

Don't hurry up.....wait!

If your mother is like mine, you probably heard at some point that “patience is a virtue.” And while it may have been tough to swallow as a child, I’ve grown to appreciate how true this saying is. As I look around at families these days, I’m startled at the low tolerance folks have when they need to wait for something. Look around and you’ll see it, too. You may be in line at the gas station or the library or the bank, and it won’t be too long until someone sighs loudly or makes a comment about how late they’re going to be now.

I’m not saying we should automatically judge these people negatively – we’ve all been aggravated at times! I do think it’s symptomatic of where American culture has been heading lately. We adults have grown accustomed to instant gratification; convenience has become our mantra. Why wait in line at the bank anymore? We have the ATM. Better yet, how about the drive-thru ATM? That way we don’t have to even get out of our car, never mind talk to another person.

Even eating has become a rushed ritual. Meals used to be the time set aside for families to catch up on their day, discuss what’s happening in the news, or just hang out and enjoy each other’s company. Today, we have Express-take out and Call-ahead seating, if home delivery isn’t convenient enough. And if we have to wait too long for any of these services, we call back (probably on speed-dial) to find out what the hold-up is. Ironically, at least half the family is MIA for the meal, anyway, on their way to or from some other activity.

Feeling stressed? Imagine the lessons this mad-rush world is teaching our kids. It’s a small wonder that they’ve adopted the inability to sit still and wait for a while. I’m not talking Disneyland-style waiting, which is a testament to anyone’s patience. I’m thinking more of the “wait-and-see” before we rush to do/buy what they want---no, need – no, got-to-have. You can hear it from the voices of preschoolers: “Mom, why do we have to wait SO long?” (at the movies) to preteens “Isn’t there ANOTHER store we can go to that’s not so crowded?”

Waiting Lessons

What fascinates me is not the child’s reaction, which after all, is timeless. It is the impatience that is mirrored in the response of more and more parents nowadays. You hear retorts such as, “I KNOW, Joey, I didn’t think it was going to be this busy. Now we’ll be late for the party.” As you can imagine, the scene escalates, the clerk looks alarmed, and the fun continues from there.

What reaction would I like to see more? I’d be delighted to see parents explain to their kids that everybody has the same issue. We could try saying, “I’m sure all the other folks in line would like to get home soon, too.” Or, better yet, “This present is worth waiting for. Don’t you think Jill is going to love it?”

Delaying gratification is a skill that is learned. Very young children just don’t have it. If you ask them if they want one cookie now, or three later, they invariably pick the instant treat. Not until the ages of 6 or 7

do children acquire the ability to think a bit about short-term vs. long-term rewards. So it may take some old-fashioned distraction with the younger set. By this, I don't mean bribery via candy bar, but maybe playing "I Spy" while you wait your turn

Once kids are older, it's our responsibility as parents to help them understand time management, limited resources, and the other factors that are behind "The Wait". Are we stressed because we only left 10 minutes for our errand, and every stoplight wasn't green on the way? How long did we know that we had to buy this present? Or we can use the opportunity to point out that technology is changing our world. Maybe the line is shorter at the "express check-out" aisle, but we'd have to learn how to use it. Perhaps your child can walk you through it --- they're totally unfazed by new technology -- and feel like a problem-solver. Or you can discuss whether machines replacing the work of people is always a good thing; is faster ALWAYS better? Sharing each other's views might give them a new perspective on waiting, and it's certainly more productive than just suffering through the delay.

At the end of the day, the important skill we'd like our kids to develop is to wait graciously when they need to. No one is served by cranky impatience. And in today's jam-packed schedules, I think sometimes we can slow down and benefit from waiting. We may not be able to control the delay, but we can be in charge of modeling how we handle it. So, here's to a little more patience in all of us.

Maureen O'Brien, PhD is a developmental psychologist and mother of twins who lives in Canton. She lectures and consults on child development and parenting issues and is the author of the parenting series, Watch Me Grow: I'm One-Two-Three (available at Amazon.com).