
PARENTAL DISCIPLINE AND DELAYED GRATIFICATION

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It was hypothesized that children brought up under coercive power (exemplified by direct commands, arbitrary power, no explanation, and not keeping promises) would be more likely to exhibit immediate gratification, whereas children brought up under noncoercive power would be more likely to delay gratification. A total of 107 junior-high students completed a questionnaire measuring delayed gratification and a questionnaire measuring attitudes towards parental discipline, and the hypothesis was confirmed.

Keywords: parental discipline, delayed gratification, coercion, arbitrariness, explanations, promise keeping.

Among the factors, to which delayed gratification has been found to be related, is the belief that the delayed decision can be depended upon to yield the greater reward (DiVesta & Walls, 1967a, 1967b, 1967c; Mahrer, 1956; Walls & Smith 1970). The factor of the participant's trust is of concern, for he may decide on the immediate, although smaller, reward simply because he does not have faith that the delayed, although larger, reward will be forthcoming. The standard procedure for research on delayed gratification is for the participants to be told that they will be given the larger reward should they decide to wait. There is rarely an independent measure as to whether the subjects believed that the promiser would deliver. It is possible that some of the findings on delayed gratification are as much a result of differential trust in the experimenter than in differential propensities for delayed gratification.

The objective in the present study was to examine the antecedents of trust. The hypothesis is that children brought up under coercive power (exemplified by direct commands, arbitrary power, no explanation, and not keeping of promises) will exhibit immediate gratification while children brought up under noncoercive power will exhibit delayed gratification. The rationale for this hypothesis is that parental use of coercive power produces in the child a number of reactions which militate against delayed gratification.

The parents' use of arbitrary power is detrimental to the child's autonomy, and promotes the development of hostility and heightened autonomy needs. Moreover, "the use of unqualified power assertion gives the child no explicit information that may help him develop inter-

nalized controls or draw upon those that already exist” (Hoffman, 1960, p. 132). When parental power is regarded as just, the effective bond between parent and child is strengthened, this tending to encourage behavioral conformity to parental rules (Elder, 1963). In a sample of adolescent boys, parental explanation was strongly related with resistance to temptation (Miller & Swanson, 1960), and it has been shown that the adoption of parental standards is facilitated by parental warmth (Mussen & Distler, 1959). Since so much of conformity demanded by the parent is that of delayed gratification, it is plausible to expect that a particular kind of parental-child relationship would encourage delayed gratification.

The use of legitimate power may have the effect of indirectly encouraging gratification. Elder (1963), for example, found that adolescents were much more likely to be confident in their ideas and opinions, as well as independent in their decision making if their parents had explained the rules. Katovsky et al. (1967) reported that parents who maintained a positive relationship with their children were more likely to foster in the child a belief in internal control than were parents who were punitive, rejecting, and critical. The rejecting, punitive, and dominating parents are seen as encouraging the belief in the child that factors outside his control are responsible for his rewards.

METHOD

The participants were 107 seventh graders in one of the junior-high schools in Tel-Aviv, Israel. They were given two questionnaires. One concerned immediate-delayed gratification and consisted of statements in which the participant indicated his preference for an object of smaller value, which he would receive immediately, or a more valued object which he would obtain in the future. The questionnaire itself was adopted from an M.A. thesis by Leah Ahroni in the Department of Psychology of Bar-Ilan University, Israel.

The questionnaire measuring attitudes toward discipline exercised by parents was adopted from Itkin (1952). Those statements emphasizing the parents' keeping of promises, arbitrariness, and giving of explanations were selected. Some further questions were added. Examples of items are: “Parents should give children of elementary-school age (or older) reasons for any requests made by them;” “Children should be expected to obey commands instantly and without question;” “A parent should always insist that every one of his or her commands be obeyed, even if he or she realizes after giving a command, that it was an unreasonable one;” “Sometimes my father was too strict and sometimes he was too lenient.”

RESULTS

Both scales, delayed-immediate gratification and parental behavior, revealed similar scores for boys and girls. Consequently, the data for the boys and girls were combined (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
DELAYED GRATIFICATION ACCORDING TO ATTITUDE TO PARENTAL DISCIPLINE

		<i>Parental Consistency</i>			
		<i>Low</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>	
Mean	10.2	12.7	14.5	<i>F</i> - 60.0
<i>n</i>	(32)	(35)	(33)	<i>p</i> < .001

The immediate-delayed gratification scores (higher number indicating delayed gratification) were cross-classified according to the degree of parental consistency and arbitrariness. The latter was trichotomized into low, medium, and high. The ANOVA was highly significant ($F = 60.0$, $p < .001$) indicating that the more consistent and less arbitrary the behavior of the parent, the greater the delayed gratification of the child.

The Pearson correlation coefficient between the scales immediate-delayed gratification and parental behavior is 0.53.

DISCUSSION

The study was concerned with the antecedents of delayed gratification. The results strongly indicate that children are more likely to delay gratification when they have parents who keep their promises and offer explanations when they cannot, who are consistent and non-arbitrary in their punishment. There are two possible, albeit related, explanations for the relationship between parental consistency and delayed gratification. One is simply that such behavior on the part of the parent develops in the child a feeling of trust. The second is that such behavior fosters in the child the development of internalized controls and encourages behavioral conformity to parental rules – which often is tantamount to delayed gratification.

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