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# Journal of Experimental Child Psychology

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jecp](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jecp)



## Brief Report

# Generalized trust predicts young children's willingness to delay gratification



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 17 July 2017

Revised 21 December 2017

### Keywords:

Delay of gratification

Trust

Childhood development

Preschool age

Decision making

Individual differences

## ABSTRACT

Young children's willingness to delay gratification by forgoing an immediate reward to obtain a more desirable one in the future predicts a wide range of positive social, cognitive, and health outcomes. Standard accounts of this phenomenon have focused on individual differences in cognitive control skills that allow children to engage in goal-oriented behavior, but recent findings suggest that person-specific trust is also important, with children showing a stronger tendency to delay gratification if they have reason to trust the individual who is promising the future reward. The current research builds on those findings by examining generalized trust, which refers to the extent to which others are generally viewed as trustworthy. A total of 150 3- to 5-year-olds in China were tested. Participants were given the opportunity to obtain one sticker immediately, or wait for 15 min for two stickers. Results showed that participants with high levels of generalized trust waited longer even after controlling for age and level of executive function. These results suggest that trust plays a role in delaying gratification even when children have no information about the individual who is promising the future reward. More broadly, the findings build on recent evidence that there is more to delay of gratification than cognitive capacity, and they suggest that there are individual differences in whether children consider sacrificing for a future outcome to be worth the risk.

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## Introduction

When individuals delay gratification, they forgo immediate rewards in order to obtain more desirable future rewards (Imuta, Hayne, & Scarf, 2014). The tendency to make such future-oriented choices early in life predicts a wide range of positive long-term consequences, including better social and cognitive competence and better stress management (Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989). Of interest in the current research is whether generalized trust, which refers to the extent to which people are generally expected to act in a trustworthy manner, might influence young children's delay of gratification.

Young children's delay of gratification has typically been studied by presenting them with a choice of a small reward immediately or a bigger reward later. For example, the choice may be between one marshmallow now and two marshmallows in 15 min (see Mischel, Shoda, & Peake, 1988) or between one sticker now and more than one sticker at some point in the future (Garon, Johnson, & Steeves, 2011; Imuta et al., 2014). In these studies, the dependent measures generally consist of which choices children make or how long children are willing to wait for the more desirable rewards.

Executive function skills play an important role in the ability to delay gratification by allowing children to pursue the types of long-term goals that are often required to achieve positive social, cognitive, and health outcomes (Baumeister & Vohs, 2003; Eigsti et al., 2006). For example, they allow children to inhibit impulses in ways that are needed to reach longer-term goals (but see Diamond & Lee, 2011, for evidence that interventions that lead to improved executive function do not necessarily lead to improvements in delay of gratification).

Whether children have reasons to trust versus distrust the individual who is promising future rewards also affects their willingness to delay gratification (Kidd, Palmeri, & Aslin, 2013; Michaelson, de la Vega, Chatham, & Munakata, 2013; Michaelson & Munakata, 2016; see also Leonard, Berkowitz, & Shusterman, 2014). Kidd et al. (2013) manipulated whether 3- to 5-year-olds saw evidence that an experimenter was either reliable or unreliable before they participated in the classic marshmallow task. Evidence of reliability was presented in the form of an experimenter either following through on a promise to give children something desirable (e.g., an art supply kit to play with) on two occasions or breaking such a promise on two occasions. Children's waiting times for two marshmallows averaged about 12 min in the reliable condition and about 3 min in the unreliable condition.

Michaelson and Munakata (2016) also tested 3- to 5-year-olds using a task in which children did the classic marshmallow task after observing an experimenter show evidence of being either reliable or unreliable. However, Michaelson and Munakata designed their reliability manipulation to rule out the possible effects of children being differentially rewarded across the two conditions. Their manipulation involved having children observe the experimenter break an adult's art project and either lie or tell the truth about it to the owner. Children in the reliable condition had a median waiting time of 15 min (the maximum allowable time), whereas those in the unreliable condition had a median waiting time of slightly less than 5 min. These findings suggest that children use reliability cues about people promising desirable future rewards to guide their behavior in delay of gratification tasks.

The current research examines whether young children's generalized trust (i.e., the extent to which individuals generally expect others to act in a trustworthy manner), like interpersonal trust, would affect young children's delay gratification. To date, generalized trust has primarily been studied in adults, with much of this work addressing the broad societal implications such as the role of generalized trust within political institutions (e.g., Rothstein & Stolle, 2008). Nevertheless, the limited amount of work that has been conducted with children indicates that there are meaningful differences in generalized trust during childhood as well (Betts & Rotenberg, 2008).

In the current study, we tested the prediction that children who generally view others as trustworthy will show a stronger tendency to delay gratification based on the assumption that they will be more likely to believe they can count on an unfamiliar experimenter to follow through on the deal that was offered. We tested this prediction among a sample of 3- to 5-year-old preschool children in China (see Legare & Harris, 2016, regarding the need for more data from non-Western samples in developmental

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