

BACKTALK

Self-Discipline Is Empowering

BY ANGELA LEE DUCKWORTH

Is self-discipline overrated? Is the only benefit of self-control higher report card grades? Are self-disciplined children generally uncreative, anxious, and unhappy? Does contemporary American culture put inordinate emphasis on the virtue of self-discipline? As a research psychologist and former middle and high school math teacher, my answer to all of the above questions is a resounding *no*.

My view diverges from the perspective offered by Alfie Kohn in his article, “Why Self-Discipline Is Overrated: The (Troubling) Theory and Practice of Control from Within” (*Kappan*, November 2008).

Kohn defines self-discipline as “marshalling one’s willpower to accomplish things that are *generally regarded as desirable*” and “using that same sort of willpower to prevent oneself from doing *what is seen to be undesirable* or to delay gratification” (p. 169, emphasis added). But this is not the definition used in the research conducted by Walter Mischel, Roy Baumeister, Marty Seligman, and myself — all of whose work Kohn cites in his article. As we (and most psychologists) use the term, self-discipline is *not* the ability to accomplish goals which *others* deem desirable. Rather, self-discipline is the ability to marshal willpower to accomplish goals and uphold standards that *one personally regards as desirable*. That is, self-discipline isn’t the capacity to do what other people order you to do; rather, it is the capacity to do what you want to do. It’s knowing how to manage your emotions and thoughts and knowing how to plan your behavior so you can reach your goals. Defined and measured in this way, self-discipline predicts a wide range of positive outcomes.

Consider, for example, Mischel’s famous “marshmallow studies.” In these experiments, preschool children chose between a smaller treat they could have right away and a larger treat that required waiting. Contrary to the grim picture Kohn paints of the self-disciplined child, Mischel and his colleagues found that the number of seconds a young child could wait in this situa-

tion predicted not only SAT scores, but also emotional coping skills in adolescence (Mischel, Shoda, and Rodriguez 1989). In adulthood, the ability to delay gratification was found to reduce the negative effects (e.g., low self-esteem, use of crack and cocaine, and low educational attainment) of rejection sensitivity, the disposition to expect, perceive, and overreact to interpersonal rejection (Ayduk et al. 2000).

In collaboration with Mischel, I recently replicated these experiments with 10-year-old children. Children who waited longer were, according to a variety of measures, happier, more relaxed, and better at handling stress. These results parallel findings by Funder, Block, and Block (1983), who found that two different delay of gratification measures at age four predicted uniformly positive traits later in childhood:

Boys who delayed gratification tended to be independently and consistently described as deliberative, attentive and able to concentrate, reasonable, reserved, cooperative, and generally manifesting an ability to modulate motivational and emotional impulse. Boys who did not delay gratification, by contrast, were irritable, restless and fidgety, aggressive, and generally not self-controlled. Girls who delayed gratification were independently and consistently described as intelligent, resourceful, and competent. Girls who did not delay tended to go to pieces under stress, to be victimized by other children, and to be easily offended, sulky, and whiny. (p. 1198)

Unlike Kohn, I believe that we should devote more — not less — intentional effort to cultivating self-discipline in children. Teaching self-discipline means helping children understand how to achieve their goals. When we teach children how to regulate their attention, emotions, and behavior, we empower them to pursue goals that are most important to them. ■

REFERENCES

- Ayduk, Ozlem, Rodolfo Mendoza-Denton, Walter Mischel, Geraldine Downey, P.K. Peake, and Monica Rodriguez. “Regulating the Interpersonal Self: Strategic Self-Regulation for Coping with Rejection Sensitivity.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79 (2000): 776-792.
- Funder, David C., Jack H. Block, and Jeanne Block. “Delay of Gratification: Some Longitudinal Personality Correlates.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 44, no. 6 (1983): 1198-1213.
- Mischel, Walter, Yuichi Shoda, and Monica Rodriguez. “Delay of Gratification in Children.” *Science* 244 (1989): 933-938.

KAPPAN welcomes your essays. E-mail BackTalk contributions to Kappan@pdkintl.org.

■ ANGELA LEE DUCKWORTH is an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

File Name and Bibliographic Information

k0903duc.pdf

Angela Lee Duckworth, BACKTALK: Self-Discipline Is Empowering, Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 90, No. 07, March 2009, pp. 536.

Copyright Notice

Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc., holds copyright to this article, which may be reproduced or otherwise used only in accordance with U.S. law governing fair use. MULTIPLE copies, in print and electronic formats, may not be made or distributed without express permission from Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc. All rights reserved.

Note that photographs, artwork, advertising, and other elements to which Phi Delta Kappa does not hold copyright may have been removed from these pages.

All images included with this document are used with permission and may not be separated from this editorial content or used for any other purpose without the express written permission of the copyright holder.

Please fax permission requests to the attention of KAPPAN Permissions Editor at 812/339-0018 or e-mail permission requests to kappan@pdkintl.org.

For further information, contact:

Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc.
408 N. Union St.
Bloomington, Indiana 47405-3800
812/339-1156 Phone
800/766-1156 Tollfree
812/339-0018 Fax

<http://www.pdkintl.org>

Find more articles using PDK's Publication Archives Search at
<http://www.pdkintl.org/search.htm>.