

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Cognitive and Attentional Mechanisms in Delay of Gratification

Mischel, W. et al. (1972). "Cognitive and Attentional Mechanisms in Delay of Gratification." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 2: 14.

Key Words: Delayed gratification, substance abuse, rewards, distraction

Summary/Conclusions

The present study examined if there were any factors that helped or hindered young children in waiting for a greater future reward and not accepting an immediate lesser reward. In three separate experiments, children between the ages of three and six were placed in situations where they could decide to accept a lesser immediate reward or could wait 15 minutes for a greater reward. Children that did not receive any suggestions or toys to help distract waited significantly shorter times. Children that were provided a toy or instructed to think of something fun waited an average of 8.59 minutes (toy) and 12.12 minutes (thinking of something fun).

Limitations of Information

The sample size of the study was relatively small. The study was completed on children, it is unclear how aging may change the mechanisms of delaying gratification. There might be factors that researchers could not account for that influenced the children's wait times. The underlying mechanisms of delayed gratification could be different with addiction or habits.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Delaying Gratification through Distraction

Researchers have long been intrigued by the topic of self-control. In particular, the question of why individuals may take a lesser immediate reward in lieu of a larger reward later has been examined extensively. In a series of experiments in 1972, researchers observed children in different situations to examine how factors such as distraction and positive thinking impacted a child's choice to delay gratification.

In three separate experiments children between the ages of three and six were led into a room by a researcher and asked to wait for the researcher's return. The child could stop waiting at any time by ringing a bell. In the first experiment, researchers wanted to test if children (n=50) would wait longer for a larger reward or accept a lesser immediate reward compared to children who received no reward. The experiment also tested whether distraction would increase wait times for children. In the second experiment, researchers tested if children (n=32) waited longer when they thought about something fun, sad, or the reward they would receive. In the third experiment, researchers provided children (n=16) with either no instruction, to think fun thoughts, or think of the reward before leaving with the tray that contained the rewards.

In the first experiment, when there was no distraction, children waited less than 30 seconds for the reward. When the reward and distractions were present, children waited an average of 8.5 minutes (when given a toy) and 12 minutes (when thinking about some-

thing fun). In the second experiment, once again fun thoughts produced the longest average wait. With no reward visible in the third experiment, children waited an average of 12 minutes without any distraction and an average of 13 minutes while thinking fun thoughts. Not one child that was instructed to think about the rewards waited for longer than two minutes, even with the reward out of view.

Practical Applications for Probation Officers:

- √ Consider spending less time discussing things (e.g. alcohol, drugs) probationers may struggle to avoid. Instead, focus conversations on how to avoid places, people, and situations.
- √ Shift conversations about previously rewarding behavior (e.g. relapse, substance abuse) to other topics (e.g. reminders of action steps, progress) before ending probation appointments. This may help individuals focus on distracting thoughts instead of trying to delay gratification.
- √ If probationers are upset or sad, it might be beneficial to discuss positives or create external distractions (e.g. spending time with family, starting a new hobby) to avoid risky situations.

Practical Applications for the Workplace:

- √ When discussing professional developmental goals, consider spending more time discussing progress rather than the reward or celebration for completing the goal.