

# The Challenge of Waiting, in Any Culture

July 28, 2022

Fifty years ago, Walter Mischel and colleagues wanted to measure how well young children could resist temptation. He invented the famous “marshmallow” test. Children could either eat one marshmallow right away or wait 15 minutes and get two marshmallows. Four-year-olds agonized over the decision, sitting on their hands or turning their heads away from the tempting treat, but still most of them gave in. As researchers tracked the children over the following decades, it turned out, remarkably, that the children who waited longer also did better in school and life later on.

But why did some children wait longer than others? It’s easy to think that “will” or “self-control” is an intrinsic ability, a psychological superpower, and that some children just have more of it than others. But a [new study](#) in the journal Psychological Science by Yuko Munakata at the University of California at Davis, Kaichi Yanaoka at the University of Tokyo and colleagues suggests that this is the wrong picture. Our ability to resist temptation may reflect habits and social rules as much as personal willpower.

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