

Studying for SATs? Strategic self-control may beat pure willpower

September 28 2022



An open book and notebook. Credit: Aaron Burden, Unsplash, CC0 (creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/)

In two surveys of nearly 20,000 high schoolers, students who reported using at least one self-control strategy—such as turning off their

phone—tended to spend more time practicing for the SAT and had higher SAT scores than students who relied purely on willpower. Chayce Baldwin of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Angela Duckworth of the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, and co-authors present these findings in the open-access journal *PLoS ONE* on September 28, 2022.

In working towards a goal, a person might employ self-control strategies that help them align their actions with their goal and avoid appealing alternatives, such as tracking their progress. Alternately, they might employ pure willpower to avoid temptations and force themselves to work. Prior research suggests strategic self-control may be more effective than willpower, but few studies have compared these approaches in real-world settings.

To shed new light on the topic, Baldwin and colleagues partnered with the College Board to conduct two survey studies of 19,822 U.S. high-school students. The [surveys](#) included questions about how the students motivated themselves while studying for the SAT exam, which is used by colleges to make admission decisions. For instance, students indicated if they had disabled their cellphone, set up a distraction-free place to study or created a study schedule—or if they "just willed themselves" to study.

Statistical analysis of the results showed that the use of self-control strategies was associated with more time spent practicing for the SAT exam and higher SAT scores, even after accounting for differences in socioeconomics and prior achievements among the students.

The more self-control strategies students reported using, the higher their SAT scores tended to be. However, as more strategies were used, the additional benefit of each one diminished, suggesting that students may only need to employ a limited number of self-control strategies to enjoy

their apparent benefits.

On the basis of these results, the researchers suggest that helping [students](#) use [self-control](#) strategies could be a cost-effective way to boost their SAT scores, especially given the high expense of formal SAT coaching. They also call for further observational and [experimental research](#) to help confirm and build on these findings.

More information: Chayce Baldwin et al, Self-control and SAT outcomes: Evidence from two national field studies, *PLoS ONE* (2022). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0274380](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0274380)

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Citation: Studying for SATs? Strategic self-control may beat pure willpower (2022, September 28) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-09-sats-strategic-self-control-pure-willpower.html>

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