

Learning Self-Control

In order to thrive, clearly a life-skill all adults and children need to develop is self-control. In a previous article we described Stanford University's late 1960's longitudinal Marshmallow Experiment led by US psychologist Walter Mischel. More recently, a similar study in New Zealand following 1000 children over a thirty year period concluded that the level of self-control children have as five year olds is one of the greatest predictors of their health, wealth and success as adults.

How can self-control be defined? It is about being able to manage emotions and subsequent behaviours to achieve a goal which is not immediate. This means controlling emotional outbursts, delaying gratification, controlling impulses, pushing through frustration, persevering with a challenge and waiting patiently for a turn.

Practising self-control is paramount for well entrenched skills in adolescence; a stage when teens are individuating, making more of their own decisions many of which may have potentially harmful effects particularly related to health, behaviour (impacting study, work, relationships) and money. Teens with high self-control are able to calculate the risks and tell the difference between a dangerous risk and one that they can learn from and grow through.

Here are some ideas to consider when helping your child develop self-control:

- Provide opportunities for your child to decide whether to exercise self-control or give in to temptation. Perhaps offer to boost savings when they reach a certain amount of pocket money. Making a visual chart/tally so they can check progress. Every time a child voluntarily gives up something they want for something more, they build neural pathways in the frontal cortex that are associated with self-discipline. This only happens when the child chooses to forgo the thing he/she wanted, not when he/she is forced. They are then practising self-control. The more situations a child is put in where they have to practise self-control, the more they will be strengthening this all important skill.
- Manage the circumstances of your child's routines so that they are not unnecessarily overwhelmed, overscheduled or tired. These conditions/stressors are very challenging for children and they then find themselves "losing it" testing any self-control that could have been exercised.
- If heading to the shops and the plan is not to purchase much wanted items, set your child up for success before leaving home. For example, "You might see special things that you really want, but we're not buying any treats today. If you see something you can put it on your list to save for."

- For teens, the idea of their future self, reflecting on decisions made in their teens may help them to make responsible choices. "What would your future self want you to do right now?"
- Self-control means having what it takes to put the fun things on hold while the must do's are worked on. Having jobs/chores to do at home provides the opportunities they need to learn about delaying fun and in some cases provides opportunities to earn some pocket money. Never feel guilty about asking children to wait - you are really helping them to learn the skills of self-control.
- Mindfulness strengthens the pre-frontal cortex that is the part of the brain that is responsible for planning, organising, problem solving and resisting impulses. Self-control is developed through being calm and considering options and also by building the capacity to let thoughts and feelings come and go without acting on them. The Smiling Mind App is a tool commonly used in schools to help children to relax and be in the moment.

All children will get frustrated and impulsive from time to time. Self-control is built over time and it's a quality that can be strengthened, whatever the age. As psychologist and Marshmallow Experiment leader, Walter Mischel says,

"We can't control the world, but we can control how we respond to it. Once you realize that willpower is just a matter of learning how to control your attention and thoughts, you can really begin to increase it." The important thing is to provide the opportunities that will guide each child to be the remarkable human they are capable of being.

Gai Bath and Andrea Maver

SMC Counsellors

gbath@smc.tas.edu.au

amaver@smc.tas.edu.au