

# INSIGHTS

by Michael Grose - Australia's No 1 parenting educator



## Would your child eat the marshmallow?

**Impulse control is one of the keys to being successful in life. It doesn't take a study to make that obvious.**

Between 1968 and 1974 Stanford University researcher Michael Mischel conducted an unusual experiment that demonstrated the importance of delaying immediate gratification to lifelong success.

In a long-term study Mischel, offered 4 year-olds a marshmallow, and told them that if they could wait for the experimenter to return after ten to fifteen minutes, he would reward their patience with another marshmallow.

Control your impulses and delay gratification for a greater reward was the idea here! An interesting dilemma for any 44 year-old, let alone a 4 year-old.

Mischel found there were **three groups** of kids. About one-third ate the marshmallow within the first few seconds. They didn't even consider waiting. Down the hatch! Another third tried to wait, but couldn't last the distance. Another third practised some old-fashioned self-discipline and didn't eat the marshmallow. That's quite an effort!

Mischel followed the 400 kids involved in the experiment over a 14 year period and found that there was a high correlation between the results of the study and how each group performed in high school.

The **marshmallow gobblers** were more troubled, and had difficulty subordinating immediate impulses to achieve long-term goals. When it came time to study, they were easily distracted and less likely to follow-through and finish school.

The **marshmallow resisters** were more motivated, educationally more successful and more emotionally intelligent. Their end-of-high-school marks were higher than the other groups marks.

### So what's the point?

I think it's a great reminder for all parents that the Rolling Stones were right when they sang all those years ago **'You can't always get what you want.'**

Okay, Mick Jagger wasn't thinking about kids when he belted out those lyrics, but he may as well have been.

Impulse control is one of the keys to being successful in life. It doesn't take a study to make that obvious. Those who can put off immediate gratification or the quick fix to work toward a bigger goal will always be successful in life.

Always have been, always will. It takes self-discipline to save, rather than use a credit card. It takes self-discipline to get up in the cold each morning to exercise rather than stay in bed. Impulse control pays off... in the long run.

Modern parenting can be detrimental to developing impulse control.

Let's face it, in this era of smaller families we have greater propensity to gratify kids' needs immediately. To be blunt, to avoid disappointing kids, I see some adults bending over backwards to give them what they want.

### Impulse control is largely about self-discipline and character.

While some kids are more naturally prone to delay gratification than others, some parenting styles are more likely to promote impulse control than others. Parenting does have an impact!

Here are four strategies to encourage your children to delay gratification, practise self-discipline and build character along the way:

- 1. Just say NO!** You may need to grit your teeth with some tough nuts, but so be it!
- 2. Give kids pocket-money and teach them how to set goals.** Being a child's personal ATM doesn't encourage impulse control.
- 3. Help kids focus on bigger rewards.** When kids can see that a BIGGER reward is attainable they are more likely to strive to get it.
- 4. Establish rituals and rites of passage.** 'You get your big bike when you are ten' is a type of ritual that parents used in the past to make children wait. These rituals and rites of passage give parents strength to resist pester power and teach kids that good things come to those who wait.

There is no doubt that saying No to kids is hard work as it is in their job descriptions to push parental boundaries.

It is in their long term best interests to realise that they "can't always get what you want..."

It's worth remembering the following line to that Stones Classic was, **"you can try sometimes, you can try".**

Maybe Jagger was singing about kids after all!

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