

## Banking on **SELF CONTROL** By Lauren Porter



**S**elf control is associated through the literature with all things positive.

But is there more to this story than meets the eye?

According to the research, people with high levels of self control make better choices and live healthier lives. People rated with high levels of self control are less likely to commit crimes, more likely to be employed and be physically healthier. Our very own Dunedin Longitudinal Study shows the myriad of positive influences self control can have on a child's life 30 years down the track. With self control we are more likely to say no to risky sex, problem gambling and even that extra piece of cake.

The time-honoured experiment with children involves not cake but marshmallows. Picture this: A young child is sitting at a table. In front of him is a plate with one marshmallow on it. He is told that the researcher who

put the marshmallow there is now going to leave the room. If he waits until she returns and does not eat the marshmallow in front of him, he will be rewarded with two marshmallows to eat. He may also choose to eat the one marshmallow on his plate while the woman is out of the room. If he does this, he will not receive a second marshmallow. The children in this experiment are not coaxed or encouraged. They are given the two options as neutral choices. The decision is theirs. In the literature, children who wait and receive the second marshmallow as a reward are rated with a greater ability to delay gratification and, hence, higher levels of self control. As in other research, more self control is equated with better outcomes. The ability to wait for a bigger or better reward instead of impulsively acting is obviously similar to the behaviours needed for many realms of success.

To examine only the behaviour, however, is to paint an incomplete picture. You can think of self control like currency. You want a big bank account. You want to have reserves to draw upon and you want the means to put the money in the bank. But the bank balance alone answers only one half of the equation. There is another question that is equally, if not more, relevant. How did the money get there?

For some, self control is a trust fund. It is an inherited fortune. For others, it's a rags-to-riches story; money that is scabbled for, hard fought and hard won. And for others, it's counterfeit. The money isn't really there to spend.

### What do I mean?

Well, the 'trust fund' children gain self control through a relational inheritance. Growing up in a family web of trusted and loving relationships teaches these children that the world is largely safe and predictable. They believe in their goodness and competency. Furthermore, they believe in the goodness and competency of others. They can wait for a second marshmallow because they trust the adult in charge. They can wait for a second marshmallow because they are not starving. They can wait for a second marshmallow because they have been helped and supported to achieve challenges.

For the rags-to-riches children, they have acquired self control without inheritance. In other words, they have learned to put their desires aside and not act impulsively but it has come in spite of - not because of - warm, loving relationships. For these children, they may wait for a second marshmallow because they fear punishment. They may wait for a second marshmallow because they want to be liked. They may wait for a second marshmallow because they do not want to be seen as weak.

The behaviour looks the same, but the motivation is not. Every adult has had both experiences. One day we turn down that piece of chocolate cake because we are feeling really good about ourselves and we feel empowered to make the healthy choice. Another day we turn down that cake because we feel depressed or fat and therefore undeserving. As with children, the decision that is made from within a framework of positive self-regard is unlikely to have a negative impact. But even the 'right' decision within a context of self-derision can hurt.

Of course, there is also the scenario where we do not show restraint. Such is the case with many of the children studied. These children do not really have full bank accounts. They may have the desire to receive two marshmallows, but it is counterfeit money. They can't cash in. Just as with the motivations underpinning the children who wait, the motivations of the children who do not are also critically important. These children may not wait because they do not trust. They might not wait because they have not been supported to attempt challenge. They may not wait because they do not feel

balanced within themselves and competent. They might not wait because they do not feel worth it. Why they do not wait then becomes critically important to transforming their currency from something fake to something they can cash in on.

There is no doubt that self control is a critical piece of healthy functioning. Self control is a behavioural concept and as such confers only as much understanding as behaviour can. Once the actions are put within an emotional-relational context, much more meaning emerges. If we really seek to understand, support and nurture our children and families, meaning makes a world of difference.

#### **Further reading:**

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#### **about the author.....**



*Lauren Porter is the Co-director of the Centre for Attachment, a family therapist and a PhD student at the University of Canterbury. She obtained her Masters Degree in Social Work from New York University, USA in 1995 and has since been dedicated to working with families, children and adolescents in the field of mental health counselling and training. Lauren has worked in a wide range of settings and communities, including Germany and the US, in addition to New Zealand. Her experience has focused on families struggling with issues pertaining to conflict and trauma. She served for 8 years on the Infant Mental Health Association Aotearoa New Zealand (IMHAANZ) Executive Committee and is a member of Brainwave's Scientific Advisory Committee. Lauren is the mother of two children.*