Help kids develop impulse control

by Michael Hawton

How many of you have been in a situation where, after being on a diet for a few days, a colleague comes to work selling chocolates for a fundraiser? Do you give in and buy a chocolate? It's for a good cause after all. Or do you resist?

Austrian psychologist Walter Mischel conducted an experiment in 1965 involving four-year-olds and marshmallows. Mischel invited individual children into a room where a marshmallow was on the table. The man who brought the child into the room explained that he had to step out for a couple of minutes and if the child wanted to, he or she could eat the marshmallow. However, if the child could wait until the man returned before eating the marshmallow, they would be given an extra marshmallow – so two instead of one. Sure enough, some children couldn't wait and ate the marshmallow before the man returned, while others were able to resist the temptation in order to earn the reward.

Mischel followed the subjects of his experiment into adult life. He discovered that those who had displayed the ability to delay gratification as young children grew to be more socially competent, self-assertive and dependable. And they performed better at school.

Other studies have shown similar results: individuals who had self-control when young later do better on a whole range of variables.

Mischel initially believed that the ability to delay gratification was a result of a certain personality type. However, in a subsequent study with Albert Bandura, Mischel placed children who had not shown the ability to delay gratification in contact with adult role models who demonstrated some delaying tactics. The adults engaged in some kind of self-distracting activity or put their heads down for a nap. The children who observed these adults later showed the ability to delay gratification themselves. That is, they had *learnt* the ability to resist temptation from their experience with the adult role models.

Impulse control is a skill

The implications for parents are clear. If our children display characteristics such as impulsivity, we can help them learn more beneficial ways to deal with the world. Parents can role model the appropriate behaviours and talk to their children about the strategies they used.

Two main factors seem to influence the ability of both children and adults to delay gratification. Both are more likely to delay gratification if they trust they will eventually get the better reward. That is, they will be more inclined to hold out if they believe the person or organisation that is offering the reward is likely to follow through.

Second, people will generally only display delaying behaviours if they have the skills to turn what might be tedious waiting time into a more enjoyable (or at least tolerable) time. In the original experiment, children who delayed eating the marshmallow showed a range of behaviours including turning their chairs away from the table, singing, inventing games with their hands and feet and talking to themselves to help them pass the time.

Emotional intelligence is the key to impulse control

Parents can help younger children delay gratification by distracting them. Many parents find themselves doing this instinctively. When four-year-old Holly nags for snacks just before dinner, they give her a job to do. However, be aware that children younger than about four generally haven't yet developed the parts of the brain that allow them to delay gratification of their own accord.

Older children need to learn how to distract themselves by redirecting their emotions. This is more likely to happen if children understand that emotions don't always need to be acted upon. Older children who are able to focus on the bigger picture will be able make choices that allow them to achieve their goals.

In the book *Influencer*, the authors contend that many social skills, including the ability to delay gratification, can be learnt. This is good news for most of us! They maintain that while we accept that practice improves performance in sport, music and technical areas, few people would think to practice the skills needed to delay gratification, be a better team member or to negotiate with a boss. However the authors say we should. They claim that with the right kind of practice, we can all learn to be more socially competent.

Note: *Influencer* by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, David Maxfield, Ron McMillan and Al Switzler is available through Parentshop.

You can attend our upcoming webinar, Developing Emotional Intelligence in Children, at no cost!

As your school is a Parenting Ideas Schools member, you can attend our upcoming webinar Developing Emotional Intelligence in Children with Michael Hawton at no cost! Use the voucher code below to register for the webinar valued at $37 per person.

About the webinar
In this webinar, Michael will explore the nature of emotional intelligence and how parents can act in ways to develop their child's emotional intelligence.

When
Monday, October 29, 2018 7:30 PM – 8:30 PM AEDT

Price
This webinar is $37 per person to attend, and is free of charge to families at schools that have a Parenting Ideas membership.

parenting ideas

How to use the voucher

1. Go to www.parentingideas.com.au/product/developing-emotional-intelligence-in-children/
2. Click 'Add to cart' and proceed to the cart when you are ready.
3. Enter the coupon code Emotions and click 'Apply'. Your discount of $37 will be applied to the order.

Your Parenting Ideas Webinar Voucher

Webinar: Developing Emotional Intelligence in Children

Guest Speaker: Michael Hawton

29 October 2018 - 07:30pm

VOUCHER CODE
EMOTIONS

VALID UNTIL 29 NOVEMBER 2018

DOWNLOAD PDF VERSION

Attend this webinar at no cost

Valued at $37

parenting ideas schools

Michael Hawton

Michael Hawton is a psychologist, speaker and founder of Parentshop, a leader in lifelong behavioural change. Michael works extensively with teachers, parents and professionals in the areas of emotion coaching, difficult conversations and behavioural change. Visit parentshop.com.au to find out more