

Now, most kids really want that second marshmallow. But the key question is: How long can they wait?

Now, I added a twist to look at the effects of context. I told each kid that they were in a group, like the green group, and I even gave them a green t-shirt to wear. And I said, “Your group waited for two marshmallows. And this other group, the orange group, did not.”

Or I said the opposite: “Your group didn’t wait for two marshmallows, and this other group did.”

And then I left the kid alone in the room, and I watched on a webcam to see how long they waited.

So what I found was that kids who believed that their group waited for two marshmallows were themselves more likely to wait. So they were influenced by a peer group that they’d never even met. Pretty cool, isn’t it?

Well, so with this result, I still didn’t know if they were just copying their group or if it was something deeper than that. So I brought in some more kids.

And after the marshmallow test, I showed them pictures of pairs of kids, and I told them one of these kids likes to have things right away, like cookies and stickers, and the other kid likes to wait so that they can have more of these things.

And then I asked them, “Which one of these two kids do you like more? Who would you want to play with?”

And what I found was that kids who believed that their group waited tended to prefer other kids who liked to wait for things. So learning what their group did made them value waiting more.

And not only that, these kids likely use executive function to generate strategies to help themselves wait, like sitting on their hands or turning away from the marshmallow or singing a song to distract themselves.

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So what this all shows is just how much context matters. It's not that these kids had good executive function or bad; it's that the context helped them use it better.

So what does this mean for you and for your kids? Well, let's say that you want to learn Spanish. You could try changing your context and surrounding yourself with other people who also want to learn.

And even better, if these are people that you really like, that way you will be more motivated to use executive function. Or let's say that you want to help your child do better on her math homework.

You could teach her strategies to use executive function in that particular context, like putting her phone away before she starts studying or planning to reward herself after studying for an hour.

Now, I don't want to make it sound like context is everything. Executive function is really complex, and it's shaped by numerous factors. But what I want you to remember is if you want to improve your executive function in some aspect of your life, don't look for quick fixes.

Think about the context in how you can make your goals matter more to you, and how you can use strategies to help yourself in that particular situation. I think the ancient Greeks said it best when they said, "Know thyself."



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And a key part of this is knowing how context shapes your behavior and how you can use that knowledge to change for the better.

Thank you.

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