

Marshmallows and “Grit”

In the 1960s Walter Mischel conducted a fascinating experiment in which he took 4 year old children and put a marshmallow on a plate in front of them. He then told them that the marshmallow was theirs, but if they waited to eat it until he returned he would give them a second marshmallow as a bonus for waiting. He left the room and the children were observed and timed as to how long they waited before eating the marshmallow. The most fascinating thing about this study is not that some children could wait the entire time he was gone (10–15 minutes), but the longitudinal study that followed the children throughout their early educational lives. It demonstrated that the amount of time a child could wait was an almost direct predictor of future academic and personal success. Fourteen years later Mischel found that the "grabbers" suffered low self-esteem and were viewed by others as stubborn, prone to envy, and easily frustrated. The "waiters" had better coping skills, were more socially competent, self-assertive, trustworthy, dependable, academically successful, and scored about 210 points higher on the SATs. In fact, the ability to delay gratification through self-discipline (as measured by the “Marshmallow Test”) was a better predictor of future success than any other measurement.

Today, Martin Seligman and Angela Duckworth are referring to studies such as the one above as they study “grit” and how it may be developed in children. Briefly, the research suggests that no more than 25 percent of the differences between individuals in job performance - and no more than a third of the differences in grade point average - can be attributed to IQ. Perseverance, self-discipline, hard work, and other similar attributes that they have bundled under the broad concept of “grit”, along with creativity and luck, contribute to the other 75 percent. In other words it's not only talent that matters, but also character; and it seems to matter more. Their research indicates that “grit” and intelligence are completely independent traits, and suggests that schools and parents should be more interested in developing “grit”, rather than preoccupying themselves with the almost constant measurement of intellectual and other abilities and aptitudes. The research of Carol Dweck indicates that one impediment to developing “grit” may be the seemingly innocent act of parents' indulgent praising of a child's intelligence.

An article in the December 2005 issue of Psychology Today referred to Louis Terman, an early researcher in “giftedness”, who reported that “persistence in the accomplishment of an end” was a major factor that distinguished the most successful from the less successful. More recently, Joseph Renzulli, director of the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented has identified "task commitment" (i.e. perseverance, endurance, and hard work) as one of the three essential components of giftedness along with ability and creativity. In fact, he says the evidence that these non-intellectual factors are critical to giftedness is "nothing short of overwhelming.”

As we make our New Year's resolutions let's resolve to have the self-discipline to focus on developing “grit” in our children. After all, it was one of New Jersey's most famous citizens, Thomas Edison, who said, “Many of life's failures are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up.”