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How Old Is Old Enough?

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This past week the [Supreme Court](#) heard arguments about whether children should ever be sentenced to life without parole for crimes that don't involve murder.

At the heart of the argument lies a vexing question: When should a person be treated as an adult?

The answer, generally, is 18 — the age when the United States, and the rest of the world, considers young people capable of accepting responsibility for their actions. But there are countless deviations from this benchmark, both around the world (the bar mitzvah, for instance), and within the United States.

For drinking, driving, fighting in the military, compulsory schooling, watching an R-rated movie, consenting to sex, getting married, having an abortion or even being responsible for your own finances, the dawn of adulthood in America is all over the place.

And if you think separating the men from the boys (or the women from the girls) is difficult today, tracing the history of America's conception of childhood just complicates things further.

In the 19th century, teenagers were expected to raise their own children and work in the fields. This was true even though 19th-century teenagers were physically and intellectually less advanced than teenagers today. Thanks to better nutrition and more formal schooling, today's children generally reach puberty earlier and are, at least in theory, more informed about the world around them.

In other words, the only thing that is consistent about our notions of when a child becomes an adult is our inconsistency, says Steven Mintz, a historian at [Columbia University](#).

We like to think the threshold is set to protect the welfare of the child, as with statutory rape laws or even movie ratings. But sometimes the cutoff is set for utilitarian reasons: We don't want to hurt young people, but we also don't want young people to hurt us.

In Florida, for instance, the state got tough on teenage criminals when juvenile crime rates jumped during the 1990s, threatening not only residents and visitors, but Florida's bedrock tourism industry itself. Two such juvenile offenders, one who raped a woman when he was 13,

and another who committed armed robbery at 16, brought the appeals heard by the Supreme Court last week.

Sometimes adulthood is set inconsistently for pragmatic reasons. Maybe we accept that 19-year-olds are not yet fully responsible adults for the purpose of driving a rental car, but hey, we still need someone to drive our tanks in Afghanistan.

And often the categories are determined by economics, to benefit whoever is making the rules. Some institutions — say, a law school financial aid office — dictate that a young person is expected to lean on her parents financially until age 30. Others — say, a health insurance company — say that no, a young person is actually expected to stand on her own two feet at age 19.

These contradictions can be discomfiting. It seems unfair to grant a young person the responsibilities of a grownup without granting that young person the rights of a grownup, too. If the court treats a 13-year-old as an adult, should the DVD rental store, too? What about the local bars?

Over the years attempts have been made to align these various ages of majority. The voting age was lowered during the Vietnam War, for example, largely because Americans were uncomfortable with a democracy that forced 18-year-olds to die for their country but denied them suffrage.

But even if you want an elegant, bright line to separate adulthood from childhood, where should it be?

Since at least Aristotle, scholars have tried to answer this question. And as with so many things, the question has migrated largely from the realm of philosophers to that of scientists.

Neurological and behavioral research, led by Laurence Steinberg at [Temple University](#), has been particularly influential in recent years.

Professor Steinberg, who last week won a \$1 million research prize for his work on the development of young people, has found through laboratory experiments that young teenagers seek out risk and have trouble controlling their impulses. That's a very bad combination when it comes to crime, and often a mitigating factor when it comes to judging those crimes.

These studies helped convince the Supreme Court in 2005 that executing convicts for offenses committed before age 18 was unconstitutional, and the same research is now a centerpiece in the current Supreme Court cases about life without parole.

But still, scientific research has in many ways further blurred, rather than clarified, the distinction between childhood and adulthood.

For one, it has shown different people mature at different rates. But more problematically, any given person's abilities also mature at different rates. Young people develop logical reasoning before they develop impulse control, for example. That means kids can recognize bad behavior even before they can overcome the natural urges and social pressures to participate in it.

Because young people develop different skills incrementally, rather than all at once, Professor Steinberg says, it makes sense to dole out rights and responsibilities incrementally. Maybe competent voting is different from competent driving, which is different from competent drinking.

"Ask any parent you know," Mr. Steinberg said, "they'll tell you how confused they are that their kids are so smart in some ways, but still do such stupid, stupid things."