

PSYCHOLOGY

Educator Doubts That America Is Nation of 12-Year-Olds

Education Office Expert Says Average Mental Age is 17.7 But Conclusion is Contradictory to Previous Research

THE STATEMENT, often made, that the average intelligence of adult Americans is that of 12-year-old children has been challenged by the U. S. Office of Education's expert on educational tests, Dr. David Segel.

The mental age of adults in the United States is 17.7 years, if a new figure given by Dr. Segel in *School Life*, publication of the Office of Education, is correct.

He deplors the fact that the 12-year figure has been so widely and consistently advertised, resulting in lowering the educational or cultural level of newspapers, magazines, movies and radio presentations.

Is the 12-Year-Old Bright?

The pronouncement that the national intelligence is greater than has been thought will be welcome to many who are loath to consider themselves part of a mentally 12-year-old population. Looked at from another point of view, however, a 12-year mental level is not so alarming. The parents of the modern young adolescent are usually quite willing to admit that Miss 12-Years and her brother are quite capable of outwitting their elders. They surpass many older persons in ability to learn.

Intelligence, as distinguished from education, general knowledge, experience, or skill, is not something that keeps on improving throughout life. As far as the merely physical basis for intelligence is concerned, that is, anatomical development of the brain itself, the boy of six is just as mature as an adult, the anatomist, Dr. T. Wingate Todd, has found.

Growth All Through School

But children throughout the school age do seem to improve in their ability to think—to perform mental tasks such as those included in intelligence tests.

Popular judgment, as reflected in laws, varies concerning the time when persons become mentally mature. A minimum age of 21 must be attained for voting purposes. For driving an auto-

mobile, for marriage, for giving testimony in court, and for earning a living, earlier ages are usually sanctioned.

Intelligence testing is still a new science, and comparatively little is now known about the mental makeup of the population in general. Probably the most comprehensive study yet made is the one known as the Later Maturity Study conducted at Stanford and Yale Universities by Dr. W. H. Miles and associates. In this research, tests were given to a sampling of literate persons aged all the way from 7 years to 94.

It was found that the period of growth lasts certainly until the age of 18. Then the period of rapid growth of intelligence is over and it holds or begins to drop, slowly at first but with gradually increasing momentum. After the early twenties, people continue to build up their experience and knowledge, but the peak of their natural ability has already been reached and is just being passed.

Average For Prime Only 17

But this does not mean that everyone, or even most people, ever reach a mental age of 18. According to the Stanford study, the average mental age of youngsters in their teens is 17 years, 3 months, and the average for the twenties is just the same. In the thirties it has dropped to 16 years, 8 months; for the forties, 16 years, 7 months; for the fifties, 15 years, 8 months; for the sixties, 14 years, 8 months; for the seventies, 13 years, 11 months; and for the eighties, 11 years, 7 months.

Wide individual differences were observed. A large number of the aged have ability that tests above the average for younger persons. And, of course, many a youngster is handicapped with ability very low in comparison with his fellows. Persons so dull as to be unable to learn to read and write were not considered in the Stanford study at all.

What is America's mental age?

A large proportion of Uncle Sam's

nephews and nieces—some 47 millions—are youngsters who have not yet attained their mental growth. Another large group has passed the time of maximum ability and are on the long gradual down slope where experience is used to counter-balance decreasing natural power. Only a comparatively small number are at the peak. Thus the average mental age is generally cited at a figure well below the 17.7 years found by Dr. Segel, which he defines in terms of "ability to learn."

In determining this average of nearly 18 years, Dr. Segel seems to have ignored all persons under 16 or over 50 years of age as well as failing to take into consideration illiterates, feeble-minded in and out of institutions, and the senile. His tabulation includes about 62 millions, or just a little over half—presumably the upper half—of the population of the nation.

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Language Facility Gives Advantage in Tests

CHILDREN of the higher economic and social classes are considered superior in intelligence to those less fortunate mainly because of their superiority in the use of language, Dr. Ethel Kawin, of the Institute for Juvenile Research, found in a study just reported by her in a book, "Children of Pre-School Age," published by the University of Chicago.

Children of a nursery school in the Hull-House district of Chicago were compared with those attending a nursery school in Winnetka operated as a joint project of the Winnetka Woman's Club and the Board of Education and attended mainly by the children of professional people. The wealthier children received higher scores on the Stanford-Binet scale, but their advantage was smaller when measured by the Merrill-Palmer Scale in which language is less important, and the difference was smaller still when the language tests were omitted. The poorer children excelled on some of the motor tests.

This finding justifies serious questioning of the accepted viewpoint that the intelligence of children is greater toward the upper end of the social-economic scale, Dr. Kawin concludes, although she warns that the number of cases included in her study are too few to warrant any definite conclusions.

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