



# Resource Article

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*"Authentically Exploring*  
*Children's Play"*

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Waiting, patience, and delay of gratification are skills that start in infancy and develop naturally through the child's participation in day to day routines and activities. An infant cries and waits, briefly, before she is picked up and soothed, fed, or changed. A toddler sits at a small table, perhaps with less patience, waiting for his or her turn to scoop food from the bowls being passed around at lunch time. A preschooler learns to delay her gratification of playing outside until she has picked up her toys and positioned herself with the group by the door. The ability to wait and delay gratification is part of developing self-regulation, an essential developmental concept, which ultimately helps children navigate their world.

Mischel studied delayed gratification in preschoolers in the 1960's and 70's using the famous marshmallow test. This test was given to 4 year olds (mostly children of Stanford staff and graduates students) attending the Bing Nursery school. The test involves giving the child the option of having one marshmallow immediately or waiting several minutes in order to get two marshmallows later. The

results indicated the preschoolers' willpower and self-control. Also of interest were connections between the ability to delay gratification and positive outcomes later on in life.

More recently, a group of researchers contacted the original marshmallow study participants to examine longitudinal patterns and outcomes. More than one-third of the former preschoolers, over 500 participants, responded to the mailing request.

The predictive findings of the initial study are startling. A correlation between the number of seconds preschoolers waited to get more marshmallows and SAT scores was found. The more seconds they waited, the higher their SAT scores were. The greater number of seconds waited was also correlated with better social cognitive and emotional coping in adolescence (Mischel et al., 1988). Another study linked the inability to wait for a more desirable treat as a preschooler, to being overweight, at age 11, compared to those children who waited longer for more marshmallows after a few minutes (Seeyave et al., 2009).

## Resource Article (continued)

Positive psychological results were also found. Ayduk et al. (2000) discovered that the children who waited more during the marshmallow test achieved more economic success, handled stress more effectively, and used drugs (crank/cocaine) less often. This was even found in for individuals with complex psychosocial circumstances. Delayed gratification has also been associated with less physical and verbal aggression, less bullying behavior, and higher self-worth and self-esteem (Rodriguez et al., 1989) in adolescents.

The researchers conducting this review liken the immediate wants of something as 'hot' and decreasing the desirability of something to making it 'cool'. The goal would then be reframing the 'hot' want into something 'cool,' such as imagining a sweet, yummy marshmallow more like something that is light and fluffy. In other words, focusing on its shape rather than its taste. While this strategy may work for older children, how can we encourage and promote waiting and delaying gratification in younger ones? This is a good question to consider and it does not have an easy answer. But perhaps it starts in infancy? Of course we want to meet a baby's needs, but could waiting and watching, just a little bit, to observe and ponder what it is the baby needs, help the baby develop self-regulation skills? Will the baby self-soothe, with minimal assistance, or is there an immediate need that a parent should meet right away without time for pondering? With toddlers, should we introduce the concept of waiting and/or the first this then that strategy before immediately providing what the child desires or needs? The ability for a parent to tune into a child's needs and wants is certainly important, but knowing too that willpower, waiting, patience, and self-gratification might help a child learn to self-regulate now and also in the future may help parents understand and promote this skill as

appropriate when the child's needs might not need an immediate response.

Even decades after the marshmallow test study, we know that learning to wait for something can allow a child time to make a better plan (i.e., executive functioning) in order to get what he or she wants or needs. Perhaps we should consider this in our work with families. For example, when a baby, sitting a parent's lap, drops a toy and the parent swoops down to pick it up immediately to give back to the baby, several opportunities for self-regulation may have been missed. Consider that there was no opportunity for the child to demonstrate object permanence (where did the toy go), communication (pointing or naming to request the object or ask for help), or to demonstrate persistence with task (looking down to track the toy in order to get the toy). This reaction is the type of behavior that might impede encouraging the skills important for self-regulation.

Sometimes our families, and us as early intervention providers, want instant results. However, by knowing and learning more about delaying gratification, we can learn to wait with families and find ways to scaffold children's learning opportunities. We can work together and make helpful comments and observations that reinforce the importance of self-regulation.

Mischel, W., Ayduk, O., Berman, M. G., Casey, B. J., Gotlib, I. H., Jonides, J., Kross, E., Teslovich, T., Wilson, N. L., Zayas, V., & Shoda, Y. (2011). 'Willpower' over the life span: Decomposing self-regulation. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 6(2), p. 252-256. Accessed from: <https://academic.oup.com/scan/article/6/2/252/1619382/Willpower-over-the-life-span-decomposing-self>

# What do the data say?



## How do young children across the world spend their leisure time?

This question was addressed in a study involving 2400 mothers across the nation (Singer et al., 2009). All of the mothers had children between the ages of 1 and 12. Collectively, they represented a variety of culture, customs, languages, and religions. The 16 participating countries were categorized as developed, newly industrialized, and developing countries.

Developed	Newly Industrialized	Developing
France	Argentina	Indonesia
Ireland	Brazil	Morocco
Portugal	China	Pakistan
United Kingdom	India	Thailand
United States	Turkey	Vietnam
	South Africa	

Study participation was based solely upon mothers' willingness

to be included. Telephone and face-to-face interviews were used to gather information, in the mother's home language. Interviewers were trained to ask the questions uniformly, being careful not to ask leading questions or provide information that might skew responses. Interviews included 150 in each of participating country, and care

was taken to ensure equal distribution between boys and girls (i.e., 18 to 19) in each of the four different age groups (i.e., ages 1-3, 4-6, 7-9, and 10-12). The interview questions included asking mothers how their children spend time every day. Responses were organized into 13 different categories.

1. Electronic games	6. Outdoor free play	10. School
2. Explore nature	7. Paint/draw/clay	11. Sing/dance/music
3. Extracurricular	8. Play with toys	12. Unorganized sports
4. Imaginative play	9. Rough and tumble	13. Watch TV
5. Organized sports		

Considering the categories above, which activity do you think was, reported as the most common activity? Which activity do you think was the least often reported activity?

The results indicated watching TV was the most common activity; 72% of mothers reported their child watched TV. Examined across country categories, results showed children in developed countries spent less time watching TV compared to those in the newly industrialized and developing countries. Compared individually, more than 80% of mothers from Vietnam (91%), India (88%), Indonesia (85%), Thailand (84%), Brazil (82%), and Argentina (80%) reported their children watched TV often. Interestingly, the mothers from the United States reported the lowest percentage (46%) of TV watching, which may be influenced by the array of other activities available to them. Among the participating countries nearly 95% of families in 9 countries own a TV. Those countries with less TV ownership included Brazil (88%), South Africa (69%), India (59%), and Indonesia (43%). TV ownership data were not reported for Morocco, Vietnam, or Pakistan. Children's age was also a factor; mothers of older children (7-12 years of age) compared to those of younger children (1-6 years of age) reported a higher frequency of TV watching. Mothers in some countries reported TV watching as a bonding opportunity. The range was 74% (Indonesia) to 12% (United States and Ireland). Compared across country categories, 19% of the mothers from developed countries reported that TV watching fostered bonding with their children compared to 45% and 62% respectively for newly industrialized and developing countries. Electronic game play, ranged from 52% in the United Kingdom to 10% in Morocco, and 30% in the United States. The least common activity was imaginative play; only 27% of the mothers reported their children engaged in imaginative play.

What we know from this, is that TV watching is a common pastime for children of all ages across different countries and cultures. As early intervention providers, it is important to acknowledge this, and depending upon a family's priorities teams can explore how this pastime might be enhanced as a natural learning opportunity or perhaps replaced if that is a family interest. The details of this study are summarized nicely in an embedded table. This study also provides details about the mothers' concerns that children today are missing the natural exploration and free play opportunities that they had as children. Depending upon a family's priorities, exploring the types of play activities they want their children to have, in light of their past experiences, could be an insightful reflection activity.

Singer, D. G., Singer, J. L., D'Agostino, H., & DeLong, R. (2009). Children's pastimes and play in sixteen nations: Is free-play declining? *American Journal of Play*, Winter, p. 283 – 312. Accessed from, <http://www.journalofplay.org/sites/www.journalofplay.org/files/pdf-articles/1-3-article-childrens-pastimes-play-in-sixteen-nations.pdf>



# Consultation Corner

From February through July 2017 we are excited to have **Dr. Kristie Pretti-Frontczak** as our Consultation Corner expert. During this series Kristie will address a variety of questions that will help us *Authentically Explore Children's Play*.

For such a small word...*PLAY* sure does carry a powerful punch! In fact, research as well as our own experience has shown time and time again, a strong connection between learning and play. Whether learning to walk, solve a problem, or keep ourselves from eating one more cookie, the skills required were more than likely learned through play.

It seems, however, that in this age of accountability, play is something we do after the work is done, something that is too "soft" to support academic achievement, and something for which there just isn't enough time.

In addition to these societal barriers to children learning through play, some children struggle with developing strong play skills. For example, some children struggle to adjust or respond to changes that occur during play. Other children may resist expansions of their play or the introduction of anything new. And still others, may get stuck in a loop and spend much of the time repeating memorized actions and/or phrases.

To address the societal barriers, we can all become stronger play advocates. For example, we can learn more about evidence-based facts regarding the impact of play on early development and the role play serves in academic and lifelong success. To get started, [request access](#) to this free infographic and then share widely.



<https://prekteachandplay.com/shop/power-play-infographic/>

But what can we do when a child struggles, resists, and/or gets in a loop when it comes to their play?

Well, a first course of action is to see these as signals that the child may be feeling overwhelmed, confused, and/or unsure of what is going to happen next. Therefore, we may need to help parents and caregivers to:

- adjust expectations to better match the child's skills, abilities, and interests
  - adjust the pace and introduction of novelty to ensure things remain manageable
- adjust the frequency of requests and questioning to minimize any disruption of the child's internal regulation and/or attention

In a nutshell, it's about helping caregivers to recognize the signals of distress and then chart a new course of action. A course of action where there is balance between the child directing their play and caregivers' efforts in supporting and expanding their play.

## Consultation Corner (continued)

More specifically, when children show signs of struggling, resisting, and/or being stuck in a loop when it comes to play, there are at least three actionable steps we can help caregivers take:

1. Establish proximity and be present
2. Get on the same page
3. Make small and supportive bids

### **Step 1: Establish proximity and be present**

The goal here is to convey to your child that you are listening, that you are ready to be a play partner, and to limit the amount of verbal demands. Keep in mind, of course, we want children to be exposed to meaningful talk; however, there are times when being quiet allows us to build trust, to make connections, and to allow your child an opportunity to take the lead. Sitting beside and watching, helps your child know you are interested in what they are saying and doing. It also allows you time to ensure the child is “connected” to you...BEFORE giving a direction and/or asking a question.

### **Step 2: Get on the same page**

As a strong play partner, you read your child’s cues, match their pace, and know when to offer help. All too often, however, when playing with a child, we can move from one idea or location too quickly and impose our ideas on what they can or should do with toys. To get on the same page, aim to match intensity, complexity, and interests. For example, if your child is interested in stacking objects (even in a way that seems repetitive), avoid shifting their attention by asking them to label the colors, or to tell you, “how many” they have. Instead, imitate what they are doing at a pace and in a way that matches their actions.

### **Step 3: Make small and supportive bids**

Bids are designed to invite your child to engage and should be quite small at first. Bids can be a look, a touch, a gesture, and in some cases, a brief comment. The simpler and smaller, the more manageable for your child. You will need to experiment with your bids to determine if they are a match. And beware, because sometimes your child’s response to a bid may “appear” to be socially unacceptable (e.g., they push your hand away, throw an object offered, run away). This exchange, however, could signify they are accepting your bid and are trying to work with you to get out of the loop or to accept change/novelty into their play.





## On the WWW

Carol Westby's Symbolic Play Scale Checklist was initially published in 1980 and was revised and reissued in 2000. This useful tool provides a parallel checklist of symbolic play and language skills. The scale is clearly organized and includes useful examples to clarify the different levels included. It is a useful tool for considering children's levels of symbolic play and language based upon authentic assessment observations.

The following link, from Autism Teaching Tools (<http://www.autismteachingtools.com/>) provides more information about the 2000 revision of the Westby Play Scale as well as the symbolic play and language items. This scale is organized around 10 stages of play from ages birth to five years of age.

<http://www.autismteachingtools.com/page/bbbbf/bbbbtj>



## Continuing Education for KIT Readers

The Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD) is offering a continuing education opportunity for KIT readers.

In line with the focus on *Authentically Exploring Children's Play*, readers are invited to receive continuing education contact hours for reading the monthly KIT publications (February through June 2017) and completing a multiple-choice exam about the content covered in these KITs.

KIT readers will receive the exam in July 2017. There is no need to register for the CEUs. Rather, if you are interested complete the exam online at [www.edis.army.mil](http://www.edis.army.mil)

Upon successful completion of the exam, you will receive a certificate of non-discipline specific continuing education contact hours.

KIT Newsletters  
are available  
online at  
[www.edis.army.mil](http://www.edis.army.mil)

Thank you for your continued interest in the KIT.

