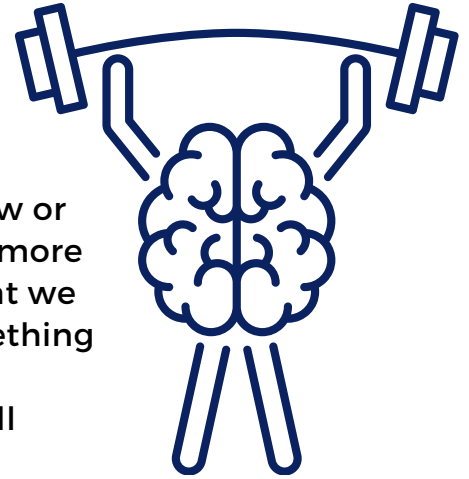


WILLPOWER AND HABITS

Many people have a tradition of setting resolutions at the start of the new year. If this sounds like you, you may have already noticed that your good intentions are not always leading to new or changed habits. Setting a new habit or changing an old one is more than just a matter of intention, it is often a combination of what we refer to as "willpower" - the mental energy required to do something that requires our self-control or other executive functioning skills - and identifying one or more tools and strategies that will help reinforce whatever behavior you're trying to change.



Research has shown that we can't just will ourselves to change, we need structures and routines that help create pathways for that choice in our brains. If we want to reduce our social media usage, for instance, we need to counteract the dopamine hits that we've become accustomed to. We might want to find a new source for that dopamine (a replacement activity) or supplement our willpower with various techniques so that we can sustain our new intention until it becomes our new norm.

Research suggests that building a beneficial habit is more impactful than strengthening your willpower to explicitly resist a temptation. Willpower requires thoughtfulness and intentionality, whereas habits are often done without even consciously thinking about them.



The more natural a choice becomes, the easier it will be to keep repeating that choice in the future. If someone is trying to change their eating habits, for instance, their task is easier if the foods they're trying to avoid aren't easily accessible and the foods they want to eat instead are. Convenience increases consumption, and, over time, that new snack may just become your default choice that takes no effort on your part.

There are multiple strategies you can employ that might vary depending on the habit you want to create. Some habits will be boosted by physical actions, such as when a person who wants to wake up earlier puts their alarm clock across the room and has to get out of bed to turn it off. The action accompanying the new habit makes it less desirable to hit the snooze button, and you are thus more likely to stick to your commitment and wake up earlier than before. Other habits might be boosted by a cognitive task, such as when you mentally consider the options you have, and reframe the choice to not just focus on the immediate benefit. **When we get in the habit of analyzing a decision in terms of both its short- and long-term consequences, it often makes it easier for us to make the choice we want for our future self.** And, helpfully, reframing a decision in this manner does not require increased willpower, but instead moves the decision from being guided solely by our limbic system to incorporating our prefrontal cortex as well.

MARSHMALLOW EXPERIMENT

One of the best-known studies on willpower and delayed gratification in children is widely known as the marshmallow experiment. In the 1970s, researchers at Stanford gave pre-school age children a choice: 1) receive one marshmallow now or 2) receive two marshmallows after waiting for 15 minutes. In almost every case, pre-schoolers were unable to resist the marshmallow in front of them and demonstrated the relative weakness of their self-control. In addition to confirming that self-control is something that is learned over time, the marshmallow experiment also showed that removing the physical proximity of the treat or distracting yourself with other things to think about were both strategies that helped increase a child's willpower. **When you think about building your child's skills and habits, keep in mind that they need practice using their self-control** and that there are strategies you can utilize to help them form good habits.

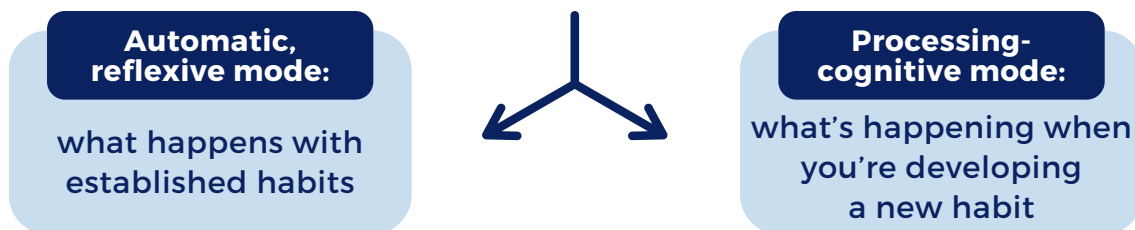
Marshmallows, of course, are not the only desirable thing for children. In today's world, both children and adults are constantly surrounded by a feast of distractions, from short-form videos and social media to the endless stream of information - both beneficial and harmful—readily available online. Our default has become an expectation for instant gratification; why do I need to read the book when I can ask AI to generate a summary for me, or go to the store when I can have the item delivered to me with the click of a button?



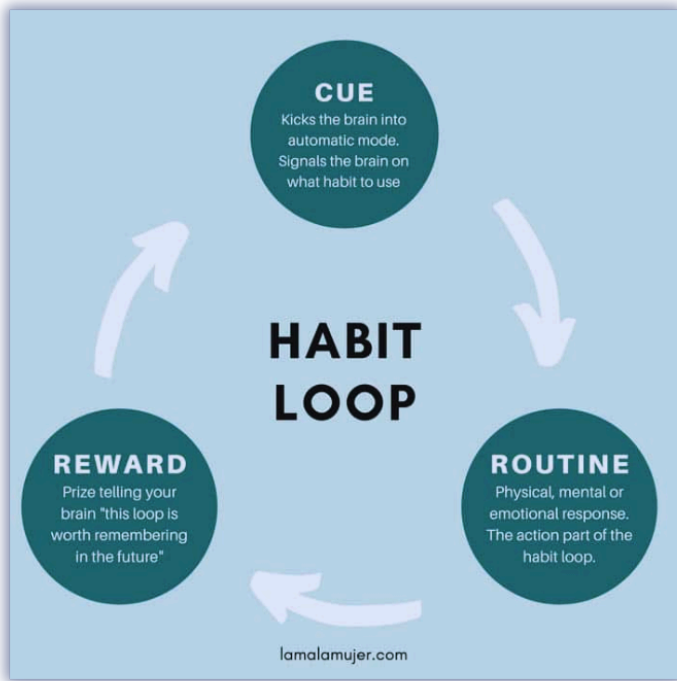
The desirability of the benefits technology can bring can easily overwhelm our self-control unless we can utilize our willpower and develop good habits so that we're not just consuming these "treats" without intentionality.

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN OUR BRAINS

Although we instinctively think of habits as something that happens automatically without thought, MIT researchers showed that even habits are controlled by a small part of our prefrontal cortex, the infralimbic cortex. No matter how ingrained a habit may be, it's still getting a signal from our brain that tells that habit to activate. The study's findings also suggest that even when a new habit is formed, the old habit still exists in our brain and can be reactivated if the right conditions were to be created. That's in part because our brain operates on two levels:



Knowing all of this can help us be more attentive to the choices we want to make. Habits can, in fact, be broken, but until your new habit is fully established you often need to be consciously reinforcing it. When considering the habits we might have with social media or smartphones, it's worth considering how these apps and devices specifically manipulate our brains to produce dopamine, making us more likely to continue using them, and thereby establishing new, if unintended, habits. These effects are magnified in the brains of adolescents, making habits formed in adolescence potentially more challenging to change in adulthood.

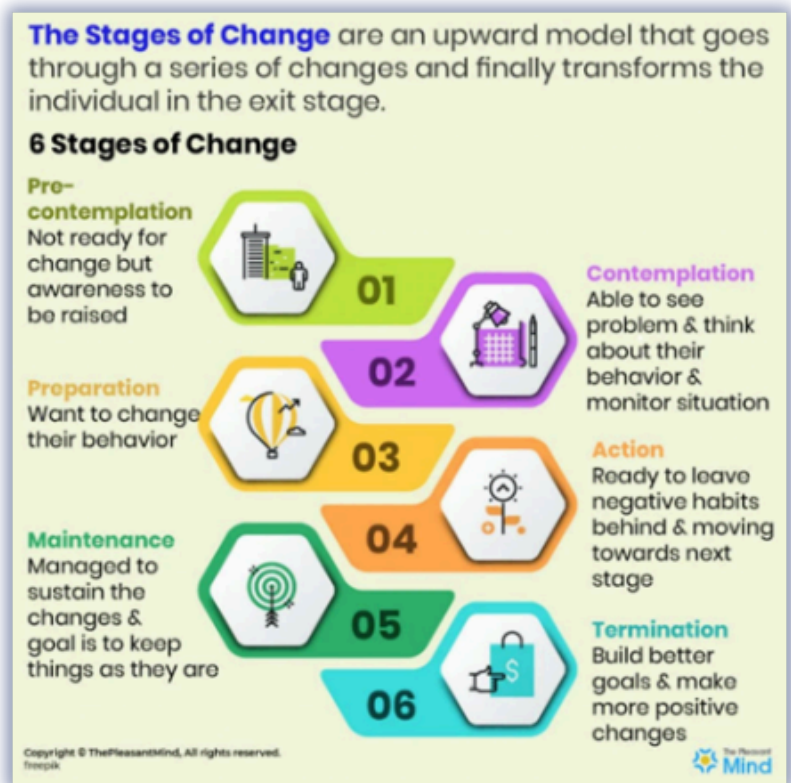


As parents, we can help model this to our children and encourage them to incorporate it into their own decision-making processes. If a parent is hoping to reduce the amount of time they spend on their phone, for instance, so that they can prioritize spending more time with their family, they might note out loud when they're instinctually reaching for their phone and say something like, "That would be fun for the moment, but I'd miss out on hearing about your day. Tell me more about what happened at school!" If you're trying to help your child do this, keep in mind that their brains are still growing, and they need practice both in developing self-control and the strategies that will help them be successful in overcoming temptation.

THE 6 STAGES OF BEHAVIOR CHANGE

The Transtheoretical model, originally designed by researchers to understand how individuals make meaningful changes, offers a valuable framework for guiding your family's resolutions. Whether you're thinking about cutting down on screen time, prioritizing family dinners, or planning more outdoor adventures, this approach can guide your family through the process—from contemplation to action to maintaining those positive changes.

Where do you see yourself in the Stages of Change? Recognizing your current stage is a powerful first step toward meaningful progress. It's also important to remember that not every family member, including your children, may be at the same stage. **Communication is key to understanding the why behind starting a new family goal or changing a habit that may not be serving or nurturing your family unit.** Take time to sit together, share your perspectives, and collaborate on ways to meet your family goals as a team. By working collectively, you can create a stronger, more connected family foundation.



THE BRAIN'S ROLE IN STRENGTHENING FAMILY GOALS

The start of a new year is the perfect time for your family to hit the reset button and dream up some fun goals and changes to focus on together. It's not just about the parents setting the tone—your kids will love being part of the process too! And here's the best part: **everyone benefits**. By choosing more family time over screen time, you're not only building stronger connections, but you're also giving your brains a boost of those feel-good dopamine vibes. Kids thrive when they feel loved and engaged, and you'll all walk away with hearts (and minds!) full from the time spent together.

Parenting decisions, especially those about technology, often feel like mental gymnastics... and that's no coincidence. These choices rely on key regions in the brain, such as the prefrontal cortex, to manage attention, prioritize tasks, and adapt to new situations. The good news is that neuroscience tells us that our parent brains are equipped for the challenge! By leaning on executive function, we can prioritize what matters most and create intentional habits that benefit our families for years to come. Executive function has three characteristic features: it is effortful, operates consciously, and engaged in service of novel goals as opposed to rote or overlearned ones. Here's how it works:

Effort Allocation

The brain evaluates how much mental energy a task will take and decides whether it's worth it.

Redirecting Attention

Parenting requires us to filter distractions and focus on what matters most, like family goals over societal pressures.

Creating Habits

Over time, novel parenting decisions, like limiting screen time, can become second nature as the brain automates these behaviors.

For instance, delaying smartphones may seem hard now, but the potential payoff—**better focus, healthier habits, and stronger family bonds**—makes the effort worthwhile

The prefrontal cortex plays a critical role in helping us form habits by automating new behaviors. Over time, as a behavior is repeated and rewarded, the brain shifts control of that behavior from areas involved in attention and decision-making to regions that handle automatic actions. This process allows the brain to free up mental energy for other tasks. **This ability to create habits is deeply embedded in our brain's structure, reflecting its importance in making our actions more efficient and effortless over time.**

Parenting With Purpose

The reason for a behavior change should be for positive gain rather than just avoiding a negative. It's natural to worry about perceived negatives, like your child feeling socially isolated without the latest trends or technologies. But reframing decisions around what your family stands to gain—stronger bonds, healthier habits, and greater emotional resilience—helps create a positive and intentional path forward. **Focus on the benefits, and let them guide your choices toward lasting, meaningful growth for your family.**

POWER IN THE PLEDGE:

HOW DELAYING SMARTPHONES SUPPORTS YOUR FAMILY'S VISION

As a new year begins, it's the perfect opportunity to pause and reflect on the decisions that shape our families and influence the path ahead. Adding the Smart Families Pledge to delay smartphones to your resolutions can be a meaningful way to set a positive tone for 2025, rooted in research-backed strategies for fostering healthy adolescent growth.

A FRESH START FOR YOUR FAMILY

Renowned psychologist, Albert Bandura, emphasizes that we are the architects of our own development, and the choices we make today have lasting impacts. Delaying smartphones and social media is more than just a resolution—it's a **conscious decision to prioritize your child's well-being and nurture a supportive environment for their growth and success.**

WHY THE PLEDGE MATTERS

Taking the Smart Families Pledge isn't just about avoiding technology; it's about creating intentional habits that strengthen family connections and encourage balanced development. This choice sets the stage for long-term benefits, from improved mental health to deeper, more meaningful interactions.

YOUR FAMILY'S JOURNEY IN 2025

This year, embrace the opportunity to align your family's values with actionable steps. By joining the Smart Families community, you'll be a part of the collective strength of families committed to making a difference. Together, we can make 2025 a year of purpose, connection, and growth.

Take the pledge today and start your family's journey toward a healthier, more intentional future!



**Prioritize Family and values.
Delay Social Media.**

**Delay the Smartphone.
No Phones Used in Schools.**



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