

Handling Boredom: Why It's Good for Your Child

“Mom, Dad....I’m bored.”

Makes you feel put on the spot, right? You might even feel like you're a bad parent. Most of us pressured to solve this "problem" right away. We usually respond to our kids' boredom by providing technological entertainment or structured activities. But that's actually counter-productive. Children need to encounter and engage with the raw stuff that life is made of: unstructured time.



Why is unstructured time so important for your child's healthy development?

One of our biggest challenges as adults, and even as teenagers, is learning to manage our time well. So it's essential for children to have the experience of deciding for themselves how to use periods of unstructured time, or they'll never learn to manage it.

Maybe even more important, unstructured time gives children the opportunity to explore their inner and outer worlds, which is the beginning of creativity. This is how they learn to engage with themselves and the world, to imagine and invent and create.

Unstructured time also challenges children to explore their own passions. If we keep them busy with lessons and structured activity, or they "fill" their time with screen entertainment, they never learn to respond to the stirrings of their own hearts, which might lead them to build a fort in the back yard, make a monster from clay, write a short story or song, organize the neighborhood kids into making a movie, or simply study the bugs on the sidewalk (as Einstein reportedly did for hours). These calls from our heart are what lead us to those passions that make life meaningful, and they are available to us beginning in childhood -- but only when children are given free rein to explore and pursue where their interests lead them.

As Nancy H. Blakey said,

“Preempt the time spent on television and organized activities and have them spend it instead on claiming their imaginations. For in the end, that is all we have. If a thing cannot be imagined first -- a cake, a relationship, a cure for AIDS-- it cannot be. Life is bound by what we can envision. I cannot plant imagination into my children. I can, however, provide an environment where their creativity is not just another mess to clean up but welcome evidence of grappling successfully with boredom. It is possible for boredom to deliver us to our best selves, the ones that long for risk and illumination and unspeakable beauty. If we sit still long enough, we may hear the call behind boredom. With practice, we may have the imagination to rise up from the emptiness and answer.”

Most kids given unstructured time rise to the occasion (after some minor complaining) and find something interesting to do with it. Kids are always happiest in self-directed play. That's because play is children's work. It's how they work out emotions and experiences they've had. Watch any group of children playing (outside, when screens are not an option) and they will organize themselves into an activity of some sort, whether that's making a dam at the creek, playing "pretend" or seeing who can jump farthest.

Why does "I'm bored" become a constant refrain for so many kids?

When kids simply can't find something to do, it's usually because:

- They're so used to screen entertainment that they aren't practiced at looking inside themselves for direction.
- Their time is always so structured that they aren't used to finding fun things to do with their "free time."
- They have no one to play with, and haven't yet discovered things they like to do by themselves.
- They need some parental connection. All kids need to check in with their parents for refueling during the course of the day.

Unfortunately, our society is raising a whole generation of children who are addicted to screens. That's because electronics (ipads, phones, computers, game boys) are designed to produce little "dopamine" rewards in our brains as we interact with them. That's so enjoyable that other experiences pale in comparison.

But children need all kinds of other experiences, from building with blocks (motor skills, perceptual abilities) to engaging with other kids (learning how to get along and partner with others) to creative pursuits (becoming a doer, not a passive observer). Children also need to be physically active. Their bodies are designed to move, and if they don't, they have a harder time sustaining attention and staying in a good mood. That's why it's essential to limit screen time.

When children say they're bored, how can parents respond?

First, stop what you're doing and really focus on your child for five minutes. If you use this time to connect, just chat and snuggle, your child will probably get the refueling he needs and be on his way fairly quickly.

If he doesn't pull away from you, and you need to get back to work after a few minutes of fully connecting, consider that maybe he needs a little more time with you. Most of the time when children are whiny and unable to focus, it's because they need more deep connection time with us. Offer to involve him in what you're doing, or take a break from your work to do something together.

Once you're confident that your child has a full "love tank," you can revisit the "what to do" question. By now, he probably has some ideas for something he'd like to go do. If not, tell him that figuring out how to enjoy his own time is his job, but you'd be happy to help him brainstorm about possible activities.

What about when kids really do need help coming up with a boredom-busting activity? How can we help...while still being clear that entertaining themselves is their responsibility?

Most of the time, kids left to their own devices end up doing something interesting, but sometimes they really do need our help, especially if you're newly limiting TV and electronics, or if they suddenly have more time on their hands than usual, for instance when school ends and summer begins. (Once kids get used to limitations on TV and electronics, they become good at entertaining themselves, and more creative at play.)

Even if you need to help your child come up with ideas for "what to do," shift the responsibility to your child, by working with her to create a Boredom Buster Jar. Together, you write down ideas that your child thinks would be fun to do and put them in the Boredom Buster Jar. Whenever a child says she's bored, she picks three pieces of paper from the jar and chooses one of the activities.

Here are 115 examples of screen-free ideas that children can do themselves, that your child might want to include in her **Boredom Buster Jar**.

- Make a book of jokes
- Make an obstacle course in your hall with yarn and tape
- Build a fort with blankets and pillows

• Build a fort with blankets and pillows

- Write your Grandma a letter
- Cut out paper dolls and costumes for them
- Get a magnet and make a list of everything in your house that is magnetized
- Get a ruler and measure things in your house, recording their length
- Put on some music and dance
- Wash the mirror with a sponge
- Write down ten things you love about each person in your family to surprise them
- Brush the dog
- Draw a tree
- Make a dollhouse out of cardboard
- Learn a tongue twister
- Make homemade ice cream in a baggie
- Dig a hole in the back yard
- Give the dog a bath
- Find shapes in the clouds
- Make paper airplanes and fly them
- See how many times you can dribble the basketball
- Cut a guitar out of cardboard and add rubber band strings
- Paint a picture
- Play capture the flag
- Wash the car
- Make a birthday card for the next person you know who is having a birthday
- Plan a treasure hunt, with clues
- Ride your bike
- Make a scene in a cardboard box of the ocean, or a jungle.
- Use boxes to build a castle
- Use an eye dropper to drop vinegar tinted with food coloring onto a pie pan filled with baking soda
- Start a journal
- Make homemade wrapping paper
- Mix ivory soap, kleenex and water to make clean clouds on a cookie sheet
- Organize your room
- Write a story
- Create a play with costumes
- Make paper bag puppets or sock puppets
- Cut out pictures from magazines and make a collage
- Use plain white paper and envelopes and decorate your own personalized stationery
- Cut up old holiday cards and make holiday stickers for next year by coating the back with gelatin glue, let dry (dissolve 2 tsp gelatin in 5 tsp boiling water.)
- Surprise your mom by making lunch
- Make a zoo for your stuffed animals
- Have a lemonade sale
- Make & decorate a calendar of the summer, with important dates marked.
- Put juice & cut-up fruit into ice cube trays to make ice cubes.
- Create a family newspaper/newsletter

- Make dessert
- Use masking tape to make a race track for your cars all over your living room
- Play Tag or Freeze Tag
- Start a collection (leaves, rocks, buttons) and make a museum display
- Hang a clothesline in your room and clip photos to it to make an art display
- Create a circus performance
- Learn a new card game
- Make a potion lab or pouring station outside with food coloring and containers (wear an apron!)
- Set up a shop and be the shop keeper
- Make your room into a rainforest
- Make a sculpture from pretzels and peanut butter
- Write the story of your life
- Do a something kind for someone, in secret
- Make an obstacle course
- Play Simon Says (you will need a friend for this)
- Bowl in your hallway with soda bottles or toilet paper tubes
- Make a placemat (just laminate it at the local copy shop)
- Write some limericks or haiku
- Decorate an old teeshirt with cool buttons & fabric pens
- Start a club
- Make rock candy
- Plant a terrarium
- Make a daisy chain
- Decorate a rock and make a house to keep it as a pet
- Use old cardboard tubes and boxes to build a marble maze.
- Make "funky junk" art out of old jewelry
- Read a book
- Make snow globes or calming jars with glycerin and glitter
- Have a water balloon fight (outside!)
- Memorize a poem and recite it for your parents
- Make a boat using a plastic soda bottle base & popsicle sticks (use duct tape) for the top, then float it at the pond.
- Draw a picture of a desert island with all the things you would want on it
- Blindfold your sibling & take them on a tour of your house & yard, then trade places.
- Play a board game
- Play Mother May I
- Make a fairy house for your garden
- Cut out a crown, tape into a circle to fit your head and decorate
- Create your own board game
- See if you can draw a picture with your foot.
- Draw on the sidewalk with chalk
- Play hopscotch
- Set up a restaurant and serve pretend meals
- Play jumprope
- Play with bubbles in the sink

- Plant some seeds
- Make a windsock
- Use the hose and a tarp to make a slip and slide on your lawn
- Paint your toenails
- Play dodgeball with a soft ball
- Make a curving line of dominoes and knock the first one so they fall down in a row
- Weed the garden
- Make puppets with old socks, buttons & markers.
- Make a list of fun things you can do without a grownup
- Mix liquid hand soap, cornstarch and food coloring into paint and paint the bathtub.
- String beads to make friendship bracelets.
- Use the hose, pvc pipe and soda bottles to construct waterways in your yard
- Use pipe cleaners to make animals
- Use pipe cleaners to make an indoor ring toss game
- Use a basket and string to rig an elevator to hoist stuffed animals up your stairwell
- String a necklace out of pasta
- Practice kicking a soccer ball
- On a hot day, give kids sponges and a bucket of water outside, and let them toss them to each other
- Glue popsicle sticks together to make picture frames, decorate.
- Make and fill a bird feeder
- Make playdoh
- Paint sea shells or rocks
- Make bean bags
- Blow bubbles
- Give your dolls or stuffed animals a bubble bath

If it really does seem like there is nothing to do, is using electronics and TV ever an acceptable solution?

The problem with using TV or electronic games to alleviate boredom is that it is one of those temporary solutions that digs you into a deeper hole. Studies show that kids who regularly use electronics are more likely to feel bored when not doing so than other kids. Even after eliminating the habit, it can take months for them to find other activities about which they're passionate. But don't give up -- you're doing their creativity an enormous favor!

If your child can read, there is never "nothing" to do. There is a whole world of books just waiting. Of course, you will need to schedule a weekly library trip to find wonderful books. And you will have to "hook" your child on a book by beginning it with her. Choose a book she can read, but might not choose on her own -- a simple chapter book, rather than a picture book, for example. Read together until you have to answer the phone or start dinner, but a minimum of a quarter of the book, so your child is hooked. Then tell her it's time for her read-alone time. It's her choice. Does she want to keep reading the book you've just gotten her into, or read

something else? Most kids grab the book and finish it themselves. (If she doesn't, you may need to drop back a level to a slightly simpler book.) Keep choosing engrossing, slightly harder books. If you need ideas for engrossing children's books, there are many wonderful lists online including [5 Star Children's Books](#).

If your child cannot yet read, but you are available, there are thousands of wonderful things you can do with your child. You are likely to draw a blank in that moment when your child is whining, so it's worth making a list in advance. Again, there are many wonderful lists online of parent-child activities. I highly recommend games that are designed to bring you closer to your child, because these will fill his cup, after which he will be more able to figure out what else to do. (They also deepen your relationship, which makes kids much more cooperative and makes you both happier.) Here are some examples: [Games to Play with Your Child for Connection & Emotional Intelligence](#).

So those times when there really is "nothing" to do are mostly when your child cannot yet read to herself well enough to stay engrossed for an hour, and you are otherwise occupied. If you can include your child in your activity, your problem is solved. Small children love to wash windows, cook dinner, help you fold laundry, etc. If they can't be directly involved (for instance, stirring a pot on the stove or cutting the onions), set them up with a child-sized table in or next to your kitchen, give them a plastic knife and some soft fruit, and let them make a fruit salad for dessert. You will never see such a proud child. Or let them "wash" the porch with water while you vacuum inside. Or "clean out" the cupboard where you keep your pots and pans.

If you are doing something that precludes your child helping or even being in the same room, such as sweeping up broken glass, put on some music. Most preschoolers and toddlers love music, and will happily dance to it, or march around beating a rhythm on a pot, and singing to the music. Of course, that's not a quiet activity!

But let's assume you are doing something where they can't be involved, such as rocking the baby to sleep, and your toddler or preschooler needs to be kept busy and quiet. Preschoolers can often happily occupy themselves for an hour with water or sand (set them up in the bathroom with a baby bathtub of water, ice cubes, pouring toys, etc, or a small plastic tub of sand with small toys), and if you have a monitor, you will be able to hear if he needs you. Every family needs a special activity tucked away for each child, that is age appropriate and guaranteed to enchant. The internet has endless recipes for sensory bags and boxes. For me, it was toothpicks, mini marshmallows and gumdrops, which could be fashioned into wonderful sculptures and of course held special appeal because some found their way into little mouths that didn't get much sugar. This may be a compromise you wouldn't make, but every child has something they would find fascinating for half an hour, which you can arrange in advance for those emergency situations.

Another wonderful option is an audio book. A good one will mesmerize your child, and unlike visual screens, they stimulate the imagination and encourage a love of books and stories. If your child can't sit still, give her washable markers and paper to draw pictures of what she is hearing as she listens to the story.

Of course, the real issue with young children is that they need supervision. In such a case, when you can't supervise them, is it so terrible to put your two or three year old in front of a screen for half an hour? Of course not, if it isn't a daily occurrence. Choose something limited in length so there's a natural ending to

eliminate fights when you turn it off, and to keep your child from seeing commercials. Give your child something to look forward to afterwards.



"Once the baby is asleep, you and I will spend some special time together"

And just be sure you turn off the screen once you're available, rather than taking advantage of it to finish "just one more thing" on your computer!