

It's Hard to Wait — But Worth Learning

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Mary and Jill are both typical, intelligent preschoolers. They are given two choices: one piece of candy now or two pieces of candy if they wait for an unspecified amount of time. Mary decides to wait while Jill jumps up and down and demands the candy right away.

Revisit Mary and Jill in their teens. You may find that Mary is destined to score 210 points higher on her SATs and will be less vulnerable to the lures of alcohol and smoking than her impatient peer, Jill.*

This is among the findings of researchers of delayed gratification and frustration tolerance, otherwise known as patience. In a society where we can have our heart's desire at the click of a mouse, this classic value is losing ground. For children, the negative effects are just coming to light — from lower academic achievement to addictive behaviors, depression and an inability to learn from mistakes.

Patience-Building Ideas

Children who can express themselves through words and gestures are less likely to show frustration. Build toddler communication skills by reading to them, teaching basic signing, and speaking clearly. Help them sort out feelings by physically getting down on their level, making eye contact and speaking quietly about what might be troubling them. Sometimes, a little time and attention is all they need.

For older children, show the value of patience and responsibility by delaying gratification. They may have dessert after eating their dinner. They may play on the computer after cleaning their room. Help them anticipate a fun activity by counting the number of “sleeps” or days before it occurs.

If you give allowances for chores, help your children save up for a special toy or outing. Building this connection between work, earnings and reward will benefit them long after the toy is forgotten.

How to Handle Meltdowns

There will be times when children aren't equipped to be patient. A missed nap, hunger or too much sugar and overstimulation can lead to short tempers and meltdowns.

Schedule errands when young children are well rested and fed. If an activity begins to frustrate them, distract them with a new activity or toy. Give older children a task during errands to build their patience and confidence. Avoid giving in to their demands for treats or toys every time you're out and about.

Time-outs are also effective for removing older children from the frustration-inducing situation until they calm down. Teach them to count backwards from 10 or to focus on their breathing until they feel ready to re-join the activity.

Patience Begins with Parents

If you notice your child expressing frustration in ways that seem familiar, think about your own reaction to stressful situations. Since children are great imitators, patience can be mentored.

Parents who show restraint and patience in the face of temptation and adversity — a rude driver, a long line at the post office, a delayed purchase — will be rewarded in the future by children who know that good things can come to those who wait.

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* Study by Dr. Walter Mischel, Prof. Psychology, Columbia University, NY