

## Do we live in a Me-Here-Now World?

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Our generation has lost a precious skill.

Some combination of affluence and selfishness, cultural narcissism and hopelessness has cost us the essential ability to delay gratification. To just say no. To control our impulsiveness. To consider consequences before we act. We would not be who we are, we would not have come so far, had our parents been as self-centered as we and, I fear, our children are suffering as a result.

The evidence of our cultural hedonism, of our insistence on the here-and-now-and-me, surrounds us. Pollution. Debt. Drugs and alcohol, cigarettes and nicotine. Obesity and illness. Depletion of the Earth's resources. As a society, we are acting like so many six-year olds left unattended in a candy store, hoarding what we can, stuffing our faces as if *now* and *me* are all that matters, without a thought for others who get less and with no concept that our gluttony is self-destructive.

We have come to value happiness more than health, *me* more than *us* and today more than tomorrow. But if seeing the problem only leaves you feeling more hopeless, salving the pain with more self-indulgence, all is lost. No, you can not change the entire society, but you can change your own behavior and, in so doing, there's a chance that your children will change too.

**You are a model to your children.** Up until about seven years old, most children gladly declare that they want to grow up to be just like their same gender parent. After about age thirty, most adults are shocked to discover that that is exactly what they've done.

In your children's eyes, your actions will always be more powerful than your words. Its not enough to talk the talk, you must walk the walk. If you want to raise children who value health, who invest in their own and the world's future, you must do the same. Go ahead and preach all you want. Just be sure to practice what you preach.

The father who lectures his son about the evils of marijuana while he sips his martini may as well say nothing. The mother who complains about a daughter's obesity between bites of her fast-food burger is a hypocrite. The family that drives to the school's environmental fair in their SUV, that spends without saving, that consumes without recycling, that takes without giving is raising children who will raise children who will raise children who will do the same until there is nothing left.

If this strikes you as extreme or fatalistic, if you argue that you've earned today's extravagance, that you deserve a break today, you're only illustrating the point. We've become blind to our impact on the future. We've come to think that just a little more couldn't hurt. But it can. It does.

We must make changes today.

**We must value health greater than happiness.** Its too easy to give in, to give up. To sooth the savage beast rather than help the beast learn to soothe himself. Of course you're tired. Perhaps you're sick. Certainly you've had it up to here. But the moment you compromise on your parenting standards, the moment you allow your kids to blackmail you with the threat of emotional meltdown, you're teaching them to do more of the same.

Billy cries and whines and pouts at bedtime, wearing down his mom until she gives in. "Just this once," she lies, letting him curl up in her own bed because she's exhausted. And the next night? And the night after? Billy's tantrums will only grow louder and longer as he discovers anew the threshold he must reach to win the comfort of his mother's bed. Not only has this mother lost the battle, but this child is missing out on a critical opportunity to learn to tolerate his own upset.

And Sarah, the fifteen year old sitting in the vice principal's office? Of course she didn't do her homework. Of course she was out far too late with her older friends the night before. And why shouldn't she be experimenting with substances and sex? Her single father is over-worked and overwhelmed. He yells and threatens when she screws up but never applauds when she succeeds, not that she succeeds much any more. Why bother? She sees no reason to learn algebra today when she could be out partying. She lives for the moment, too immature, too angry and too depressed to consider how today's choices will impact all of her tomorrows.

**Consistency, limits and consequences.** Children need structure. They need to know what is okay and what is not. They need to know that you're there. That your love is constant and unconditional. That you are eager to reward their successes with praise and attention. That when you must, you will punish their failures calmly and consistently. They need your example of kindness and respect, maturity and intelligence and humor. They need to learn that a small investment today may yield a large return tomorrow.

What limits do you impose on your children? What are your rules and expectations? How do you follow through? Are you and your co-parents consistent? Do you give in? If you can't tolerate their temper tantrums, how can they ever learn to do so?

Do your children expect to be waited upon? To simply get without giving? That money grows on trees because you've always been their money tree?

**Young dogs and new tricks.** Now is the time to change. Children who grow up with the expectation that they must participate in the family's well-being, that they must give in order to get, that their anger and frustration are inevitable and tolerable, that they cannot have what they want when they want it, but that they can save bit by bit in order to get it tomorrow, these are the children who will some day change this world for the better.

Its not too late, but it is harder to teach an old dog new tricks. The more entrenched and longstanding the behavior, the more resistant it will be to change. But don't let that stop you. It will only be that much harder to change tomorrow. Change one expectation at a time. Do so with your co-parents' support. Announce the change at a family meeting and be prepared to follow through consistently and without exception. Reward success as often as possible, but be prepared to punish failure calmly when necessary. Start today and change all of our tomorrows.

----- parenting pointer -----

For most children, delay of gratification is about getting stuff and getting stuff is about money.

How do your kids get their stuff? Have they learned that it takes a certain amount of begging and pleading and whining? That you give in just to shut them up? Or have they learned to turn on and off their polite, respectful selves in order to manipulate a present out of you? Nasty and distant until they want something?

Here's an alternative:

1. Children ages seven and older can be expected to delay gratification. How much and how long will vary by child and maturity. You can help them to set a goal and to work toward it incrementally. Younger and less mature kids will need visible and tangible reminders as they earn their way toward a goal (a chart or a jar that accumulates nickels or tokens glued to a page which, when full, earns the goal).
2. Establish one specific, concrete expectation for each day. Making a bed. Washing the dishes. Getting to sleep on time. Using appropriate language in the house.
3. Assign a specific reward for each day's success. The type and size of the reward will depend on your values, your budget, the child's maturity and the goals the child is working toward. An eight year old earning a quarter a day toward a trip to DisneyWorld will give up in frustration quickly but may persist if the goal is a four dollar video rental. A sixteen year old might improve her school behavior if each week's behavior report determined the next week's internet access.
4. Failure on any given day simply fails to earn that day's reward. Failure does *not* lose rewards earned for prior successes. How the child copes with failure, how she expresses her frustration and how you tolerate her upset is the key. If you teach her that disappointments happen, that today's frustration will pass, you can be proud that when she's thirty, she'll look in the mirror and see you.