

Researchers find early emergence of procrastination in children

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A new study out of Brock's Developing Memory and Cognition Lab shows there may be more to those heartfelt requests from toddlers for "five more minutes" before heading to bed than researchers have

previously understood.

Brock student researchers Taissa Fuke, Ege Kamber and Melissa Alunni, alongside Associate Professor Caitlin Mahy in the Department of Psychology, co-authored "The emergence of [procrastination](#) in [early childhood](#): relations with executive control and [future](#)-oriented cognition," which was recently published in *Developmental Psychology*.

The paper shows that not only does procrastination behavior emerge as early as age three, but it also becomes more characteristic over time and appears to be linked with other future-thinking behaviors, such as delaying gratification.

One of the key distinctions drawn by the researchers is the difference between task avoidance and procrastination, which boils down to two [important factors](#): a personal need to do something and an intention to do it—eventually.

"Task avoidance for adults may be as simple as staying away from a social event we don't want to go to," says Kamber, a Brock Ph.D. student. "But in procrastination, we know we have to do this task, even if it's undesirable, but we put it off."

Mahy says determining intention, especially in children as young as three, can be challenging, so the team was careful to have parents report on tasks children intended on doing or had to do themselves, such as getting out of bed in the morning.

As a result, they detected an interesting pattern.

"The 3- and 4-year-olds procrastinated in different areas than the 5- and 6-year-olds," Mahy says. "The [younger children](#) were much more likely to procrastinate on tidying up messes and engaging in bedtime or

mealtime routines, whereas the [older children](#) were more likely to procrastinate on doing homework or doing chores around the house."

Kamber, whose Ph.D. research focuses on episodic future thinking, says the connection between procrastination and future-thinking behaviors, such as delaying gratification, has been of particular interest to him.

Using the example of the marshmallow test, where [children](#) are given a marshmallow and assured that if they don't eat it right away, they can have a second marshmallow in 10 minutes, he explains how delayed gratification and procrastination involve similar forms of impulse control.

"You know you need to wait because the future outcome is better, but it's also hard to wait, because it's a marshmallow," he says. "Delayed gratification is our ability to inhibit our current impulses to focus on greater future outcomes, but with procrastination, we have to inhibit our impulse to not do the undesirable task in order to get it completed."

The connection between procrastination and future-thinking is important because it involves "having empathy for your future self," Mahy says.

"The thing about procrastination is that you get an instant reward of not vacuuming the carpet or not doing homework—you get to enjoy the current moment," she says. "But the task that you will eventually have to do still hangs over your head and tends to create more anxiety over time—you're effectively punishing your future self with the [task](#) and also the prolonged anxiety."

More information: T. S. S. Fuke et al, The emergence of procrastination in early childhood: relations with executive control and future-oriented cognition, *Developmental Psychology*, (2023). [DOI: 10.1037/dev0001502](https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0001502)

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