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THE GIFT OF “NOT YET”



A World of Instant Gratification

We live in a world of immediacy and instant gratification. Groceries arrive at our doors within hours, entertainment streams instantly, and answers are available at the touch of a screen. For today's children and teenagers, waiting has become increasingly unfamiliar. As a result, our youth have very few opportunities to experience the benefits of delayed gratification.

Parents also naturally want to protect their children from difficult emotions, often providing them with immediate relief or happiness to avoid tantrums or simply to see them smile. Whether it is handing them a device during a difficult moment, solving a problem for them immediately, or helping them avoid feelings of frustration or anxiety altogether, adults often step in with the best intentions. Yet research continues to show that some of the most important developmental growth occurs in moments of pause when youth have to wait, struggle, recover, and try again.

Why “Not Yet” Matters

Psychologist Walter Mischel famously explored delayed gratification through the “Marshmallow Test” in the 1960s and 1970s. Children were given a choice: eat one marshmallow immediately or wait and receive two later. The study highlighted something significant — the ability to delay gratification is strongly linked to later success in areas such as emotional regulation, problem-solving, resilience, academic achievement, and relationships.



Delayed gratification is not simply about patience or obedience. It forms part of what psychologists call executive functioning — the brain's “air traffic control system” that helps children manage emotions, focus attention, plan ahead, persist through challenges, and regulate impulses. Every time a child or teenager hears “not yet” and learns to tolerate the feelings that arise in a safe environment, important neural pathways are strengthened. As such, allowing some discomfort is not neglect; it is a long-term investment for our youth.

Understanding the “Displacement Effect”

One of the growing concerns in child development today is what professionals call the *displacement effect*. The important question here is: **What developmental experience is being replaced when screens step in?**

Children and teenagers develop essential life skills through repeated exposure to everyday challenges:

- waiting,
- boredom,
- frustration,
- social discomfort,
- effort,
- disappointment,
- problem-solving,
- and recovery after mistakes.



These moments may seem small, but they are the practice ground for emotional and cognitive growth. When screens consistently remove these experiences — especially during moments of discomfort — children lose opportunities to rehearse the very skills they need to build resilience and independence.

Reframing The Screen-Time Debate

For many years, the conversation focused almost entirely on *how much* screen time children were having. However, modern research suggests the more important questions are:

- What is the screen replacing?
- When is it being used?
- What purpose is it serving?
- Is it supporting development, or avoiding it?

The issue is often not the total number of minutes spent on a device, but *where* screens appear in our youth’s daily lives:

- during transitions,
- before sleep,
- in moments of boredom,
- during frustration,
- or whenever emotional discomfort arises.

Screens can quickly become emotional regulators — calming anxiety, easing boredom, or preventing frustration. While this may provide immediate relief, nervous systems actually grow stronger through manageable experiences of discomfort, not through avoiding them altogether.

Not Addiction — Under-Rehearsal

Importantly, many children and teenagers are not “addicted” to screens in the traditional sense. Instead, they may simply be *under-rehearsed* in coping with difficult emotions and experiences without digital relief.

A cycle can easily develop:

- A child or teenager struggles emotionally.
- A screen is offered to reduce distress.
- The child or teenager feels immediate relief.
- Opportunities to practise emotional regulation decrease.
- Tolerance for discomfort gradually narrows over time.

The risk is not screen use. The risk is exclusive reliance.



Not elimination — expansion

For youth, screens often serve very real and meaningful purposes. Devices can provide:

- predictability,
- sensory regulation,
- focus,
- comfort,
- control,
- and opportunities for success and mastery.

The goal is therefore not removal, punishment, or shame around screen use. It is to protect screens from replacing the experiences that childhood depends on.

The developmental concern arises when screens become the *only* coping strategy available.

Youth also need opportunities to build:

- co-regulation with adults,
- flexible coping skills,
- sensory regulation strategies,
- frustration tolerance,
- and confidence in handling discomfort gradually.

The aim is not elimination — it is *expansion*. It is about intentionally protecting moments of productive struggle, rather than offering digital distraction when difficult feelings are around.

Developmental Skills at Risk

When screens consistently replace key developmental experiences, children and teenagers may have fewer opportunities to strengthen important capacities such as:

- **Emotional Regulation:** Learning to calm themselves, manage frustration, and recover *from setbacks*.
- **Executive Functioning:** Developing persistence, organisation, planning, sequencing, and problem-solving skills.
- **Social Competence:** Practising real-time conversation, reading body language, negotiating conflict, and repairing relationships.
- **Identity Formation:** Building self-awareness through reflection, privacy, quiet thinking, and real-life experiences rather than constant online performance or comparison.
- **Sleep and Emotional Processing:** Sleep is not simply “rest.” It is an active process where the brain consolidates learning, processes emotions, and recalibrates the nervous system. Screens — particularly before bedtime — can disrupt both the biological and psychological conditions necessary for healthy sleep.



Different Ages, Different Vulnerabilities

As children grow, developmental demands increase — and the effects of displacement often become more visible. The impact of screens varies for each developmental stage.

Developmental Stage	Greatest Risk	Practical Tips:
Early Childhood (0–5 years):	○ Reduced interaction and fewer conversational exchanges with caregivers.	○ Prioritise face-to-face interaction, conversation, reading, and imaginative play over passive screen viewing. ○ Avoid using screens to calm every tantrum or moment of boredom. These moments help children develop emotional regulation. ○ Create predictable routines around meals, bedtime, and play. ○ Choose high-quality content and watch together where possible, talking about what your child sees. ○ Keep bedrooms and mealtimes screen-free.
Middle Childhood (6–10 years):	○ The displacement of effort, competence-building, frustration tolerance, and independent play.	○ Encourage hobbies that require effort and persistence, such as puzzles, sports, music, art, building, or outdoor play. ○ Allow children opportunities to experience manageable frustration instead of stepping in immediately. ○ Introduce waiting periods before screen access to strengthen delayed gratification. ○ Use screens intentionally rather than automatically during transitions or boredom. ○ Involve children in creating family technology rules so they develop ownership and responsibility.
Pre-Adolescence (10–13 years):	Heightened vulnerability due to: ○ peer comparison, ○ identity development, ○ emotional sensitivity, ○ social pressure, ○ and sleep disruption.	○ Focus on teaching self-regulation rather than relying only on strict control. ○ Keep devices out of bedrooms overnight to protect sleep and emotional processing. ○ Encourage regular offline social interaction, movement, and unstructured downtime. ○ Talk openly about social media, online comparison, and emotional well-being. ○ Model healthy technology habits as parents — children notice adult behaviour more than adult rules.
Adolescence (14–18 years):	○ Teenagers require increasing autonomy, but they still need structure, scaffolding, and emotional support as executive functioning continues to develop.	○ Collaboratively negotiate healthy technology boundaries rather than imposing only punitive rules ○ Focus conversations on balance, wellbeing, sleep, mental health, and responsible digital citizenship. ○ Encourage teens to notice how certain apps, games, or online interactions affect their mood and stress levels. ○ Maintain screen-free family routines such as meals, car conversations, and shared activities. ○ Encourage part-time responsibilities, volunteering, sport, creative pursuits, and real-world competence-building experiences.

What Parents Can Focus On

Rather than aiming for complete removal of technology, our focus can shift to protecting the experiences children and teenagers need most. A helpful question to ask is:

“What was meant to happen in this moment instead?”

Prioritise the non-negotiables:

- healthy sleep,
- face-to-face connection,
- effortful learning,
- peer interaction,
- movement and play,
- and unstructured downtime.

Once these foundations are protected, screens can be integrated more thoughtfully and flexibly.



The Gift of “Not Yet”

As difficult as it can be, allowing children and teenagers to experience manageable frustration is not harmful — it is developmental nourishment.

When we resist the urge to immediately rescue, distract, or smooth over every uncomfortable feeling, we communicate something powerful to our children and teenagers:

- “You can cope.”
- “You can wait.”
- “You can recover.”
- “You are capable of doing hard things.”

The small moments matter:

- waiting for a turn,
- working through boredom,
- persisting with homework,
- navigating social conflict,
- or tolerating disappointment.

These are the moments where resilience, confidence, emotional regulation, and independence are quietly built.

In a world that increasingly offers instant gratification, perhaps one of the greatest gifts we can give our children and teenagers is the **opportunity to experience the power of “not yet.”**

