

Help Your Child Develop Self Control

Editor's Pick. Written by Laura Markham.

We can think of self-discipline as the ability to manage ourselves to reach our goals. In Walter Mischel's Marshmallow experiments, he tests how long a child can resist eating a treat, if it means she will then get two treats that she really wants. In other words, does the child have the self-discipline to control her impulses to meet her goal?

The bad news is that our self-control as a four year old seems to predict our self-discipline later in life.

The good news is that about 30% of four year olds can already manage their emotions, anxiety and impulses well enough to resist temptation, at least some of the time. That's important, because managing behavior is essential to accomplish our goals, from getting along on the playground to holding a job.

So what can you do to help your child learn self-discipline? There's a common misconception, popularized by Pam Druckerman in [Bringing Up Bébé](#), that kids in France learn better self-control than American kids because they're trained early to wait for their parents' attention and to follow rigid schedules. But there's zero evidence of this. Walter Mischel has apparently never conducted the Marshmallow test with French kids, so there's no evidence that they'd do better on it than American kids. And even if they did, we wouldn't know what part of French parenting caused it. Finally, since there are no studies asserting that French adults are more self-disciplined than American adults, the whole idea is clearly suspect! But I do think Druckerman has a point about waiting, which I'll explain.

Let's look at the steps to developing self-control.

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