How Culture Affects the ‘Marshmallow Test’

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In 2017 my family and I moved from Boulder, Colo., to live in Kyoto, Japan. My kids immediately noticed many cultural differences. Japanese homes typically do not have central heating, for one. We arrived during an unusually cold February, so my older child would curl up under the kotatsu—a low dining table with a heater affixed underneath—to get warm. After enrolling in the neighborhood elementary school, my kids saw how their peers cleaned classrooms and served food, unlike in the U.S., where specialized workers handle each task.

One of their most memorable lessons occurred during their first school lunch. They lined up with their classmates to be served, carried their lunch tray to their seat and started eating. The other students quickly began shaking their head and waving their hands. My children didn’t speak Japanese, but the message was clear; they stopped eating. After every student in the classroom sat down with their food, the students called out in unison, “Itadakimasu”—literally “I humbly receive” and akin to “bon appétit.” Then they began eating together. The next day, my kids waited to eat along with all their classmates.

When my children described this situation, it got me thinking. Many studies have looked at the ability to delay a snack as a measure of self-control—and found that such delayed gratification foretells a brighter future. Was it possible that children in Japan had a special advantage?

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