

The Marshmallow Test and Self-control

(Extract of Principal's Address – School Assembly 14th January, 2015)

This is the first Assembly of the year 2015. Before I begin my sharing, I would like to give you a small gift - a marshmallow (棉花糖). But don't eat it now. There is a reason for this - you'll understand why in a moment. Now let me start.

At the beginning of the year, people like to have "New Year Resolutions".

- Work harder
- Practice more
- Pay more attention in class
- Finish every assignment on time
- Read more books
- Revise for exams earlier
- Play less video games
- Spend less time on Facebook
- Eat more healthily
- Do more exercise...

The disappointing thing about New Year Resolutions is that most people fail to keep up with them, and, as a result, fail to reap the reward that they promise in the end.

Today I would like to share with you a very famous experiment – a really cruel experiment – called "The Marshmallow Test"!

In 1970, a Stanford University psychologist Walter Mischel and his colleagues conducted an experiment which came to be known as the Marshmallow Test. It works like this:

A 5-year old kid would be put in a room and given a marshmallow (or other snacks of his/her choice such as Oreos). The experimenter would then tell the kid that he would leave the room for awhile. If the kid could wait for the return of the experimenter before eating the marshmallow, then he/she could get one more marshmallow. However, if the kid could not wait, he/she could eat the one marshmallow promised and that is it. He/she would not get the extra one. Typically, the kids would be made to wait for 15 to 20 minutes. Now let us see how kids usually react to this:

[Video] 4 minutes https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QX_oy9614HQ

It's a really cruel experiment, isn't it – to treat kids like this?

As you can see, some kids could not resist the temptation and ate the marshmallow before the experimenter returns while some managed to resist it and were rewarded with one more marshmallow in the end. As you can see from the expression and behaviour of the kids, it is not easy to resist temptation, but some kids managed it.

What is this experiment about?

It is about "self-control". Some people use the terms "Instant gratification" Vs. "Delayed gratification. Instant gratification is "immediate satisfaction" – e.g. to eat the marshmallow without waiting for the experimenter to return is to seek instant gratification. Delayed gratification is the ability to put off something rather pleasurable now in order to wait for something that is even more rewarding later – e.g. not to eat the one marshmallow now in order to get two marshmallows later. The struggle of the kids is to resist instant gratification so that with delayed gratification, they can get more as a reward.

Now back to the experiment – it is interesting to know that some kids have more self-control than others. So what? Now here the experiment gets even more interesting – Remember that the experiments were first done in the 1970s. Years later, the psychologists traced how these kids were doing. It turns out that those kids who could wait longer had better academic results, managed to earn more and were physically fitter later on in life! They were also less prone to addictions like alcohol and drugs. It seems that through the insignificant marshmallow, we can see the very significant future of the kids!

The reason is not difficult to guess: our self-control, self-discipline and ability to resist instant gratification enable us to achieve more in the long run:

- Preschoolers with good self-control sacrifice the immediate marshmallow and get one more after 15 minutes.
- Ex-smokers forfeit the enjoyment of a cigarette so he could experience good health and avoid an increased risk of lung cancer in the future.
- Shoppers resist spending too much at the mall so they could save for a comfortable retirement.
- A student delays playing his favorite video game until after the test/ the exam so he could concentrate on his studies and get better academic results.
- Internet users refrain from checking Facebook every other minute so they could concentrate on their work and achieve more.

How can we improve our self-control?

Perhaps we can start with the knowledge that there is strong evidence to support that this can be done! As for method, many have been suggested by

different psychologists and we need to try them out to see which methods suit our nature best. The important thing is not to give up.

In the 2014 book *The Marshmallow Test: Mastering Self-control*, Walter Mischel - the person who did the first Marshmallow Test - proposed a number of methods. Let me share two here:

1) MAKE UP "IF...THEN" RULES. The reason why we succumb to instant gratification is that we react automatically to immediate stimulations and well-established old habits. The "If...Then Rule" method is to help us create new habits in response to the same stimulation so as to break with old habits or innate automatic mechanisms. So for someone who wants to lose weight, he can create this rule: "IF I go to a restaurant, THEN I will start my meal with vegetables." For someone who wants to play less video game at home, he can create this rule: "WHEN I come home from school, THEN I shall check my diary to see what homework I need to complete that day." He then rehearses and practices this rule. Through sufficient rehearsals and practices, the desired behavior is triggered automatically without effort, replacing the old habit and inborn reactions.

2) COOL THE NOW, HEAT THE LATER. We can vividly imagine the negative consequences of instant gratification: Whenever we are tempted to play video game instead of revising for the exam, visualize the moment we are given the school report after the exam and the pain and regret we would feel if we succumb to the temptation now. By bringing forth the feeling about future consequences to the present moment, we would find it easier to make more rational choices about what we should do now.

So to conclude, improving self-control and willpower can have dramatic impact on our learning, our future and our long term happiness. It also fits into our School Major Concern this year of "Cultivating Self-directed Learners" because a self-directed person must be someone with the willpower to resist instant gratification for worthwhile long term learning goals.

So may I take this chance to wish that your New Year resolutions this year can be realized - perhaps with help of your knowledge of the Marshmallow Test.

I hope that when you enjoy your marshmallow in class and when you come across the marshmallow again in future, you will be reminded to continue working on your willpower, self-control and self-discipline.

Thank you!