg's theory was correct.

Today Genie is 51. She is again in psychological confinement as a ward of the state -- her sixth foster home. And again, she is speechless.

Source : <https://www.verywellmind.com/genie-the-story-of-the-wild-child-2795241>

¹ **Feral** = wild

² **Assess** = evaluate

³ **A span of time** = une durée dans le temps