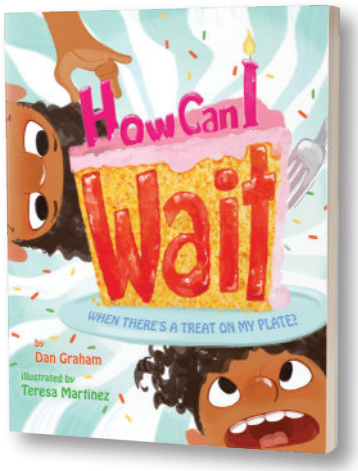
AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Help Them Wait: Strategies to Build Kids' Self-Control



Waiting is hard. Especially when it's something you want. Dr. Walter Mischel conducted the famous Marshmallow Test in the 1960s to understand how children develop the ability to delay gratification. The test shed light on strategies that kids can learn to use to help them delay gratification. *How Can I Wait When There's a Treat on My Plate?* by Dan Graham, PhD explores the challenge of waiting for something you want through the experience of twins, Dell and Pete.

Here's an excerpt from the Note to Parents and Caregivers that provides some strategies to help kids build their self-control.

Strategies to Help Increase Self-control

Turn your face
Temptations can become less powerful if we stop looking at the thing we want.

Take some space
Putting some distance between ourselves and the tempting object can make self-control easier. Distancing ourselves from current emotions can also boost self-control. We can do this by vividly imagining our future emotions. If we concentrate on how a long-term reward will feel later, it can become emotionally powerful enough to help motivate waiting.

Children, and adults, are much more successful in delaying gratification when we can distance ourselves from the emotion of the current situation and get closer to our positive future emotions.

Imagine
We can use imagination to change the way we feel about something tempting. To delay gratification in the story, Pete could have imagined the marshmallow was something else, like a white mouse or a distant cloud. He could have made the marshmallow less appealing if he imagined that bugs had crawled on it. Or he could imagine he was someone else, like a superhero, who was very good at waiting.

Do something fun
Distracting ourselves by doing something we enjoy can help shift our focus from the thing we desire to the fun we are having.

Additional Strategies for Parents and Caregivers

Model self-control

Children often adopt the behaviors that they see caregivers use. You can be a self-control role model by demonstrating not only the strategies described in this book, but also a growth-focused approach to learning such skills. When demonstrating successful self-control, you can mention that you learned these self-control skills and that you are still working to improve them and to learn others.

Promote autonomy

Supporting children's choices and their ability to act independently helps them understand that they have control over delaying gratification. You can do this by leading children part of the way to a solution, but leaving enough for them to do on their own to earn a feeling of accomplishment. For example, when working a puzzle with your child, you could rotate the piece to be properly oriented, but allow the child to put it in place.

Children's autonomy is also enhanced when they can dictate the pace at which an activity, like playing a game or going for a walk, takes place, and when they can actively take part in accomplishing a task. Encouraging your child to dress themselves, although it may take longer than if you helped them, can build their sense of autonomy.

Help children make if/then plans

Advanced planning can help break unwanted if/then relationships. If we can identify what leads us to unwanted behavior, then we can add a new response. If your child saw a treat that was tempting, then they could imagine it was something else–like a bug–so that it was no longer tempting. When we practice these if/then plans, we begin to change our automatic responses.

- If I want something sweet to eat, then I will eat a piece of fruit.
- If I feel angry, then I will silently count backward from 100.

Or combine if/then strategies with imaging:

- If I see a sweet treat that I shouldn't eat, then I'll imagine that it's just a picture of the treat.

Delaying gratification and exercising are life-long challenges. Helping your child identify and practice strategies can build a foundation for success in the future.

This Article's Author

Dan Graham, PhD, is a faculty member in applied social and health psychology at Colorado State University. His research focuses on promoting healthy eating and physical activity. He lives in Colorado.