

Lack of Gratitude, Inability to Delay Gratification, and Unhappiness Linked to Childhood Overindulgence

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“To function effectively, individuals must voluntarily postpone immediate gratification and persist in goal-directed behavior for the sake of later outcomes” (Mischel, Shoda & Rodriguez, 1989, p. 993). To test this theory Mischel, Shoda & Rodriguez (1989) devised a simple elegant laboratory experiment by presenting four-year-old children with a dilemma. The researchers brought each child into the lab, sat them at a table and presented them with one marshmallow on a plate. The children were told that they could eat the marshmallow right away, but if they didn’t eat the marshmallow until the researcher came back, they could have two marshmallows. The researchers found that children who had self-control and put off eating the marshmallow for the later reward of a second one (1) tended to be more intelligent, (2) more likely to resist temptation, (3) to have greater social responsibility, and (4) to have higher goals later in life compared to those who were not able to delay gratification (Mischel & Gilligan, 1964; Mischel, Shoda & Rodriguez, 1989). Why can some children delay gratification while others can’t? Is there a connection between childhood overindulgence and delayed gratification? What role do materialistic values play? Why do some children grow up to be grateful and happy and other do not? These are questions Slinger and Bredehoft (2010) investigated in a recent study reported at the 2010 National Council on Family Relations Annual Conference.

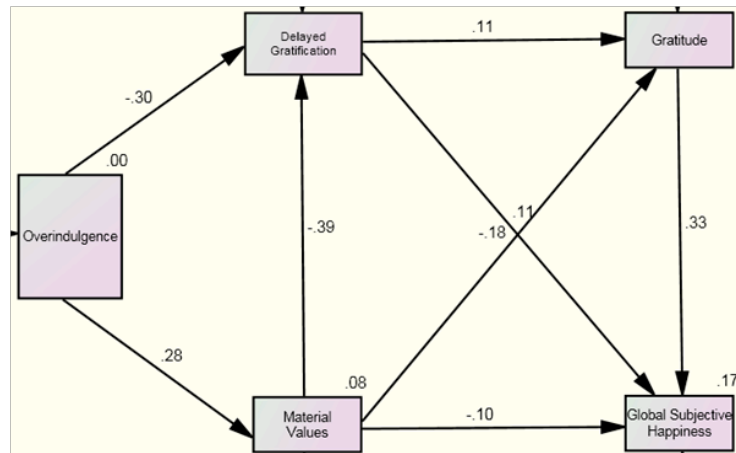
The sample consisted of 466 participants (73% female, 27% male; ages 16-83; Mean age 30.72) from thirty-six states and the countries of Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Iceland, Israel, Japan, and Mexico. Participants accessed the study through the web at www.overindulgence.info (60.1% from psychology classes at Concordia University, and 39.9% from the webpage). Participants answered 128 questions consisting of demographic data and seven psychological scales.

Hypotheses

1. The more childhood overindulgence the more likely to be unable to delay gratification in adulthood.
2. The more childhood overindulgence the more likely to hold materialistic values in adulthood.
3. The more childhood overindulgence the less grateful in adulthood.
4. The more childhood overindulgence the lower subjective happiness in adulthood.

Results

Figure 1: Path Analysis for Childhood Overindulgence & Adult Attitudes and Behavior



- Childhood Overindulgence leads to the inability to delay gratification and to adult materialistic values.
- The inability to delay gratification and materialistic values leads to being ungrateful and unhappy.
- Conversely, if an individual is **not** overindulged as a child, he/she is more likely to delay gratification, feel grateful, and be happy.

Would you like children to postpone gratification rather than have “gimme gimme attacks” because they want it right now? Would you like them to be grateful for the sacrifices you have made for them? Would you like them to grow up to be happy adults? Then don’t overindulge them. Don’t give them too much. Don’t over-nurture them. Don’t be soft on structure, have rules and chores.

Try it out today with your child - one marshmallow right now, or wait for two later?

References

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