Instant Gratification and Self-Control in an Experiment with Children and Teenagers

Tabea Bucher-Koenen[*]   Carsten Schmidt[†]

University of Mannheim and MEA   University of Mannheim.

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Abstract

We observe preferences over time of school children in a slightly modified food choice experiment of Read and van Leeuwen (1998). We use individuals aged between 6 and 18 in order to evaluate how time-related preferences evolve with increasing age. In contrast to existing literature dealing with changing discount rates over the life-cycle we do not ask for preferences between hypothetical payoffs but offer tangible choices in terms of Smarties (small sugar-coated chocolate sweets) and apples. In a within-subject design the pupils choose between the healthy and the unhealthy food item on two consecutive days. On the first day they state their preference regarding tomorrow's consumption and on the second day they pick a food item for immediate consumption. We find that most of the 6 to 7 year olds consistently choose chocolate for future and immediate consumption. With pupils age 8 to 12 an increase of time-inconsistent behavior - pupils naïvely planning to consume an apple tomorrow and then choosing chocolate for immediate consumption - can be observed. From age 14 on a larger share of pupils is sophisticated

in the sense that they plan to and actually do consume an apple. In accordance with the literature, we observe that girls switch more often.