# **Smarter: The New Science of Building Brain Power**

By Dan Hurley

#### Smarter: The New Science of Building Brain Power By Dan Hurley

#### "A riveting look at the birth of a new science." —Daniel H. Pink, author of Drive

When he was eight years old, Dan Hurley was labeled a "slow learner" because he still couldn't read. Three years later, he had become a straight A student.

Until the publication of a major study in 2008, psychologists believed that intelligence is fixed at birth, that IQ is like a number tattooed on the soul. The new study showed that people can increase their "fluid" intelligence through training.

Hurley, who grew up to become an award-winning science journalist, first explored the topic in *The New York Times Magazine*. In *Smarter*, he digs deeper by meeting with the field's leading researchers—and becoming a human guinea pig. After just three months of playing computer brain-training games, joining a boot-camp exercise program, learning to play the Renaissance lute, practicing mindfulness meditation and and even getting his brain zapped in the name of science, Hurley improved his fluid intelligence by sixteen percent.

With humor and heart, *Smarter* chronicles the roiling field of intelligence research and delivers practical findings to sharpen the minds of children, young adults, seniors, and those with cognitive challenges.

#### Smarter: The New Science of Building Brain Power By Dan Hurley Bibliography

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## **Editorial Review**

#### Review

*"Smarter* is an essential read. It's a riveting look at the birth of a new science as well as a user's manual for anyone who wants to be better at solving problems, learning new things, and coming up with creative ideas." —Daniel H. Pink, author of *Drive* and A *Whole New Mind* 

"A clear-eyed but encouraging view of cognitive enhancement." —Scientific American MIND

"Chatty and personal, *Smarter* is an easy read—even for those of us with untrained brains." —*The Washington Post* 

"Hurley captures the history and mystery of intelligence, but, most of all, the exciting new science of intellectual growth. This may be the most important revolution of our time!" —Carol Dweck, Author of *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* 

"Dan Hurley isolates just what cognitive exercise boosts intelligence. Anyone who doubts that environment can make a real difference to cognition should start with this book." —James R. Flynn author of *What is Intelligence* 

"Filled with beautifully explained science, Smarter is engaging and inspiring, offering much-needed hope to those of us whose smarts seem to be declining. Smarter, in fact, is that rare thing: enjoyable reading that can also improve your life."

-Gretchen Reynolds, author of The First 20 Minutes

About the Author

Dan Hurley is the featured journalist in PBS's August 2013 Pledge Special, "Smarter Brains." His articles on intelligence research have been featured in the *New York Times Magazine*, the *Washington Post, Neurology Today*, and *Discover* magazine. He lectures to corporate and academic audiences across the United States. His fluid intelligence went up 16 percent after his training regimen.

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#### Copyright © 2013 by Dan Hurley INTRODUCTION

Danny and Julie Vizcaino, brother and sister, were born and raised in a poor neighborhood of Modesto, California, she in 1981, he in 1983. Their parents, immigrants from Mexico without high school diplomas, were typical of the local population: their mother worked in a canning factory, and their father worked in construction until he died in an accident when the kids were young. With an older brother who had dropped out of high school and gotten into trouble with the law, Julie was left back in second grade and took it for granted that she was, in a word, stupid.

"I was never really good at reading and writing," she told me. "Or at anything."

Then, in 1991, Julie entered fourth grade and found herself in the class of a new teacher, Kevin Cripe, who had the outlandish idea that his students were capable of great things.

"When I talked to older teachers," Cripe told me, "they said that Julie was just not very smart. One of her older brothers was in and out of jail. She had been left back. Her younger brother, Danny, had also been left back. And she was not a great reader."

But Cripe had been a lifelong chess player, and when he decided to start a chess club, he invited Julie to participate.

"I had no idea what it was," she said. "I called it 'chest.' I had never heard of it, but I said sure."

Cripe kept their training fun, but challenging, and Julie picked it up with a speed that surprised even Cripe. She began spending hours leaning over a chessboard, lost in thought, thinking not just two or three moves ahead, but ten or more. After two years of practice, when Julie was in sixth grade, Cripe decided that she and two other kids were good enough to enter a local tournament in Bakersfield.

"Here's what I felt as we were going to that first tournament," Cripe said. "There was this other kid named Jordy. A great kid. Both his parents were psychologists. Jordy was a prodigy. He had gone to private elementary schools and played the piano in concerts. His parents had done all the right things. I thought, here's Jordy, he has all this stuff, he speaks French, and here's Julie. Cognitively, I have to think that her brain has never been fully activated or whatever you want to call it. Sort of like a kid who's never really run, never been pushed to do something athletic. I thought, what would happen if we just treat her brain as if it's going to be like his at some point? So I just decided to treat all the kids in the chess club like they're going to be as smart as all the other kids in these tournaments, the ones from the elite private schools. If I didn't believe that, then it's all hopelessness, right? You might as well burn up all the books."

After the students did well at the Bakersfield tournament and at a number of others in California, Cripe decided he would take Julie and the rest of his team to a national chess championship held in Charlotte, North Carolina.

"Don't do this," a fellow teacher begged him. "You will only embarrass these children."

But Cripe took them, and out of eighty teams, his scored in the top fifteen. Among the hundreds of students participating, Julie ended up among the tournament's top ten.

"I didn't start winning till I was thirteen or fourteen," she said. "When I was fourteen, I won a lot of money playing in the tournaments. That's how I bought my first car." Eventually, in her age group, Julie was ranked among the top fifty female players in the United States.

Then her younger brother, Danny, joined the team and soon became its best player. At a national championship held in Tucson, Danny reached the last round, his team clinging to the hope of scoring in the top ten, when the stress got to him.

"He throws up before the last round because he's nervous," Cripe said. "He was the leader. I said, 'Okay, Danny, if you are truly sick, I'll call your mom; we'll withdraw you from the tournament. But if you're nervous, here's what I want you to think about. You have earned this. Everybody else is as nervous as you are. And I want you to enjoy this moment, because there are seven hundred other people here today who have no chance to win a trophy. So what do you want me to do?' And he said, 'I want to try to play.' Then I gave him one last piece of advice: 'If you throw up again, aim for the floor, because if you hit the board, it's going to be hard to play with the chess pieces.'

"He won his game fairly quickly. Every single other student on our team who came out after him also won. They watched Danny win after he threw up. It almost makes me cry every time I talk about it. He was one of the 'dumb ones,' and he finished in the top ten of the national chess championship that year. And our team finished in fifth place. We were ahead of Hunter College Elementary School that year. That's the school in New York City that's always among the best. They were in sixth or seventh place."

Danny went on to graduate from the University of the Pacific with a degree in mechanical engineering. He now works as an engineer for an international manufacturing firm. Julie graduated from the University of Mississippi and is now a homemaker living with her husband, Calbemar, and a young daughter, Isabel.

"I definitely think chess improved my thinking abilities," Julie told me. "And it definitely improved the thinking abilities of other kids in the chess club. We all got better in our grades and everything else. It just had to do with how hard you worked. You get pretty good at it. You sit there for so long. You've got to picture the moves in your head. At the beginning, you can't really think that far into it. When I was really practicing, I could think fifteen, even twenty moves ahead. You have to sit there for hours and try to think through all these different scenarios. And you're just thinking of different consequences. You take that and put it into your own life. If I do this, then this can happen. If I do that, then that can happen. And then you just make the best decision from there."

What, really, is the meaning of intelligence anyway?

"There are some really ignorant people out there," Julie told me, "the people who are prejudiced and think that just because some kids are from a poor area, and their parents didn't have an education, they automatically have to be stupid. And we're not stupid. I'm not stupid. There are lots of smart kids out there. There's lots of things we could get into. It just has to do with the choices you make. That's why I said chess definitely helped me make the right choices."

On the other side of the country, among the most affluent of New York City's parents, another approach to increasing intelligence is being pursued by those able to pay a couple hundred dollars per hour. Founded in 2009, Bright Kids NYC now has as many as five hundred children enrolled at any time, most of them fourvear-olds seeking to gain admission to the public schools' gifted and talented program. Although admission was once decided by each individual school district in the city, leading some to question its fairness, in 2008 a uniform, citywide standard was created, based on standardized test scores. (Yes, there are standardized tests for preschoolers.) To gain admission to a neighborhood gifted and talented program, children would have to score in the 90th percentile on the tests. To gain access to the highly sought-after citywide program, with space for just four hundred students in five schools, they would have to score in the 99th percentile. The explicit goal of the new program was to increase the number of accepted children coming from less affluent areas, but it had the opposite effect: more kids overall, and more rich ones than ever, were accepted. So the New York Board of Education tried another fix. In 2013, a new test was added: the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test, designed to assess cognitive ability independent of cultural background. The result: even more kids overall, and more rich kids in particular, passed the test. What could be causing the disparity? Although Bright Kids NYC was not the only new tutoring program aiming to help children score well on the tests, it was certainly the largest and most sophisticated, and it had truly stunning results: 94 percent of the children who prepped with Bright Kids scored in the 90th percentile on the tests, and 49 percent of them—?nearly half-?scored in the 99th percentile. The results suggest a real-life Lake Wobegon, the fictional hometown of Garrison Keillor on his long-running radio show, where "all the children are above average."

As recently as 2008, the consensus among mainstream intelligence researchers was that human intelligence is just too complex, and too closely linked to innate characteristics of the brain, to be significantly modified by any straightforward training method. Sure, they agreed that exposing children to an enriched environment does generally improve their chances for reaching their potential. But not by much. Because unlike a test of physical strength, which measures only how you performed today, intelligence tests have always been pitched as an upper limit on what you can ever do: a cognitive glass ceiling, a number tattooed on the soul.

And that's why most of us have come to think of intelligence researchers as a bunch of jerks and the IQ test as just plain un-American. Because who wants to be told that we can work and sweat all we want, we can train to run a marathon or learn a new language, we can set a goal and achieve it-?but intelligence is the one mountain we can never climb? Then again, perhaps the belief that intellectual disability is heritable and beyond remediation is just the other, darker side of the American spirit: it was in the United States, after all, that the pseudoscience of eugenics had its birthplace, where some sixty thousand sterilizations were performed in the twentieth century, continuing into the 1960s, most of them forced, many of them involving people deemed to be "imbeciles" or "feeble-minded." Championed by the likes of Margaret Sanger, J. H. Kellogg, and Alexander Graham Bell, sanctioned for a time by the U.S. Supreme Court, and funded by such august bodies as the Carnegie Institution and the Rockefeller Foundation, the eugenics movement in this country was credited by Nazi leaders, including Adolf Hitler himself, as inspiring their "war on the weak." Yet even to this day, there remain academics who continue to harp away on the supposed intellectual superiority of one racial or ethnic group over another. As recently as 2009, a dissertation for a Harvard doctorate in public policy asserted: "Immigrants living in the U.S. today do not have the same level of cognitive ability as natives. No one knows whether Hispanics will ever reach I.Q. parity with whites, but the prediction that new Hispanic immigrants will have low-I.Q. children and grandchildren is difficult to argue against." Four years later, the writer of that dissertation, Jason Richwine, authored a study for the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, that criticized immigration reform.

Given all the above, it is not surprising that the general public's view of IQ has pretty well gone down the toilet. In business-speak: intelligence has a brand problem. Popular culture these days has consigned it to the same dark corner into which it has cast pesticides, bullying, and Lindsay Lohan. I caught a whiff of the ill wind blowing against IQ these days in an e-mail from my brother Dave in Maine, who's been ribbing me ever since he heard about the subject of this book:

Mister Schmarty: Dan, just promise if you get any schmarter, you won't turn into an evil super bad guy like Lex Luthor. Hey, can you add making people nicer to schmarter? James Holmes, schmart, not very nice, the same for Ted Kaczynski. Mister Rogers: very nice, how schmart who knows but wouldn't you like him as your neighbor?

He raises a serious point: a populist vein of American culture has long equated "genius" with "evil" and celebrated a lack of learning as evidence of honesty and decency. These days, even the intelligentsia disdain intelligence, none more so than the writers Daniel Goleman, Malcolm Gladwell, and Paul Tough. In 1995, Goleman published his groundbreaking and hugely influential bestseller, Emotional Intelligence, arguing that the ability to "rein in emotional impulse; to read another's innermost feelings; to handle relationship smoothly" is as important as, or more important than, intellectual capacity. Then in 2008 Gladwell published Outliers: The Story of Success, in which he made famous psychologist K. Anders Ericsson's research showing that talent plays virtually no role in accomplishment, and that what matters—?all that matters—?is hard work, specifically ten thousand hours of practice in one's given field. Most recently, in 2012, Tough came out with How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character, based on research by psychologist Angela Duckworth and others examining the powerful role of characteristics like self-control, conscientiousness, and determination.

Wonderful insights, all. Hard work, grit, and emotional poise are definitely important to success in life. Nobody can argue with that. But wait a minute: does the importance of those qualities mean that intelligence has no value at all? Certainly IQ is not everything; perhaps it's not even the most important thing, but it's definitely one of them. As we all knew in elementary school and can see in our workplaces and on the front pages of the newspaper every day, intelligence, or smarts, or whatever you want to call it, does matter. Intelligence distinguishes humans from our fellow creatures on Earth. Intelligence—?not just knowing a lot of dumb facts, but having the ability to understand and analyze those facts, to learn, to make sense of things, to turn information into knowledge, to turn knowledge into profit, to find meaning in chaos—?is power. It's how, tens of thousands of years ago, we mastered fire and learned to farm rather than forage. It's not the only reason, but it's one of the reasons that Warren Buffett, Mark Zuckerberg, and Bill Gates are richer than you are. (Both Zuckerberg, who founded Facebook, and Sergey Brin, who cofounded Google, were selected in adolescence, in part on the basis of scoring high on standardized tests, to attend the Center for Talented Youth at Johns Hopkins, as was Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta, better known as Lady Gaga.) It's how Malcolm Gladwell, Daniel Goleman, and Paul Tough wrote such awesome books. Because they're smart, and because, as politically incorrect as it has become in polite society to say so, intelligence still matters.

And not just for school and career achievement. What's surprising, given how we think of intelligence as being all in our heads, is how it contributes to the well-being of our bodies, in ways that are not yet fully understood. A recent study of 1,116,442 Swedish men whose IQs were tested at age eighteen, for instance, found that after twenty-two years, those who scored in the bottom 25 percent were over five times more likely to have died of poisoning, three times more likely to have drowned, and over twice as likely to have been killed in a traffic accident as those who scored in the top 25 percent. Overall, by middle age, for every 15 points lower on the IQ scale that a man's intelligence was at age eighteen, his risk of dying by middle age increased by one-third and his risk of being hospitalized for some kind of assault increased by one-half. In another study, of Scottish adults born in 1921, even after adjusting for the effects of social class and childhood deprivation, every 15-point drop in IQ measured at age eleven was associated with a 36 percent increased risk of death by age sixty-five. In a host of other studies, intelligence has been repeatedly linked to the risk of getting murdered, developing high blood pressure, having a stroke or heart attack—?even to early menopause, with one study finding that every 15-point gain was associated with a 20 percent reduction in the likelihood of entering menopause by age forty-nine.

Anyone convinced that intelligence doesn't matter should try telling that to the 800,000 children and adults in the United States receiving Social Security income due to a diagnosed intellectual disability.

Try telling the 250,000 service members diagnosed with a traumatic brain injury since 2000 that intelligence doesn't matter. And I don't mean the kind of pointy-headed academic test-taking ability that the very word "intelligence" connotes, but the mental sharpness and insight that those tests measure, and which are the very ones impaired by a brain injury.

Try telling the 5 million Americans who are losing not only their long-term memory but their ability to follow a conversation and balance their checkbook due to Alzheimer's that intelligence doesn't matter. (By the way, the smarter you are, the later in age you are ever likely to be diagnosed with Alzheimer's, due to something researchers call "cognitive reserve.")

Try telling people with major depression or schizophrenia that intelligence doesn't matter. One of the most incapacitating aspects of their diseases, surprisingly enough, is the significant intellectual impairments they cause, so much so that those with the strongest remaining cognitive abilities generally have the best prognoses for recovery.

All of which would be thoroughly depressing and discouraging if we could do nothing about our intelligence, as we have been so long told. Given the supposedly unyielding nature of this albatross called intelligence, it's no wonder we have, as a culture, decided to do our best to ignore it, as we do death.

But what if all the experts who have told us for a hundred years that it cannot be changed are wrong? What if the brain is like pretty much every other part of the physical world, in that human ingenuity can find a way to tinker with it? Think about it: we can transplant a heart, construct a bionic retina to let the blind see, and build robotic legs to permit the lame to walk; we can get breast implants and have a sex change. But we can't increase our brain's functional abilities? Are smartphones the only thing we can make smarter? What is this intelligence thing anyway: is it some kind of forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge? Does it not have a real, physical basis? Are these researchers who tell us it can never be changed actually scientists—?or are they high priests of an IQ cult?

Are we not smart enough to figure out how to make ourselves smarter?

The first new answer in a century to that question came in May 2008. Two Swiss researchers by the names of Susanne Jaeggi and Martin Buschkuehl published a study that month in the prominent Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences reporting on what happened when college students played a peculiar computerized game called the N-back for twenty minutes a day, five days a week, for four weeks. The game—?about which I'll go into greater detail in the first chapter—?was designed as a test of something called working memory: a person's moment-by-moment attention and the ability not simply to remember short-term but to juggle and update and manipulate and analyze the content of those memories; that is, to work with them. In Jaeggi and Buschkuehl's study, this test of working memory was turned into a tool for training, and sure enough, the longer the students practiced the N-back game, the better they got at it. Importantly, however, before and after those four weeks of practice, the students took a test of a mental ability called fluid intelligence. Standard IQ tests include measurements of crystallized intelligence, your treasure trove of stored-up information and how-to knowledge, which just keeps growing as you age-?the sort of thing tested on Jeopardy! or put to use when you ride a bicycle. Fluid intelligence, on the other hand, is the underlying ability to learn, the capacity to solve novel problems, see underlying patterns, and figure out things that were never explicitly taught. It has long been known to peak in early adulthood, around college age, and then gradually decline (which is why the most influential work of mathematicians, physicists, and musicians usually occurs in their twenties and then quickly falls off). And unlike physical conditioning, which can transform ninety-eight-pound weaklings into hunks, a hundred years of scientific doctrine insisted that fluid intelligence was impervious to the effects of training. Yet in Jaeggi and Buschkuehl's study, after just four weeks of doing the N-back, the students' scores on a measure of fluid intelligence increased, on average, by 40 percent.

"Increasing Fluid Intelligence Is Possible After All," stated the headline of an editorial accompanying the study, which drew wide coverage in the media and sparked the academic equivalent of a food fight among intelligence researchers. Derided and ridiculed by old-school researchers as the equivalent of "cold fusion," it also drew strong praise from many younger ones. Like controlled flight prior to the Wright brothers, the notion that human intelligence could be increased struck some as laughable, others as inevitable.

In the years following publication of Jaeggi and Buschkuehl's findings, a grand total of four randomized, placebo-controlled studies have been published (as of this writing) finding no benefit of cognitive training. Skeptics point to these four studies as evidence that training remains a fool's errand. Yet in contrast, by my count, seventy-five other randomized, placebo-controlled studies have now been published in peer-reviewed scientific journals confirming that cognitive training substantially improves intellectual abilities. Twenty-two of those studies specifically found improvements in fluid intelligence or reasoning, while the remaining

fifty-three found a variety of other significant benefits in abilities such as attention, executive function, working memory, and reading. Results have now been seen not only in elementary-school children, but in preschoolers, college students, the middle-aged, and the elderly. Healthy volunteers have benefited, as have people with disorders including Down syndrome, schizophrenia, traumatic brain injury, alcohol abuse, Par-kinson's disease, chemotherapy-treated cancer, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and mild cognitive impairment (a common forerunner of Alzheimer's disease). Gains have been seen to persist for up to eight months after the completion of training.

Even for those concerned about emotional intelligence, short-term cognitive training has been shown to pay off. In March 2013, the Journal of Neuroscience published a randomized study by Cambridge University researchers showing that people who spent just twenty days training for about a half hour a day on a version of N-back that incorporated emotion-laden words like "dead" and "evil," as well as images of faces displaying fear, anger, sadness, or disgust, significantly improved their performance on a gold-standard measure of emotional control, called the emotional Stroop task. Those gains, by the way, were accompanied by greater activity in the part of the frontal lobes associated with emotional regulation, as revealed by fMRI brain scans.

Despite the lopsided evidence in favor of training's effectiveness, the dispute among scientists over whether the gains are real remains fierce, at times downright ugly. As a science journalist, I have been privileged to be present during some of the most, shall we say, piquant debates, and to speak with most of the leading voices in the field, on both sides of the divide. I've now interviewed a couple hundred researchers in the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Japan, and China. I visited Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, where I met brain-injured veterans. I went to the San Francisco offices of Lumosity, the biggest online provider of these cognitive games aimed at improving intelligence. And I met twice with the guy who leads the funding in this area at the Intelligence Advanced Research Projects Activity, or IARPA. It's a government intelligence agency, like DARPA for spies. The guy who is funding research on this is hoping they can figure out how to make their intelligence officers more intelligent, so they can see the danger in Benghazi before the chief diplomat is killed.

But he has a problem. The field is in such an uproar that each time I met him, the IARPA guy asked me what I think is really going on. Essentially what he was asking me was: does this stuff really work? And I'm going to tell you what I told him: before I put my name on a book saying that something as basic to a person's nature as intelligence can actually be improved in a matter of weeks or months, the skeptical bastard in me demands that I personally test these methods on myself first. Which I did, and will report on, for better or worse.

This book, however, is not about me: it's about the field of intelligence research as it undergoes a revolution, as an ever-growing majority of researchers shifts from viewing fluid intelligence as something unchangeable, like eye color, to something more like muscular strength, which has a biological basis but is equally susceptible to training. It's a startling transformation in our understanding of a fundamental human trait: the capacity for rational thought—?the ability to learn—?and whether a strict limit is set for each of us on the day of our birth, or whether we can do something about it. The overturning of the pernicious dogma that our intelligence is unchangeable holds enormous implications for every level of society: young and old, rich and poor, genius and cognitively disabled alike. No one is saying that cognitive training can turn an intellectually disabled person into a genius. Exactly how much people can benefit, and which methods work best, remain a work in progress But that shouldn't be surprising. Dated to Jaeggi and Buschkuehl's 2008 study, the new science of building brain power is barely six years old. This book tells the story of the birth of that science and what it may mean for anyone who ever wanted to be smarter.

## **Users Review**

#### From reader reviews:

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Book is usually written, printed, or outlined for everything. You can learn everything you want by a reserve. Book has a different type. As we know that book is important matter to bring us around the world. Close to that you can your reading ability was fluently. A publication Smarter: The New Science of Building Brain Power will make you to always be smarter. You can feel much more confidence if you can know about every little thing. But some of you think this open or reading any book make you bored. It's not make you fun. Why they might be thought like that? Have you trying to find best book or appropriate book with you?

#### Jerry Blair:

The reason why? Because this Smarter: The New Science of Building Brain Power is an unordinary book that the inside of the guide waiting for you to snap it but latter it will jolt you with the secret the idea inside. Reading this book alongside it was fantastic author who all write the book in such incredible way makes the content interior easier to understand, entertaining way but still convey the meaning totally. So , it is good for you because of not hesitating having this any longer or you going to regret it. This unique book will give you a lot of gains than the other book have such as help improving your talent and your critical thinking technique. So , still want to delay having that book? If I were you I will go to the e-book store hurriedly.

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