At What Age Does Your Brain Peak?

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Sports writers will tell you that athletes peak in their 20s, after which point their skills quickly erode. Most other things in our lives—our careers, for example—take a good deal more time to develop. Intelligence, it turns out, peaks a bit later, too, though with a twist, according to a recent study: Some facets of intelligence peak when we’re still in high school or college, while others continue to improve into our 40s, 50s, and beyond.

Research on intelligence began a century ago with French psychologist Alfred Binet’s work aimed at identifying schoolchildren with learning disabilities in the early 1900s. For a while, psychologists focused on how they could measure intelligence. But more recently, psychologists have been interested in what makes a person intelligent, or, for that matter, whether there is even one single thing we could call intelligence. (Probably not.) As the latter idea’s taken hold, researchers have wondered how different sorts of intelligence develop over time. Answering that question has implications not only for scientists’ theories of intelligence, but could also improve teachers’ effectiveness, and help doctors identify and address cognitive decline in senior citizens.

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