

Are Younger People Smarter?

By Rod Fraser



Talk to Old People: They know Cool Stuff.

At our luncheon last week, Don told me of a recent article, written by Margaret Wentz in The Globe and Mail. She argued that "most of us reach our mental peak around 20 years after the start of our careers. We do our best work in our forties and fifties and it's all downhill from there.... Cognitive decline begins in middle age."

Of course, on the face of it, these facts are inescapable. There is no doubt that people age, and with the aging process, there are some things we

just don't do as well as we used to. We aren't as strong, our eye-hand coordination isn't as acute and we sometimes forget little things.

But it's quite a reach to argue, as Ms. Wente does, that "the kids really are smarter than we are". Would you like to be operated on by a doctor just out of medical school? Probably not. Would you take advice on a complex legal matter from someone who passed their bar exams last week? I don't think so. Our intuition tells us that life experience is important to developing brain cells, knowledge and judgement.



Old Folks Rock—To the Power of Four.

I can do things today, at age 73, that I couldn't do at age 20, and I can do other things much better today than at age 20. My judgement is far better,

because I have a number of decades of adult life experience.

I also know how to learn. A dozen years ago, I attended a woodcarving show. Although I had never tried woodcarving before (aside from whittling some sticks as a kid), I picked it up in a couple of months. My brain knew how to carve before my hands did. Pretty soon the neural pathways opened and my hands were following instructions my brain was sending their way. I was off to the races.

At one point, my grandsons expressed a desire to learn woodcarving. They didn't do very well. They flailed about, doing what they could by rote. They didn't have the ability to learn how to learn. In the absence of a protracted period of learning by doing (the basis of apprenticeship training), they were never going to be carvers. Their brains weren't sufficiently developed to teach themselves the skills.



When I ask my teenage grandchildren about some of the same issues I discuss thoughtfully every day with older people, one pleads ignorance and the other replies with sophomoric talking points. Independent thought, amusing anecdotes, and authenticity are in short supply (as is curiosity).

To be fair, these kids are just finishing high school. I was no different at their age. My priorities

were schoolwork, working a part-time job and learning to interact with the opposite sex. It's the same for my grandchildren.

Jordan Peterson has a ready response to young people full of half-baked opinions. In a YouTube Video some time ago, he made the point (and I paraphrase), "you're 18 years of age; six years ago, you were twelve. What do you know? Why should I listen to you?" Quite so.



James Flynn, a researcher in New Zealand, tells us that over the last 100 years, in every country where IQ tests are on record, test scores have improved from one generation to the next.

While seemingly supportive of Ms. Wenté's argument, his conclusions are at odds with common sense. In an article in the *New Yorker*, Malcolm Gladwell explained why.

"If we work in the opposite direction, Flynn's argument suggests the typical teenager of today, with an IQ of 100, would have had grandparents with average IQs of 82—seemingly below the threshold necessary to graduate from high school." How realistic is that?

"And, if we go back even farther, the Flynn effect puts the average IQs of the schoolchildren of

1900 at around 70, which is to suggest, bizarrely, that a century ago the United States was populated largely by people who today would be considered mentally retarded." This is nonsense. No reasonable person would subscribe to such a conclusion.

Perhaps the muddled thinking in such matters depends on what you mean by 'smarter'. Rather than defining intelligence narrowly as the ability to solve a number of problems with pen and paper, we should expand its definition to include the knowledge we accumulate over the years (or decades) from study, skills that we learn in hobbies like woodcarving, as well as the wisdom that comes from having lived full lives.



Cognitive Improvement Kit

Whether or not you agree with Ms. Wenté's thinking, the key to an old age that minimizes cognitive decline, may well be hobbies such as woodcarving, and social networks such as carving clubs. The latter allow older people to gather, keep their minds active and their social skills polished.



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