



Figure 5.27 Source: Adapted from the *New York Times*, based on data from Neisser, Ulric (ed.). *The Rising Curve: Long-Term Gains in IQ and Related Measures*. American Psychological Association, 1998.

Many other scientists have investigated the Flynn effect, and there is general agreement that the long-term trend is real. The implication is clear: Whatever IQ tests measure, people today really *do* have more of it than people just a few decades ago. If IQ tests measure intelligence, then it means we really are smarter than our parents (on average), who in turn are smarter than our grandparents (on average).

Of course, if IQ tests don't measure "intelligence" but only measure some type of skill, then the rise in scores may indicate only that today's children have more practice at that skill than past children. The fact that the greatest rise is seen on tests of abstract thinking lends some support to this idea. These tests often involve such problems as solving puzzles and looking for patterns among sets of shapes, and these types of problems are now much more common in games than they were in the past.

While the Flynn effect does not answer the question of whether IQ tests measure intelligence, it may tell us one important thing: If IQs really have been rising as the Flynn effect suggests, then IQ cannot be an entirely inherited trait, because inherited traits cannot change that much in just a few decades. That is, if IQ tests are measuring intelligence, then intelligence can be molded by environmental as well as hereditary factors.

Dr. Flynn's discovery has already changed the way psychologists look at IQ tests, and it is sure to remain an active topic of research. Moreover, given the many uses to which modern society has put IQ tests, the Flynn effect is likely to have profound social and political consequences as well. So

back to our starting question: Are we smarter than our parents? We really can't say, but we can certainly hope so, because it will take a lot of brainpower to solve the problems of the future.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Which explanation do you favor for the Flynn effect: that people are getting smarter or that people are getting more practice at the skills measured on IQ tests? Defend your opinion.
2. The rise in performance on IQ tests contrasts sharply with a steady decline in performance over the past few decades on many tests that measure factual knowledge, such as the SAT. Think of several possible ways to explain these contrasting results, and form an opinion as to the most likely explanation.
3. Results on IQ tests tend to differ among different ethnic groups. Some people have used this fact to argue that some ethnic groups tend to be intellectually superior to others. Can such an argument still be supported in light of the Flynn effect? Defend your opinion.
4. Discuss some of the common uses of IQ tests. Do you think that IQ tests *should* be used for these purposes? Does the Flynn effect alter your thoughts about the uses of IQ tests? Explain.

