

Can the kids wait? Today's youngsters able to delay gratification longer than those of the 1960s

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Some 50 years since the original "marshmallow test" in which most preschoolers gobbled up one treat immediately rather than wait several minutes to get two, today's youngsters may be able to delay gratification significantly longer to get that extra reward. This was the key finding of a new study published by the American Psychological Association.

"Although we live in an instant gratification era where everything seems to be available immediately via smartphone or the internet, our study suggests that today's kids can delay gratification longer than children in the 1960s and 1980s," said University of Minnesota psychologist Stephanie M. Carlson, Ph.D., lead researcher on the study. "This finding stands in stark contrast with the assumption by adults that today's children have less self-control than previous generations."

The original [marshmallow test](#), as it's come to be

called, was conducted by researchers led by Walter Mischel, Ph.D., then at Stanford University. It involved a series of experiments in which children ages 3-5 years were offered one treat that they could eat immediately (for example, a marshmallow, cookie or pretzel) or a larger treat (another marshmallow, cookie or pretzel) if they waited. Researchers then left the room to see how long the children would wait and watched from behind a one-way mirror.

The ability to delay gratification in early childhood has been associated with a range of positive outcomes in adolescence and beyond. These include greater academic competence and higher SAT scores, healthier weight, effective coping with stress and frustration, social responsibility and positive relations with peers.

Carlson and her colleagues looked at results from the original marshmallow test, as well as replications conducted in the 1980s and early 2000s. In defiance of expectations, kids who participated in their studies in the 2000s waited an average of two minutes longer (during a 10-minute period) than those from the 1960s, and one minute longer than those tested in the 1980s.

Interestingly, today's adults thought that children nowadays would be more impulsive and less able to wait, Carlson found. She and her associates conducted an online survey of 358 U.S. adults who were asked how long they thought children today would wait for a larger treat compared with kids in the 1960s. Approximately 72 percent thought children today would wait less long, and 75 percent believed that children today would have less self-control.

"Our findings serve as an example of how our intuition can be wrong and how it's important to do

research," said co-author Yuichi Shoda, Ph.D., of the University of Washington. "If we hadn't been systematically collecting data on how long children wait in this type of experiment, and if we hadn't analyzed the data, we would not have found these changes. They pose an interesting and important question for future research to understand: Are the changes we found in our sample unique, or do they apply more broadly to children from more diverse backgrounds? What is causing the change, and what are the mechanisms through which these changes occur?"

"That ability to wait did not appear to be due to any change in methodology, setting or geography, or the age, sex or socioeconomic status of the children," Carlson said. "We also took steps to ensure none of the children in the 2000s group were on medication to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder at the time of the study."

The researchers offered several possible explanations for why children in the 2000s waited longer than those in prior decades. They noted a statistically significant increase in IQ scores in the last several decades, which has been linked to rapidly changing technologies, increased globalization and corresponding changes in the economy. At a more psychological level, increases in abstract thought, which are associated with digital technology, may contribute to executive function skills such as delay of gratification, they said.

Another explanation may be society's increased focus on the importance of early education, according to Carlson. In 1968, only 15.7 percent of all 3- and 4-year-olds in the United States attended preschool. That number increased to more than 50 percent by the year 2000. The primary objective of preschool also changed from largely custodial care to school readiness in the 1980s, including an emphasis on self-control as a foundation for educational success. Parenting also has changed in ways that help promote the development of executive function, such as being more supportive of children's autonomy and less controlling, the researchers noted.

"We believe that increases in abstract thought,

along with rising preschool enrollment, changes in parenting and, paradoxically, cognitive skills associated with screen technologies, may be contributing to generational improvements in the ability to delay gratification," Carlson said. "But our work is far from over. Inequality persists in developmental outcomes for children in poverty."

Walter Mischel, of Columbia University, who also co-authored this paper, noted that "while the results indicate that the sampled [children's](#) ability to delay is not diminished on the marshmallow test, the findings do not speak to their willingness to delay gratification when faced with the proliferation of temptations now available in everyday life."

The study was published in the APA journal *Developmental Psychology*.

More information: "Cohort Effects in Children's Delay of Gratification," by Stephanie M. Carlson, PhD, University of Minnesota; Yuichi Shoda, PhD, University of Washington; Ozlem Ayduk, PhD, University of California-Berkeley; J. Lawrence Aber, PhD, New York University; Catherine Schaefer, Penn State University; Anita Sethi, PhD, The Happy Montessori School; Nicole Wilson, PhD, University of Washington; Philip K. Peake, PhD, Smith College; and Walter Mischel, PhD, Columbia University. *Developmental Psychology*, published June 25, 2018.

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