

# Children's self-control is associated with their body mass index as adults

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As adults, we know that self-control and delaying gratification are important for making healthful eating choices, portion control, and maintaining a healthy weight. However, exhibiting these skills at a young age actually may affect weight later in life. A new study scheduled for publication in *The Journal of Pediatrics* finds that delaying gratification longer at 4 years of age is associated with having a lower body mass index (BMI) 30 years later.

Between 1968 and 1974, 653 4-year-olds completed a delay of gratification test, in which the children were given one treat, such as a cookie or a marshmallow, and were told that they would be given a second treat if they could wait to eat the first treat for an unspecified length of time (it ended up being 15 minutes).

Follow-up studies found that delaying gratification for a longer time as a preschooler was associated with adolescent academic strength, [social competence](#), planfulness, ability to handle stress, and higher SAT scores. According to Tanya R. Schlam, PhD, from the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health's Center for Tobacco Research and Intervention, "Interventions can improve young children's self-control, which may decrease children's risk of becoming overweight and may have further positive effects on other outcomes important to society (general health, financial stability, and a reduced likelihood of being convicted of a crime)."

To further assess the adult benefits of childhood self-control, Dr. Tanya Schlam and colleagues from University of Washington, Columbia University, and University of California, Berkeley, followed-up with [study participants](#) (164 responded; 57% female), who are now in their mid-30s, to assess their current BMI (an indicator of body fat), which was cross-referenced with how they did on the delay of gratification test as children. The researchers found that each minute a

child [delayed gratification](#) predicted a 0.2 decrease in adult BMI. Only 24% of the respondents were overweight and 9% were obese, which is lower than the 2008 national adult average of 34% overweight and another 34% obese.

Fortunately, self-control can be modified and improved. Because large portions and tempting, high-calorie foods usually are readily available (often more so than healthy foods), developing high self-control and ability to delay gratification, along with using other strategies and interventions, can be helpful in regulating caloric intake and achieving a healthy weight, in both children and adults.

**More information:** "Preschoolers' Delay of Gratification Predicts Their Body Mass 30 Years Late" by Tanya R. Schlam, PhD, Nicole L. Wilson, PhD, Yuichi Shoda, PhD, Walter Mischel, PhD, and Ozlem Ayduk, PhD, appears in *The Journal of Pediatrics*, [DOI 10.1016/j.jpeds.2012.06.049](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2012.06.049)

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