

Teaching Your Child the Art of Delayed Gratification One Marshmallow at A Time
By Dr. Laura Fadell

As parents, the most valuable gift you can give your child is to prepare him or her for life in the real world. This is my mantra to all families I work with in therapy. And I do recognize that this is no small task in today's society. Many parents need guidance on how to wean away from attending to their child's every want, which is extremely difficult when most television commercials aimed at children are promoting some new toy, gadget, or video game. Because our current society promotes *instant gratification*, teaching your child how to *delay gratification* will definitely take work. But the younger they start, the better! In fact, some studies have shown that toddlers are clever enough to begin learning this skill as early as 22 months of age. Now there is no doubt there will be crying and whining. There will also be temper tantrums and meltdowns. But you absolutely will survive it and your child will emerge with a fantastic set of skills that will follow him or her into adulthood.

You're probably wondering where the *marshmallows* come into this discussion. It all started back in the 1960's with a seminal experiment conducted at Stanford University under the direction of Dr. Walter Mischel. In his experiment, Dr. Mischel gathered together about fifty 4-year old children to test their impulses and ability to delay gratification. Each child was placed in a separate room and offered the option to eat one marshmallow right away (set on a plate in front of the child), or to eat two marshmallows if they could wait until the experimenter returned to the room in about 15 minutes. Most of the children initially agreed to wait until the experimenter returned as two marshmallows certainly sounded much better than only one. However, as expected, most of the children could not delay gratification and ate the one marshmallow almost immediately.

The most fascinating part of the study occurred 14 years later when these same children were brought back for a re-evaluation as high school seniors. There were no marshmallows at the second evaluation of course, but rather, the children's character traits, school success, use of drugs and alcohol, and SAT scores were compared. The findings were quite remarkable. The children who delayed gratification in the original experiment by waiting the 15 minutes for the two-marshmallow payoff were found to have higher grades and better test scores (210 points higher on SAT scores!). They also exhibited more assertiveness, self-reliance, dependability, trustworthiness, ability to cope with frustration, academic competence, and the ability to refrain from using alcohol and drugs. The children who opted for the instant gratification (i.e., ate the single marshmallow immediately) did not fare so well on the follow up evaluation. These children were more likely to be indecisive, stubborn, and impulsive. They also tended to be more jealous and envious of others, were poorer students, possessed a lower self-image, were easily frustrated, and had more experience with drugs and alcohol.

Although the Mischel Marshmallow Experiment is over 40 years old, in retrospect it was an eerily accurate foreshadowing of things to come. Take the current situation of many adults who are today "living beyond their means." The percentage of individuals who do

not use their credit cards responsibly is staggering. It is not uncommon for my clients to reveal to me that they are between \$30,000 and \$70,000 in credit card debt. The majority of these people are hard working and well educated, but just couldn't delay gratification long enough to save for what they wanted and chose to pay with plastic. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that there isn't a place for responsible credit use, nor am I excusing the predatory lending practices that often confused and took advantage of consumers. What I am saying, however; is that the earlier one learns the value of waiting for the two marshmallows versus the immediate gratification of eating the one, the more likely they will be to experience academic and personal success in the future.

As parents, it is imperative that we find ways to teach our children to wait for gratification. The best place to start is to practice waiting ourselves. Our children look to us to model appropriate behavior and skills. In doing so, you can give your child an education that will last a lifetime. The skill of self discipline and delayed gratification will keep your children from making poor choices, even in the current age that is driven by technology (e.g., instant messaging, twitter, facebook, email, etc.) and the commercialization of our society. Start today!

Tips for Teaching Your Child Delayed Gratification:

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| 1. | First and foremost is to practice delayed gratification yourself – be a good model. |
| 2. | Do a 500+ piece jigsaw puzzle with your child – but only allow each participant to place 10 pieces each time you work on it. |
| 3. | Obtain a clear piggy bank (or jar of some kind) and allow your child to see the progress they are making toward saving for a particular goal. |
| 4. | Plant bulbs in the fall for spring and together begin to watch for new growth when the weather starts to warm up. |
| 5. | Plan to redecorate your child's room, with one major change occurring each month. |
| 6. | Together with your child, select a book to read one chapter at a time. |
| 7. | Practice the "Marshmallow Test" – using whatever treat your child prefers. |
| 8. | Use your imagination! |