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June 22, 2005

BRAIN SWEAT

What is one-half of one-fourth of two-ninths of three-sevenths of 84?

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We die from planned obsolescence. Our genetic blueprint comes with a fine print that reads: warranty valid only for a limited time.

– Dean Hamer in "Living With Our Genes"

BRAIN SWEAT

ANSWER

The answer is 1. To wit:

84 times three-sevenths equals 36

36 times two-ninths equals 8

8 times one-fourth equals 2

2 times one-half equals 1

POETRY FOR SCIENTISTS

Test tubes don't listen
To taunts. They're just trying to
Get a reaction.

– Alice Waugh





OUR IGNOBEL HISTORY

In 2001, Indian doctors Chittaranjan Andrade and B.S. Srihari received the Ig Nobel Public Health prize for their seminal paper: "A Preliminary Survey of Rhinotillexomania in an Adolescent Sample."

In other words, Andrade and Srihari asked and answered the question: Why do teenagers pick their noses?

Among their findings: Nose-picking transcends class distinctions. Less than 4 percent of teens surveyed claimed never to pick their noses. Eighty percent used their fingers exclusively. (The remainder was split between tools like tweezers and pencils.) Less than 5 percent said they ate their nasal debris.

Enough said.

FAR, FAR AWAY...

Voyager 1 has entered the solar system's final frontier. The spacecraft, launched in 1977, is believed to be approximately 8.7 billion miles from the sun, past "termination shock" where the solar wind begins to ebb and into the "heliosheath," a nether region that lies just inside the "heliopause," the boundary marking the edge of the sun's influence.

Remarkably, NASA's Deep Space Network continues to maintain daily radio communications with Voyager 1 and its sister craft, Voyager 2, which is also headed out of the solar system.

CHANGING SPEEDS

Baseball coaches trying to teach Little Leaguers how to bat will often slow down a pitch, thinking that will help the kid better see the ball and connect.

Wrong.

"Children are about three times worse than adults" at judging objects moving at very slow speeds, said Dr. Terri Lewis of McMasters University, one of three Canadian universities involved in the study. Throwing very slow pitches only seems to befuddle a child's motor neurons even more.

The research, published in the journal Vision Research, was based on tests of 5-year-olds and adults in which vertical stripes moved horizontally across a screen.

Both adults and children have trouble perceiving slow motion, Lewis said, but children do far worse than adults, partly because the neurons devoted to judging slow movement are few and still maturing.

To be sure, Lewis advised against throwing kids Nolan Ryan-style fastballs. "Too slow is not good; too fast is no good. But if the child's not doing well, try speeding it up a bit."

ABSTRACTS

Intelligence in Nature

Jeremy Narby

Jeremy Tarcher/Penguin, 267 pages, \$23.95

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Are humans the only truly intelligent species? Does everything else pretty much act upon hard-wired instinct?

Narby suggests the answer is no on both counts, citing among other things that slime mold can solve mazes, bees can handle abstract concepts and parasitic plants called dodder can correctly assess the nutritional content of their victims, then decide whether to stay or move on.

PRIME NUMBERS

15 to 20 Number of cases of reported "roo rage" (kangaroos attacking people) in Australia in the past two years

3 Average number of strokes required to create characters in 115 different alphabets, ancient and modern

3 Biggest number that the human brain recognizes without counting

Sources: The Australian; Mark Changizi and Shinsuke Shimojo, California Institute of Technology

■ Have something to say? Call the Quest hotline at (619) 718-5165.

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