



# 12. Digital Media's Impact on Self-Control

It probably will not surprise you that children's experiences influence their learning and their behavior. One important skill that has a significant impact on children (and adults) of all ages is self-control. A child who has well-developed self-control skills will be able to tolerate waiting for things and delay gratification to achieve their goals.<sup>1</sup> A child who is still developing their self-control skills may become dysregulated, even during brief delays, to what they want and might make choices that seem disproportionate to the expectation.

So how does a child's environment impact how they learn this important skill of self-control? Believe it or not, screen use may have a lot to do with it. Digital media is designed to keep people on a given platform or playing a certain game for as long as possible. To ensure this engagement, apps are designed to keep consumers from having to “wait”—for example, most social media apps have endless feeds, YouTube has features like autoplay, social media allows videos to be played at 1.5x or 2x the regular speed, and video games create immersive worlds that go on without a natural end. These experiences create the expectation that our wants and needs should be instantly available and provide little exposure to naturally occurring delays.

What happens when children do not get regular practice developing a skill, like waiting or self-control? It atrophies or weakens. The result is that children are reactive (i.e., have outbursts or other behavioral/mood issues) when they cannot get what they want in the moment.

What can you do to support your child's self-control skills in the digital age? Given the old adage, “practice makes perfect,” children need to be taught to wait more deliberately than we did when we were young (since far more waiting occurred organically even a generation ago). Just as a devoted parent/caregiver may take their child out to practice throwing a ball, modern skills practice needs to involve creating opportunities for children to wait. Like any kind of practice, they should be planned, with opportunities for a child to demonstrate calm, safe waiting for short periods of time. Remember, the key to waiting (lest we forget) is the ability to occupy oneself without distraction<sup>2</sup>—thus, waiting practice should not involve giving them something else to entertain them.<sup>3</sup>

Start small; even delaying a few seconds is a helpful beginning point.<sup>3</sup> Help your child learn to tolerate waiting and develop the skill of self-control. Rather than picking up a device each time they are waiting, what would it be like for the child to wait without a screen and learn firsthand that they can tolerate periods of waiting? Finally, it is important to note that parent/caregivers can model appropriate waiting themselves by increasing their own tolerance and showing their children that they can wait successfully without devices. We know that learning often starts as children observe the environment around them, so parents/caregivers can help their children learn self-control by modeling good waiting practices without devices. Here is a simplified “how to” for getting started at home:

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- STEP 1** Start by sharing the plan for skills practice with your child in an age-appropriate way. For younger kids, you won't need to explain too much other than "we are going to practice taking turns and waiting with a safe, calm body." For older children, you might go into more detail about why this is important (e.g., "just like practice for sports or dance, the more you do something the better you get at it. We are going to practice time away from screens because I've noticed it is really hard for you to take a break from them.").
- STEP 2** Find a practice time when your child is already on their screen; although they might get frustrated by the screen interruption, their motivation to have their turn back will help them follow directions to complete the practice. Make sure there is enough time to practice—your child needs to know that only successful practice will restore their screen time.
- STEP 3** Start very small—even a few seconds of waiting might be more than your child is used to. You want them to be successful right from the very beginning so practice is as smooth as possible. Consider a 5-second wait as a beginning point; a successful practice will look like them handing over their device without a fight and waiting for the specified time calmly. Once the wait is over, thank them for their practice and give them their device back.
- STEP 4** Gradually increase the wait time expectation after your child demonstrates at least three successful practices in a row. It might feel strange, but we want children to learn to wait with *nothing*; that is, to occupy themselves without their screen. Try to resist the urge to distract your child with conversation or other demands (i.e., "try taking deep breaths"). Generally it is okay to double the wait expectation once your child has mastered waiting at that particular time (i.e., move from 5 seconds to 10, 10 seconds to 20).
- STEP 5** Pick an end point. Waiting without being occupied is hard, and children have very little experience with doing this. End points should be generally based on your child's developmental age; so, a child who is developmentally 3 probably won't be able to wait longer than 30 seconds. A child who is developmentally 5 may be able to wait for up to a minute; and a child who is developmentally 8 can probably wait up to 3 minutes. The goal isn't to have them learn to wait forever, but instead to tolerate giving up their screen when asked and waiting for a brief period of time without distraction in order to get their screen time back.

## Key Tips

**Use a signal to help your child understand the passage of time.** This signal can include a visual or picture timer for younger children, or a digital countdown timer for older children. Invest in a designated timer just for practice (avoid using a cell phone!), so your child can focus on the passage of time if they start to feel it is difficult to wait.

**Don't overpractice!** Introducing this skill will not be your child's favorite activity of the day—don't overdo it! Generally having 2 or 3 successful practices at a time is more than enough to develop and maintain the skill. Practice doesn't have to happen every day either, just a few times per week.

**Don't use practice as a punishment.** We want children to believe that learning this new skill is important; if it is required following misbehavior it will always be aversive and may result in reactivity.

**Older children can do this too!** There is no age limit for learning tolerance skills. However, for older children we recommend inserting a task demand during the wait to make it more age-appropriate (i.e., completing a chore). Instead of using a timer, you might require that the task be completed correctly prior to regaining their screen access.

## References

1. Raghunathan, R. S., Musci, R. J., Knudsen, N., & Johnson, S. B. (2023). What children do while they wait: The role of self-control strategies in delaying gratification. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 226. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2022.105576>
2. Grayson, J. B., Foa, E. B., & Steketee, G. (1982). Habituation during exposure treatment: Distraction vs. attention-focusing. *Behavior Research and Therapy*, 20(4), 323-328. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0005-7967\(82\)90091-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/0005-7967(82)90091-2)
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