RESEARCH

BEHIND THE CAMPAIGN

RESEARCH BRIEF 03

Learning to Wait

Executive function and self-regulation develop with practice and support

Executive function and self-regulation skills develop through interactions and practice, with adults providing support as children grow.

Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University

Based on A Guide to Executive Function and the Activities Guide for Enhancing and Practicing Executive Function Skills

What does the research tell us?

Executive function includes paying attention, remembering information, managing impulses, and adjusting to change. These skills emerge gradually, and age-appropriate games, routines, and supportive interactions offer opportunities to practice them.

What does this have to do with waiting?

Short, manageable waits can provide opportunities to practice taking turns, shifting attention, and coping with small delays. Waiting alone does not teach these skills; the child's readiness and the support available matter.

What can adults do?

Explain what comes next, acknowledge frustration, offer a simple game or conversation, and adjust expectations. Children do not need to wait silently or manage overwhelming delays without help.

THE CONNECTION TO WAIT WITHOUT SCREENS

Not every wait needs a screen. With responsive adult support, ordinary waiting moments can offer opportunities to practice emerging skills.

ORIGINAL SOURCES

Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University: A Guide to Executive Function; Enhancing and Practicing Executive Function Skills with Children from Infancy to Adolescence.