

## **Developing the Capacity to Inhibit Impulses and to Delay Behavior**

Impulsiveness is, in essence, the failure of the brain to place a filter between an impulse and an action. Impulsive individuals therefore have a deficit in the natural brain process that involves consideration prior to engaging in a behavior in situations where it is warranted.

Obviously, skills that are practiced become more capable. Unfortunately, the practice of delaying or inhibiting behaviors tends to be something that individuals who are impulsive avoid. The impulsive brain tends to view situations that are immediately gratifying, highly stimulating, easy to learn, and non-frustrating very positively. The converse of this is also often true – tasks involving delayed gratification, effort in the absence of a high degree of stimulation, sustained effort to master, and substantial frustration, are perceived quite negatively by the brains of impulsive individuals. These individuals tend to avoid such tasks and, instead, gravitate to activities that do not involve those qualities.

The first necessary step in overcoming impulsiveness is awareness of impulsive behavior. For younger children, prompting them to consider whether or not they were thinking at the time of impulsive behavior can be quite helpful. Many parents (myself included) frequently ask impulsive children to explain their thinking when, in actuality, by being impulsive they were not thinking. It is helpful for the parent to shift their own perspective to one of considering impulsiveness as the culprit. By doing this, we can promote that perspective in the child.

Once a child is able to easily distinguish between poor choices and the failure to think, they are in a position to begin developing purposefully filtering and considering.

Consider the concept of purposeful waiting. Any activity can be modified to involve some degree of delaying gratification, delaying action and consideration. Purposeful waiting involves structuring activities so that the child uses self-control as a central requirement for successful completion. Such children's games as "Simon Says" and "Red light Green light" involve such processes. However, virtually any activity can incorporate this. For example, when shooting a basketball, purposefully delaying for a count of 5 seconds prior to any shot involves the practice of self-control.

Activities that rely heavily on self-control and self-discipline (yoga, distance swimming, etc.) may be helpful for impulsive children if they are able to tolerate the high demand for self-control. It may be necessary with impulsive children to begin with activities and tasks that require brief periods of exerting control and increasing both the duration and the degree of control necessary over time.

Chris Sheaffer, PhD