Born Smart?

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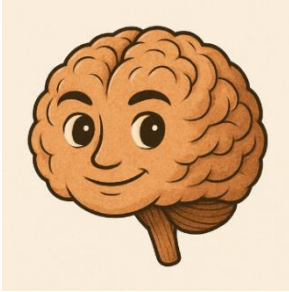
Overview

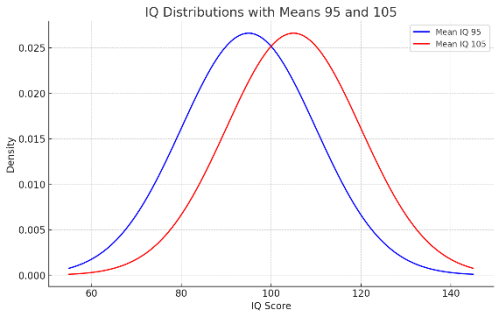
Are some people born smarter? Research seems to say yes, with important caveats. Intelligence is shaped strongly by genetics, but also by evolutionary history, culture, and environment. Understanding these roots can help individuals build on their strengths and create more resilient, fulfilling lives.

Key Findings & Insights



Genetic Foundations

Intelligence is highly polygenic: individual genes have tiny effects, but together they now explain about 10% of the variation in European-ancestry populations (Reis & Spinath, 2025). Heritability rises with age, from around 40% in childhood to nearly 70% in adulthood (Segal, 2025). Ancient DNA studies are hinting at a positive selection for cognitive traits over the past 10,000 years, e.g. in West Eurasian and East Asian populations (Akbari et al., 2024; Piffer, 2025; Olalde et al., 2018; Lamnidis et al., 2018).



Evolutionary and Cultural Context

Cognitive-related genetic variants first emerged between 400,000–600,000 years ago, with significant shifts around 4,000 years ago (Libedinsky et al., 2024; Kaczanowska et al., 2022). Some researchers claim that traits linked to intelligence were favoured as societies developed agriculture, hierarchies, and dense urban centres (Piffer, 2025; Olalde et al., 2018). Cultural values matter too: discipline, rationality & achievement predict student success & economic growth across 86 countries (Becker et al., 2024). Small gains in average IQ greatly increase the number of high performers; driving innovation and societal progress?

Mean IQ	Proportion IQ > 145 (%)	Number IQ > 145 (per 10,000)
95	0.04	4
105	0.38	38

The Genetics of Opportunity

Socio-economic status may now have partly heritable components, with traits supporting success passing genetically across generations (Abdel Abdellaoui et al., 2025). Genes interact with environment: supportive settings amplify genetic potential, while harsh environments suppress it (Reis & Spinath, 2025).

Conclusion

Genetics do influence intelligence, but outcomes depend on culture, education, and environment. Some people are, in a sense, ‘born smart’, but life experience shapes how that potential unfolds. Recognising your strengths, and nurturing them, may lead to a more resilient, satisfying, and meaningful life. In short: Genes plant the seed. Life shapes the tree. You don’t need perfect genes to thrive. In supportive settings, your natural strengths are more likely to emerge. That’s why mindset, education, and culture still matter; they shape how your potential unfolds.

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