

SELF-CONTROL

Why it's important and how to foster it



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Practica Program Newsletter

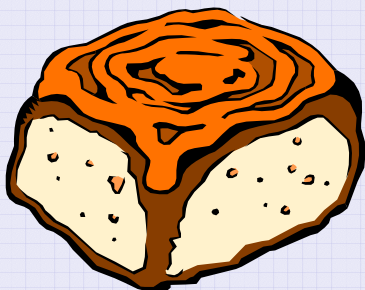
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by Lizette van Huyssteen

The Marshmallow Test

was launched in 1968 by Dr Walter Mischel at a preschool on the Stanford University campus.

He put a series of four-year olds alone in a room and put a marshmallow in front of each child. He proposed that they could either have it straight away, or wait until he came back from running an errand, in which case they could have two marshmallows instead of one.



One third of the children grabbed the treat within seconds, whilst others were able to restrain themselves for 15-20 minutes, until the experimenter returned and rewarded them.

To sustain themselves in their struggle these children employed various tactics. Some covered their eyes so they wouldn't have to stare at the temptation. Some rested their heads in their arms, fidgeted, talked and sang to themselves, even tried to go to sleep!

In follow-up studies when the kids were teenagers, those who were able to 'delay gratification' at four were far superior as students to those who had acted on whim. They were also more socially adept, better able to deal with stress, more self-motivated, confident, trustworthy and better able to put their ideas into words.

As adolescents, those who had grabbed for the marshmallow generally shared a troubled psychological portrait. They were more likely to be described as withdrawn, stubborn and indecisive, easily upset by frustrations, prone to jealousy and envy and to overreact to irritations with a sharp temper. And they were still unable to put off gratification.

Every Child needs Support

Children start off with different inborn temperaments, so some parents will find it more challenging to train their children to develop self-control than others.

Yet, early experiences play such a crucial role in this regard that no parent can sit back and leave this up to chance.

Even though both a baby's parents may be successful, self-motivated and highly dedicated individuals, the child's genetic make-up only acts as a starting point.

This may sound a bit frank, but given the wrong set of experiences during the early years, any baby can grow up to be a marshmallow grabber at age four.

So how can we help our children to develop self-control?

What to do

#1 Utilize your Practica Program

Most parents watch television with their kids when spending time with them, instead of doing 'old-fashioned' things together like doing the dishes, doing the laundry, baking or weeding the garden.

Children, in fact, need these experiences. They need lots of practise in completing practical tasks. Without these experiences it is very difficult for them to learn how to control their impulses and focus on a goal.



While the two of them are doing various practical things together, the parent unknowingly models to the child how to do things step-by-step, organise his thoughts and actions, delay gratification and focus on a goal. The experience is even more valuable to the child if the parent takes time out to describe everything in words – both as it is happening, as well as afterwards. No child will learn these valuable lessons in front of the television or playing with his friends.

The good news is that the activities in your Practica Parents' Guide were specifically designed to make your life easier by supplying you with practical ideas in this regard. Almost every activity idea in the guide involves parent and child doing something together step-by-step. And very few of them will take up more than 10 minutes of your time.

So, if it sounds a bit heavy to you to weed the garden or bake a cake with your child when you get back from the office at 5 in the afternoon, don't despair. Open your Parents' Guide at your child's age group, choose an activity and get going.

Or better yet, choose a few activities for the week ahead of time, take everything you're going to need out of your Practica trunk and keep it where you can easily reach for it.

Note: Each of the Practica activities focus on developing one or more of the 50 school readiness skills, so while you are training your child to do things step-by-step, you're not only developing his emotional intelligence, but his IQ and sport skills as well!

#2 Insist on Manners

I have recently heard of a mom who has decided to no longer insist that her kids say 'please' and 'thank-you' to her. She will continue to encourage them to use these terms when speaking to other people, but she's dealing with 3 pre-schoolers and is sick and tired of nagging them about this all day. She figures this will lighten her load.

This is a good example of a modern-day mother who is pressured to the point where anything that saves time sounds like a good idea, even when it's obviously going to back-fire in her face!

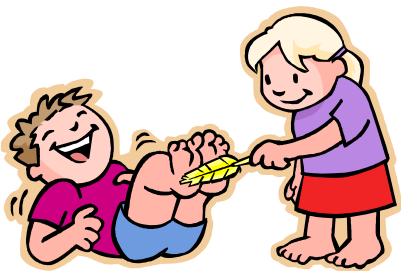
We can probably all relate to this poor mother, so let's look at the facts.

There are 3 things that every parent absolutely HAS to do during the formative years to instill self-control in a child.

You need to: (1) teach your child to obey direct instructions from a parent (2) teach him to deal with frustrations in a socially acceptable way, in other words not to swear, hit, bite or throw tantrums, and (3) insist on good manners.

Obedience, dealing with frustration in a socially acceptable way and good manners can all be described as the 'seeds' of self-control.

If you diligently plant these seeds during the formative years, you can look forward to reaping the fruits later on as your child will blossom into a confident, compassionate, positive and self-disciplined individual.



#3 Give your child a reason to try

We parents often don't notice when our children do things right. Then, to add insult to injury we totally overreact when a child makes a mistake. It's often because we instinctively feel as if WE have failed as parents in these situations. It doesn't make much sense when you think about it, but frankly, we are basically emotional beings and *most* of what we do when we act on our instincts doesn't make sense!

The problem with taking your child's good moments for granted and overreacting to his bad moments is that he ends up feeling powerless and insecure, without any motivation to try and please you. Really, why bother?

If this is you, you need to wrap your head around a few things. Remind yourself that your child is a *separate person*. He is on a life journey of his own with special inborn strengths and weaknesses that may be similar or dissimilar to your own. It is your *privilege* and *duty* to act as a coach and a source of security and encouragement to him on his life journey. He is his own person. You are supporting him as he

develops his own inner wisdom to steer him in future. He is not your 'project'.



With this in mind, the next step is to try and catch your child doing things right so that you can praise him for it.

Then, when he does make a mistake that warrants discipline, and he will, be consistent as you let him experience the appropriate negative consequences. If he throws a tantrum, for instance, send him to his room to go cry until his ready to return to the social circle.

Do not confuse him by reacting differently from day to day, depending on your mood or the company you're with. He needs to see his world as stable and predictable.

To learn self-discipline, children need to have stable secure environments. This enables them to trust that the future will be predictable, that good behaviour will be rewarded and adults will keep their word.
Miranda Devine

#4 Make wise choices about day-care for under three's

A child's mother is usually his 'primary attachment figure', but he can form close and secure relationships with other adults as well. These special people are called 'secondary attachment figures'.

Although a child will prefer to be comforted by his mother when he is frightened or hurt, he will also feel secure and loved in the company of a secondary figure when his mother is not around.

To summarize, if the child had the opportunity to form a secure attachment with his mother before she returns to the workplace, and his caregiver is committed to continue a relationship with him for the duration of the first 3 years of his life, there's no need to worry that her returning to the workplace will have a negative effect on the child's development.

But many children aren't this lucky. In his book, "Raising Babies", Steve Biddulph describes studies that were conducted over a number of years in the UK and USA amongst children who spend their first 3 years in impersonal day care.

In a typical creche of this kind a number of caretakers are assigned to share the responsibility of taking care of a large group of children. The carer-child ratio in these centres is typically 4 to 1, so 20 children may be grouped in a 'class' with 5 carers that work together as a team.

Although there are a number of carers, there is typically no single 'attachment-figure' assigned to each of the children.

In such a facility a child literally spends the largest part of his day without the security of knowing that there is one specific caring adult around that is attuned to his needs, someone that 'belongs' to him and views him as special.

These children seem to be surprisingly calm and compliant, considering that being without an attachment figure is about as scary to under 3's as it would be for an adult to be attacked by a spider.

Nonetheless, under their calm exteriors, most of the children were found to be in a constant state of 'fight or flight'. Tests done on their saliva showed that many of them were experiencing heightened levels of cortisol (the stress hormone) during the hours spent in day-care, often all day.

In an article on the toxic effects of cortisol Robin Balbernie describes the potentially corrosive effect that prolonged high levels of cortisol can have on a developing brain during the first years of life. (Please Google 'Cortisol and the early years by Robin Balbernie' to read this article.)

When the children who had spent their first 3 years in impersonal daycare were assessed at age 5, they were found to be, on average, more defiant, more aggressive and less able to control their impulses. They struggled with self-control.

In response to these and other findings the UK is implementing a new day-care model called 'Sure Start', which seeks to find ways that babies and toddlers can form an emotional bond to their caregivers.

To be sure, all too many working parents do not have the luxury of shopping around to find the 'just perfect' day care for their kids. But for those with choices, I've attached a brochure that is distributed free of charge by the UK government.

We are a creative bunch down here in South Africa. I'm sure we can use these guidelines to each put together our own day care solution for our children, to ensure that they get the very best start in life.

