

Delayed Gratification

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I have been practicing psychotherapy for over twenty years and the longer I am in practice the more things I hear myself repeating every day. This is not due to old age, senility or laziness. It's because certain principles of human nature are true and will always be true. One of these that I have repeated recently is the following.

Anyone who is successful in life has learned to work now and be rewarded later. This is known as "delayed gratification". This is an important principle worth teaching your children if you want them to succeed in life.

Our parents' generation told us "anything worth having is worth waiting for". Unfortunately the modern life we are leading has many "built-in" enemies of delayed gratification: the Internet, cell phones, text messaging, video games, Twitter, etc. All of these, and many more, serve to provide us with instant gratification. The Internet can be accessed 24 hours a day. Cell phones make it possible to reach anyone at anytime. Video games provide children with instant points or progress with the push of a few buttons. It is no wonder that our children are growing up with little patience and expectations that they want to be met immediately.

My parents had a ceramic plaque in the kitchen that read "never hurry, never worry". Relax, slow down and enjoy life. Some things cannot be gotten immediately. We would be wise to teach our children these life lessons.

Teach your children the value of hard work by letting them gradually, over a long period of time, work toward earning a privilege or goal they want to achieve. For example, if they want to have a friend spend the night on the weekend set up a plan to earn that privilege. Their goal may be to meet proper academic and behavioral expectations in school, complete homework properly and follow your directions at home.

Instead of buying them what they want, teach them the difference between a "want" and a "need". Have them perform chores or set behavioral goals to meet over a period of days or weeks to have them earn what they "want". For example, if a child wants a new toy you would agree upon how to earn it. You could then cut a picture of the toy into five pieces. Each time the child meets an incremental goal you could give them another piece of the picture. When they have earned all of the pieces, they have earned the new toy.

By teaching our children to delay gratification we are helping them to succeed now and later in life. They will face less stress and less frustration as they learn that some things take time and "anything worth having is worth waiting for".