

Children Will Wait to Impress Others—Another Twist on the Classic Marshmallow Test

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If you asked people to name a famous psychology study, the [“marshmallow test”](#) would probably come out near the top of the list. In this task, young children are told they can immediately get a small reward (one marshmallow) or wait to get a bigger reward (two marshmallows). Researchers have shown that the ability to wait is associated with a range of positive life outcomes, including higher SAT scores more than a decade later.

A new study published in the journal [Psychological Science](#) expands on this earlier research and shows that young children will wait nearly twice as long for a reward if they are told their teacher will find out how long they wait.

“The classic marshmallow test has shaped the way researchers think about the development of self-control, which is an important skill,” said Gail Heyman (University of California San Diego), lead author on the study. and “Our new research suggests that in addition to measuring self-control, the task may also be measuring another important skill: awareness of what other people value. In fact, one reason for the predictive power of delay-of-gratification tasks may be that the children who wait longer care more about what people around them value, or are better at figuring it out.”

For their study, Heyman and her colleagues from UC San Diego and Zhejiang Sci-Tech University conducted two experiments with a total of 273 3- to 4-year-old children in China.

The researchers told the children that they could earn a small reward immediately or wait for a bigger one. Children were assigned to one of three conditions: a “teacher” condition, in which they were told that their teacher would find out how long they wait; a “peer” condition, in which they were told that a classmate would find out how long they wait; or a “standard” condition that had no special instructions.

Children waited longer in the teacher and peer conditions than in the standard condition, and they waited about twice as long in the teacher condition as compared to the peer condition.

The researchers interpreted the results to mean that when children decide how long to wait, they make a cost-benefit analysis that takes into account the possibility of getting a social reward in the form of a boost to their reputation. These findings suggest that the desire to impress others is strong and can motivate human behavior starting at a very young age.

“The children waited longer in the teacher and peer conditions even though no one directly told them that it’s good to wait longer,” said Heyman. “We believe that children are good at making these kinds of inferences because they are constantly on the lookout for cues about what people around them value. This may take the form of carefully listening to the evaluative comments that parents and teachers make, or noticing what kinds of people and topics are getting attention in the media.”

Reference

Ma, F. et al. (2020). Delay of Gratification as Reputation Management. *Psychological Science*, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0956797620939940>