

Is It Easier to Do It Yourself?

Our appetites and our relationship to them

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My husband used to be sweet enough to wake me up with coffee and breakfast every morning. This went on for years. It was so nice. I mean, being woken up to the smell of coffee, how could a person be better accommodated? But I remember, to my embarrassment now, waking up a little earlier than usual on some days, and sitting in bed and waiting for the coffee. How silly it sounds. But I just got used to it arriving, and so I'd wait rather than make it myself. I'm SURE I hid it, but waiting, I'd feel impatient.

Then I began to get up earlier than he did. I started to make my own coffee. Funny enough, now I sometimes forget to make coffee or return home only to see I never even poured it from the pot.

Comedians have gotten very good at joking about what happens when we return to visit our parents' homes as adults. The big difference we feel is being kept to someone else's schedule. You are kind of waiting and helpless, there to be served. It's nice. You'd think we'd be grateful for it, but it kind of makes us crazy.

I thought of these things while reading George Ainslie's recent work in behavioral science. He's been using the study of addiction to fill out our understanding of self-control, motivation, and reward.

Ainslie is interested in the idea that appetite, though there are some limits on it, is a *reward-seeking process*.

We usually think of appetites as things that simply exist or not and that simply get fulfilled or not. He's arguing that pleasure does not just instantly accrue to things for which we have an appetite. We are intimately involved in deciding what is attractive to us. (A kiss from a stranger can be indescribably painful, etc. A dropped donut loses all of its appeal. A donut has zero appeal to healthy types.)

(Even the idea that "pleasure" is what describes what we are motivated to get is challenged by Ainslie. We see that we are often motivated to do things we immediately after dislike. (Smoking that cigarette, calling the ex). We pursue more than just pleasure.)

I think Ainslie really illuminates what was going on with my different relationships to coffee, but also a bit about why children might get frustrated more than adults do.

Waiting for coffee (that you have a long history of enjoying) is something that will increase one's appetite for it. If I woke up early enough, I'd be imagining that coffee coming, with nothing to distract me. Ainslie calls this a recursive process. I was assisting my appetite for

coffee by anticipating it arriving. Recognizing or feeling an appetite then gets me to focus further on how close it is to coming, and so on. We can develop “explosive” appetites by this back and forth. We can use “pathological” examples to illustrate this- those who are trying to quit smoking experience these before they give in to that cigarette, those who are trying to eat healthy when they give in to the donut! But the process is going on in all of our behavioral choices.

If I’m less likely to be frustrated by going through a slower and longer process of making coffee, how much less frustrating must life be for a child who is able to independently take care of many tasks by herself?

Is there a connection between children acting bratty and ungrateful and the degree of service they get?

Oh, I think there's some common wisdom out there that already says yes. There is, of course, on going research on children's self-control, and the originator of the "marshmallow test" has just written a retrospective. I know child psychologists have been talking about independence in children for some time. But out there among the parents, there is also an awful lot of pity for children who do nearly any amount of self-care (I've heard it myself).

A lot of parents want to meet every need of their child. But what does this mean? It means young children are left having to wait for someone else to bring them what they want. They can’t get their own drinks, they can’t make their own snacks, they can’t decide when the family leaves the house. What if whiny children are experiencing cravings of the sort I was having, the kind that made me feel kind of crabby, too?

This had always been a parenting trick of mine: You want a snack? Make it yourself. My eight-year old has taken to baking due to this. (That's her making cinnamon rolls from scratch in the photo.) Guess what? Like a lot of cooks, she sometimes ends up being more interested in making her creations than eating her creations.



What if, in our rush to take care of their every want and need, we are denying children the chance to lessen their interests in what they think they very much want or need. Most children outgrow temper tantrums. What role is played by those children being able to do a lot more for themselves, and moderate their cravings thereby?

When we are being spoiled, we never dream it would be easier to “just do something yourself.” But depending on the measure of easy -- it just might be true.

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