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“HOW AM I **SMART?**”  
AN INTRODUCTION TO THE  
EIGHT GREAT **SMARTS**

*“Let’s go!!”*

*“Girls, we don’t want to be late.”*

*“Mom, it’s time to go again.”*

**B**etween piano and dance recitals, the local homeschool group’s spring musical, a voice recital by Abbie, and all the rehearsals, Tina and her two girls, Rachel, twelve, and Abbie, thirteen, were often flying in and out of the house. Tina was glad to support them, but she sure felt like a chauffeur.

It’s no surprise both girls are active in these endeavors. Intel- ligences awakened when children are young are more likely to develop into strengths and that’s exactly what happened. Their music-smart and body-smart abilities were awakened early because

their parents are musically inclined and made sure to include these kinds of activities. Their picture-smart abilities were awakened, too, which helped them imagine and embrace their roles in the musical.

God used videos of quality musicals to awaken at least three of Abbie's and Rachel's eight intelligences—or "smarts"—their music smart, picture smart, and body smart when the girls were just preschoolers. Tina, their dad, Jeff, and I joked that the girls could have won a trivia game about Disney princesses and the Barbie videos, if anyone created such a game. They watched the videos over and over, memorized some of the dialogue, and often pretended they were Cinderella or Ariel.

Many of the videos the girls watched included gorgeous classical music recorded by some of the best orchestras in the world. At a very young age, they heard numerous instruments in stunning combinations and their music smarts were awakened.

These fast-moving productions stimulated Abbie's and Rachel's creativity and imaginations, and sparked their picture smarts. They observed characters dancing in the videos, so they danced. From twirling and leaping, they gained balance and an understanding of how their bodies work. This movement activated their body smarts.

There's more, though. Jeff and Tina's parenting didn't stop there. Because they responded to the girls' obvious interests in dance and music, their smarts weren't merely awakened. They were

strengthened and, more significantly, trained.

Tina and Jeff chose to enroll the girls in a dance class. That wise decision honored the girls' strong interest in ballet, which stemmed from their video viewing. They've now taken lessons for eight straight years.

I was privileged to attend their first dance recital. They looked adorable in their bright lime tutus with puffy velvet sleeves. Just like the other girls in the group, they stared at the audience during part of the dance, looked at the girls next to them for a while, and then managed to dance a few steps. They were perfect for young beginners.

Some teen performers at the recital had clearly chosen to focus on dance. Their body smarts and music smarts were focused and trained. One dancer, in particular, impressed me. I believe she had more music-smart abilities than the other dancers. Though the other girls danced to the beat, I sensed she actually *felt* the music. She interpreted the emotion in the songs through her facial expressions and the flow of her arms. This was a beautiful example of how our eight intelligences work together. They rarely, if ever, work alone. Her music-smartness enhanced the way she used her body-smart abilities. Now Abbie and Rachel are able to do this, too.

Are your children into soccer, video games, math, or reading?

***Be sure to expose your young children to a variety of activities so their God-given passions can be awakened.***

Take note of what interests them most. Be sure to expose your young children to a variety of activities so their own unique, God-designed passions can be awakened. Thoughtful parents nurture their children's development.

### **WHAT ARE THE MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES?**

Before knowing about multiple intelligences, I would have written the previous section about two girls who were creative and musical. I would have called them talented. I'm grateful for Dr. Howard Gardner's research and the beautiful reality that Rachel and Abbie are creative, musical, and talented *because they are smart*.

What's the big deal? Smart is a power word. Everyone wants to be smart. As I'll write about in later chapters, if some children believe others are smart and they're not, they can give up. They lower their expectations for today and tomorrow. They may not accomplish what God intended them to. This is also true of adults. Language is powerful. Words matter.

I love the freedom of thinking about children and adults through the grid of multiple intelligences. When I taught second graders, it was painful for me to realize some children were already classifying themselves as either "smart" or "not smart." Their parents were doing the classifying, too, which is probably where their children picked it up. I would have loved having the language of intelligences. I could have pointed out how Paul, Tracy, Worthy,

and others were smart. This would have framed relationships, academics, our year, and their future differently.

I've met many adults who didn't have the opportunity for much post high school education. My mom was one of these, although she was extremely bright. She doubted it, at least somewhat, because she didn't have the traditional proof. She always enjoyed hearing me teach on this topic and I think that's one of the reasons.

My mom could remember significant details from the news and analyze them carefully. She co-led several very successful political campaigns for her father. She sang in tune and had a great appreciation for classical music. She had two green thumbs and made our home beautiful. She wrote and spelled well and served on various committees because of these abilities. She was a trusted friend to many and could work a room of complete strangers as well as her father, the gifted politician. *My mom was smart.* Multiple intelligences allow us to look beyond old "proofs" of grades and degrees to see evidence of smarts in life.

Although it was probably fifteen years ago, I still remember the woman who came up to me at the end of a seminar for educators. She was clearly excited so I knew her noticeable tears were tears of joy. She introduced herself as a teacher's aide and explained she had never finished her teaching degree because she hadn't thought she was smart enough. She declared, "I'm enrolling to finish immediately! I *am* smart!"

I am so privileged! It's never too late to discover more about yourself. I truly hope there are truths on these pages that bless you as a woman or man and then also as a parent, grandparent, teacher, or someone who cares about children. There is power here! Let's get more specific.

The father of the theory of multiple intelligences is Dr. Howard Gardner, of Harvard University. His first book on this topic was published in 1983. Dr. Tom Armstrong, his former colleague, has written more popularized and less academic versions of Dr. Gardner's work. I'll be using his labels for the intelligences:

<b>THE EIGHT INTELLIGENCES</b>		
<b><i>Dr. Armstrong's Labels</i></b>	<b><i>Dr. Gardner's Labels</i></b>	<b><i>Think With</i></b>
Word smart	Linguistic intelligence	Words
Logic smart	Logical-Mathematical intelligence	Questions
Picture smart	Spatial intelligence	Pictures
Music smart	Musical intelligence	Rhythm/melodies
Body smart	Bodily-Kinesthetic intelligence	Movement/touch
Nature smart	Naturalist intelligence	Patterns
People smart	Interpersonal intelligence	People
Self-smart	Intrapersonal intelligence	Reflection

If you're familiar with the theory that some people are right-brained and some are left-brained, many scholars no longer believe this theory explains as many differences among people as once thought.<sup>1</sup> Many of us see the theory of multiple intelligences as a much more accurate understanding of different ways people learn and process ideas.

### **Nature and Nurture**

Dr. Gardner determined that everyone is born with each of these distinct intelligences.<sup>2</sup> They have to be awakened, but they're there, built into each person at birth. God uses our *nature* (our genetic makeup) and *nurture* (experiences we have and attitudes surrounding us) to create us as He wants us to be. Dr. Gardner stated the idea this way: "I reject the 'inherited versus learned' dichotomy and instead stress the interaction, from the moment of conception, between genetic and environmental factors."<sup>3</sup>

When "sitting at the potter's wheel" (Isaiah 64:8) and "knitting us together in our mother's womb" (Psalm 139:13–14), God chose our unique combination of genes to develop His gift of multiple intelligences. He did this for you and each of your children. He chose which smarts would be strengths. He chose you as the parent. The nurture you provide matters.

If a child grows up with apathetic or absent parents, poverty, abuse, or any number of other negative factors, his or her smarts



may remain weaker throughout life. This may be partly due to lies children believe about themselves when parented in these situations. *“I don’t matter.” “I’ll never amount to anything.” “My ideas aren’t important.”* A child believing these truths won’t bother investing in himself to develop latent gifts. The quality of your nurture matters.

Sadly, some children’s intelligences don’t fully develop. Perhaps illness or disease is the cause. For example, Merry, the adult daughter of a friend, is severely disabled both physically and mentally, with capabilities similar to a two-month-old. Yet Miki beams when sharing evidence that Merry’s strongest intelligences are music and people. The nurturing Merry receives makes the difference. Though her development is very limited, Merry responds to music and people around her. For instance, when a prospective nurse arrives, Merry’s parents have learned to use Merry’s quick evaluation when determining whether to hire her. Merry will give her mom a certain look if she doesn’t like the nurse, and Miki knows not to hire her.

Nature and nurture together determine which intelligences will interest your child. That’s where strengths always start—with interest. Some smarts will become strengths, some may not develop much at all, and some will plateau at a point in between. When you exhibit healthy and positive attitudes and provide a variety of interesting experiences for your child, you cooperate

with God in the development of his or her smarts and full potential. The nurture you provide is very important!

### **Awakening Smarts**

Abbie and Rachel provide evidence that awakening children's smarts early is advantageous. They're more likely to become strengths. This is why the girls are still dancing and playing the piano. There are many ways to awaken the smarts. You can explore the unknown with your son, create new experiences for your daughter, and attend cultural events with your extended family.

It's never too late to awaken a part of the mind. And, it stays awake to our influence for many years. Here's what I wrote about our 100 billion neurons, the cells that are the brain's conduits of information, in *Screens and Teens: Connecting with Our Kids in a Wireless World*:

Only about 20 percent of those connections are hard-wired by God.<sup>4</sup> They account for things we all learn . . . Connections of the other 80 percent of the brain's neurons are formed by what we do prior to age twenty-five.<sup>5</sup> Doing something a few times won't result in a firm connection, but repetitive beliefs, attitudes, and actions result in solid connections. They are considered "soft" in comparison to the hardwiring God causes during conception, but they become "harder" the more we use them. I'm thankful we can still learn new things as we age!<sup>6</sup>

Are you encouraged? You should be! Through age twenty-five, many changes to the brain can occur. And, even after that, we can keep learning. Yes!

So, a particular intelligence might not become a definite strength because of a late start, but any smart can be improved, focused, and trained. They can also be paralyzed. I'll explain this in chapter 2.

Even though our smarts always work together, as in the example of Rachel and Abbie dancing with both their music-smart and body-smart abilities, for the purposes of this book, I'll be writing about "nature-smart children" and "people-smart children," etc. This doesn't mean these children don't have the other intelligences. It's just that I need to isolate the qualities of each in order for you to understand them.

### **Growth Remains**

There's more. Can you picture two balloons—one that's been blown up and deflated and one that's never been used? You can tell which is which, can't you? Once stretched, a balloon never goes back to its original size. The mind is the same. Things you did when you were young stretched parts of your mind and each part will be forever larger than they were. These increases are a significant reason to provide your child with a variety of experiences during all ages and stages.

Like me. I'm a former viola player. Although I haven't played for more than thirty years, if we both picked up a viola and you've never played one, I could play better than you. Experiences awaken and then expand our smarts. That's why I could also learn to play the violin faster and more easily than someone who has never played a string instrument. Once a smart is awakened, any use of it is easier. Be encouraged!

## **HOW CAN UNDERSTANDING MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES HELP CHILDREN?**

There are many wonderful benefits of understanding the eight great smarts. Are you curious? Read on!

### **Confidence Increases**

Every child wants to be smart. When your son wonders if he is or concludes that he's not, he can be defeated before starting on an assignment or listening to a teacher or you. Is your daughter ever discouraged because she doesn't think she's as smart as she thinks she needs to be? Perhaps you're sometimes disheartened, too. It's not fun!

At the beginning of my programs about our smarts, some children have a hard time believing they have all eight. Maybe school is hard for them. Or they may have been told they're stupid. Maybe they don't earn many As or Bs.

As children hear each of the intelligences described, they begin to believe the evidence I provide. They elbow their siblings or parents and I see them mouth the words, “That’s me!” Their smiles, and those on parents’ faces, too, indicate past hurts and current doubts are being healed and erased. Fabulous! The children relax before my eyes. By the end of the program, when I ask them to raise their hands to indicate their top four smarts, many struggle with the limit. What joy to see them go from not thinking they’re smart to struggling to choose only four intelligence strengths an hour later! (It’s common for parents to indicate they feel smarter, too. Yes! They’ll parent better because of new understandings about their past and increased confidence. Although your child will be the focus as you continue reading, be open to discovering truths about how you are smart. Get ready to reject lies!)

When you and your child understand there are eight intelligences, the question changes from “Am I smart?” and “How smart am I?” to the much more valuable “*How* am I smart?” It’s no longer about the amount of intelligence but instead about which intelligences are strengths. And, it’s not as much about comparing with others as it is becoming who we were designed to be.

Children taught about the eight great smarts will apply themselves, have the confidence to tackle more challenging work, and learn more efficiently and strategically. Teach them truths from this book, talk about the smarts as situations present themselves, point

out everyday uses, and affirm them specifically with language that builds them up. *"You sight-read that well because you're music smart"* is much more valuable than, *"Good job."* *"You're self-smart. That's why you came up with those unique ideas on your own. I'm impressed!"* is much more valuable than *"I never would have thought of that!"* or *"What made you think of that crazy idea?"*

If you're homeschooling your child, you can use many ideas in chapters 3 to 10 to teach to all eight parts of the mind. You can teach with one smart and reteach or review with another. If you're not your child's teacher, you can use different intelligences when helping your child complete homework, study for tests, and learn Scripture. Studying with more than one intelligence helps children better understand what they're learning. They'll remember what they learn longer, apply their learning more accurately, and be more optimistic for the future. Their grades will often improve.

### **Less Likely to Believe They're Dumb**

Children are empowered when they're taught about the eight ways they are smart. They learn they have some smarts that are strengths and some that aren't. The new question, *"How am I smart?"* is a key. This is very different from believing intelligence is limited and they don't have enough.

Children can learn to discern which smarts to rely on during different academic and social activities. This gives them some

control over how they do, builds confidence, and increases effort. Intelligence isn't fixed and it's not narrow. It's very wide and all-encompassing. God was generous when He created us as He did!

When something is hard for children who know they're smart in many ways, they can think about whether using a different intelligence would help. When they don't do well on an assignment or test, they know they can approach the content differently by studying with a different smart. Their default won't be to believe, "I'm dumb." Rather, they'll think, "I can improve by using another smart." (As I'll share in the next chapter, it's also essential that they understand how important their character is. Using the most

relevant smarts *and* the most relevant character qualities is essential.)

***Parents who only tell their children they're smart, and don't also talk about the role of character, create a dangerous situation.***

Children who don't know they have multiple intelligences will often feel dumb when they get a "bad" grade and when tasks are challenging. They have nothing else to rely on. They

believe their intelligence is fixed and causes all outcomes—those that turn out well and those that don't.

Parents who only tell their children they're smart, and don't also talk about the role of character, create a dangerous situation.<sup>7</sup> Now, if their children don't do well, they can only blame their lack of intelligence. This can quickly result in hopelessness. They

may then slide down a slippery slope to apathy, self-rejection, and lowered expectations. These children may never accomplish what God designed them to do.

### **A New Way to Talk about Behavior**

Teaching children to ask an additional question, “How can I be smart with my smarts?” introduces the powerful idea that children can use their smarts in healthy *or* unhealthy ways. Children who understand that their positive and negative behaviors are often related to different smarts have new ways of thinking about obedience. Parents have new ways of motivating excellent behavior and talking with their children about why they misbehave. (See chapter 2 for a full presentation of this concept.)

### **Volunteering and Career Choice**

How a child is smart can also direct decisions regarding volunteering and serving. For example, a child who is nature smart and people smart may enjoy helping out at a pet shelter. One who is nature smart and body smart may enjoy walking a neighbor’s dog. Many examples are included in chapters 3 to 10 so you’ll understand how these smarts work together. Keep reading!

Careers can also be identified as a good fit or not according to a child’s smarts. My nephew, Andy, who played with Legos and toy trains much longer than other boys might have, did so because he



is very picture smart and logic smart. He is now a successful engineer using those skills and his people-smart abilities. He consults with many customers so his people-smart skills are essential. Remember, intelligences never work alone. They support each other.

### **Five Core Needs Can Be Met**

Another advantage the smarts provide is an important way for children to meet their legitimate, core needs. This means they'll be less likely to rely on counterfeit hope and dangerous ways of trying to meet their needs—lying, teasing, pride, apathy, popularity, and more.

When needs are met, it's more likely your child will experience contentment, peace, excellence, fulfillment, obedience, and much more. Knowing which intelligences are strengths and how to use them in smart ways can help your child meet these five basic needs.<sup>8</sup>

#### ***Security: Who can I trust?***

Children who know *how* they are smart can have more security in themselves. They'll believe they can do well and will be more confident even when by themselves in new circumstances. They'll also have healthy security in you when you're the one who teaches them how they are smart and how to be smart with their smarts. They will trustingly turn to you for help and believe you when you speak into their lives.

Honestly, because God designed us with these needs, we're healthiest when He meets them. Related to security, when presenting the smarts to children in a Christian context, I include this reality: "*God is smarter than I am!*" They laugh and sometimes cheer. Smart children understand that God will always be smarter than they are. In addition, smart children know they need the smartest God—the God of the Bible. I tell them that God could have created them to be like marionette puppets He controls. Instead, He gave them eight different intelligences and He trusts them to use their smarts to help and not hurt. That's humbling, isn't it?

The smarts are great, but they're no substitute for God. None! Our smarts are extremely important and I know many who have improved lives and perspectives concerning their futures because of what they learned about multiple intelligences. I hope this will include you. But these understandings won't lead to the rock-solid foundation and fulfillment only God can provide.

***I hear about children with negative labels finding each other and having a party in the corner.***

### ***Identity: Who am I?***

Identity needs to be current, honest, and complete. Children need to know their strengths and challenges. Knowing about multiple intelligences spins what they may have known about themselves in a positive light. For example, rather than thinking, "*Spelling is*

*hard because I'm really stupid!"* they'll understand "*Spelling is hard because I'm logic smart and not very picture smart.*" Discovering how they are smart also reveals many new and reliable truths. Because identity controls behavior, it's important for children to know who they are.

As I've already written, children who know *how* they are smart will apply themselves more regularly and respond to challenges more optimistically. Thinking they're smart isn't enough. It's knowing *how* they are smart that empowers their identity.

### ***Belonging: Who wants me?***

Children's belonging is dependent upon the quality of their security and identity. When one or both of these needs aren't met or they're met in unhealthy ways, children either won't experience belonging at all or their belonging will be unhealthy. Picture this: Children who believe they're dumb will hang out with peers who believe the same thing about themselves. Many teachers have told me that's exactly what happens. I hear about children with negative labels finding each other and having a party in the corner. Seriously!

When children know *how* they are smart, they can discern who is smart in the same ways. They can get to know them and have things in common to talk about and dreams for their tomorrows to share. When working on projects and needing help, they can recognize who has smart strengths they don't have that they'd

benefit from. They can choose to go for a walk in the park when dating someone who is nature smart, visit an art museum with someone who is picture smart, and expect deep conversations with someone who is self-smart. Knowing about the smarts can strengthen relationships.

***Purpose: Why am I alive?***

The core needs continue to build upon each other. Therefore, children's purpose will be healthiest when their security is strong. They need to know their strengths to believe they have purpose. Children who know *how* they are smart as part of their identity are typically more optimistic about the future. When their belonging is strong, they'll have people to serve and people to serve with. These people compel children to discover and fulfill their purpose.

Children listen intently when I get to talk with them about how they've all been created on purpose to leave the world a better place. Examples of how they can do this according to their combination of smarts always enthuses them. When you share ideas with children, you expand their horizons and awaken and confirm their passions.

As you continue reading, you'll see children in a new light. For example, nature-smart children will more readily volunteer to weed their grandparents' garden than other children. Logic-smart children will enjoy teaching a friend or sibling about a new math

app. Children who are word smart, logic smart, and people smart may want to become ethical journalists who don't let their biases influence their reporting. If they're body smart and picture smart, they may want to create beautiful sculptures that glorify God and reveal their God-given abilities.

**Competence: *What do I do well?***

The core needs culminate with competence. Many parents think what children do well is most important. It's the need that garners the most concern, energy, and conversations. But guess what? Without healthy ways to meet the first four needs, it's rare children will have competence. They think they don't need it if they don't have purpose and people to serve. If their identity is only negative and they have no one to trust, including themselves, they won't believe they can do anything well. You must pay attention to how the first four needs are met—multiple intelligences help in many ways. That's part of the power of multiple intelligences. They offer great explanatory power for the important things of life.

Children who know *how* they are smart will be resourceful and effectively achieve more. Knowing their strengths, they'll want to use them. For instance, what they do well will influence what they choose to do in their spare time, courses they take, subjects they choose to study on their own, and more. They'll find workarounds when they're challenged—making a hard task easier by using one

of their smart strengths that others might not see as relevant.

The hope I see in children's eyes when I teach them the smarts is largely because they discover how relevant these are to their whole lives. Their joy and success. Overcoming challenges. School, church, friends, family, present, future. With their new understandings, they're empowered to more successfully meet all five core needs in positive ways. Excellent!

### **HOW CAN I IDENTIFY MY CHILD'S MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCE STRENGTHS?**

Your child's smarts will usually be apparent first as interests. Therefore, spending time with your children—to see them and to hear them—is essential. When you and others notice their interests and nurture them by your positive responses, abilities will usually emerge and be strengthened. So, look for interests first. What does your son do in his spare time? What does your daughter spend her gift money on? What does your son keep talking about after school? Pay attention and ask yourself which smarts are represented. As you continue to be alert, you'll discover whether these were fleeting interests or whether they give birth to real strengths.

As I'll elaborate on in chapter 2, and include in each remaining chapter, paying attention to how each child misbehaves can also reveal smart strengths. Do they talk too much? Word smart.

Move more than is appropriate and touch everything? Body smart. Manipulate people—even you? People smart. Think they must have reasons for everything before they obey? Logic smart. You get the idea.

School subjects and topics aligned with strong intelligences will usually be easiest and more enjoyable for your child so this is another thing to pay attention to. For example, history, fiction, and creative writing are related to being picture smart. Science is aligned with being logic smart and/or nature smart. Drama is often related to being people smart.

Teaching your child about the smarts can also help you identify intelligence strengths and weaknesses. You can observe reactions to details and examples you share and note which ones pique his or her curiosity. Then ask *your child* to identify his or her strengths. Your child will often know and be able to provide evidence. Your child may also be able to indicate which of the smarts are weak. (As you'll understand after reading chapter 10, children who are not very self-smart will have a harder time with this self-analysis.)

It's easier to identify strengths for older children. When children are young, because smarts are being awakened, their interests vary. They may build with blocks for a solid week and then want to investigate everything outside. They may discover a toy that makes noise and now be very interested in music. As children

age, the top several smarts will usually become obvious. In the meantime, keep using them all.

Don't do this so they all become strengths or "top smarts." As I've already written, that's not realistic. And don't try to develop them or use them all at the same time. That's overwhelming. I know too many children who need their own appointment calendars because they're so busy. That's not healthy. As you'll come to understand as you read more, aim to expose your children to all the smarts as opportunities arise and strengths will naturally reveal themselves as you parent with balance.

Awakening, strengthening, and training children's multiple intelligences are key ways to help them become who God created them uniquely to be. Nurture their smarts and discern which are passions and potentials. This means you will also discern which will remain less important to your children. Work to accept God's choices for them. Your attitudes are essential to helping your children fulfill their God-given niche in the family, community, church, and in history. This is a significant responsibility!

To help you evaluate your child's smarts so you can better meet his or her needs, we've created a website where you can complete checklists about the smarts. Your child can do it, too, so you can compare your ratings, which should generate beneficial conversations. The website is [www.8GreatSmarts.com](http://www.8GreatSmarts.com).