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The Marshmallow Test

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

Self-control will be a valuable acquisition to the graces of the Spirit, and parents should teach their children, by precept and example, this precious lesson of patience and self-control. —Manuscript Releases, Vol. 19

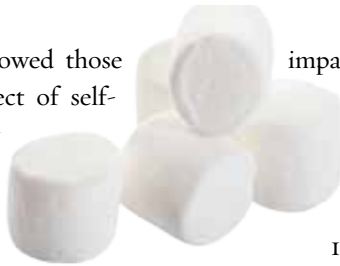
In a Sanford University research project, 600 four-year-olds were given a marshmallow (or Oreo cookie or pretzel stick, if they preferred) and told that if they wanted to eat it right away that was okay. However, if they waited while the adult went to get something, they then could have two. The purpose was to understand when the control of delayed gratification develops in children. Some ate the marshmallow immediately, others put it off for a few minutes but couldn't wait the 15 minutes, and about one-third saved their marshmallow until the adult returned so they could get two.

A follow-up study 15 years later showed those who had delayed gratification (an aspect of self-discipline) were, as teenagers, personally effective, self-assertive and better able to cope with frustrations of life. They were less likely to freeze or regress under stress, or become rattled or disorganized when pressured. They embraced challenges instead of giving up. They were self-reliant and confident, trustworthy and dependable. They took initiative and plugged into projects.

Another follow-up study showed the ability to delay gratification also correlated with significantly higher SAT scores. A 2011 study of the same participants indicated this characteristic remains with the person for life.

It's an everyday challenge for parents and children to develop the skills of self-discipline. Children learn very young. Many factors impact a person's ability to say "no" to him/herself, but parents have a huge impact on a child's ability to become self-aware, self-reliant and self-disciplined.

Self-discipline is two times stronger a prediction of school success as intelligence. David Walsh, a leading authority on children, teens, parenting, family life, and the impact of technology on children's health and development, has identified a growing epidemic: Discipline Deficit Disorder or DDD, with symptoms including distraction, disrespect,



impatience, sense of entitlement and self-centeredness. He identifies self-discipline as our ability to say "no" to ourselves.

What's a parent to do? First, face our own challenges in regard to self-discipline. Romans 17:15 acknowledges it's not our natural inclination to live a self-disciplined life. Isaiah 26:3, 4 identifies the benefit of self-discipline — perfect peace and the recognition of mutual trust. Isaiah 40:31 promises that by waiting on the Lord (delayed gratification) positive things will follow. James 1:19 gives the example of being swift to hear, slow to speak and slow to wrath.

We need to have a parenting plan, set reasonable limits, and be consistent. Short-term relief from giving a child what he wants in the moment can result in paying a long-term price. Some children learn that "no" doesn't really mean "no." It's a signal to escalate and, shortly, they will get what they want. We need to learn the lesson of the marshmallow test — that there is an amazingly strong correlation between being able to delay gratification at preschool age and experience success in school and in life as one matures.

Susan Murray is a professor emerita of behavioral sciences at Andrews University, and she is a certified family life educator and licensed marriage and family therapist.

Author's Note: You may want to check out "The Marshmallow Experiment — Instant Gratification," "The Mature Marshmallow Test" and "Dr. Walsh Marshmallow WCCO Segment" at <http://www.youtube.com>.