

It's more than OK for kids to be bored – it's good for them

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When children experience boredom, it can result in a brain boost that can push them to explore new activities.

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Boredom is a common part of life, across time and around the world. That's because boredom serves a useful purpose: It motivates people to pursue new goals and challenges.

I'm a professor who studies communication and culture. I am currently writing a book about modern parenting, and I've noticed that many parents try to help their kids avoid boredom. They might see it as a negative emotion that they don't want their children to experience. Or they might steer them into doing something that they see as more productive.

There are various reasons they want to prevent their children from being bored. Many parents are busy with work. They're stressed about money, child care responsibilities and managing other parts of daily life. Making sure a child is occupied with a game, a TV show or an arts and crafts project at home can help parents work uninterrupted, or make dinner, without their children complaining that they are bored.

Parents may also feel pressure for their children to succeed, whether that means getting admitted to a selective school, or becoming a good athlete or an accomplished musician.

Children also spend less time playing freely outside and more time participating in structured activities than they did a few decades ago.

Easy access to screens has made it possible to avoid boredom more than ever before.

Many parents needed to put their children in front of screens throughout the pandemic to keep them occupied during work hours. More recently, some parents have reported feeling social pressure to use screens to keep children quiet in public spaces.

That is to say, there are various reasons why parents shy away from their kids being bored. But before striving to eliminate boredom completely, it's important to know the benefits of boredom.



Even very young children could benefit from experiencing boredom in short spurts.

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Benefits of boredom

Although boredom feels bad to experience in the moment, it offers real benefits for personal growth.

Boredom is a signal that a change is needed, whether it be a change in scenery, activity or company. Psychologists have found that the experience of boredom can lead to discovering new goals and trying new activities.

Harvard public and nonprofit leadership professor Arthur Brooks has found that boredom is necessary for reflection. Downtime leaves room to ask the big questions in life and find meaning.

Children who are rarely bored could become adults who cannot cope with boredom. Boredom also offers a brain boost that can cultivate a child's innate curiosity and creativity.

Learning to manage boredom and other negative emotions is an important life skill. When children manage their own time, it can help them develop executive function, which includes the ability to set goals and make plans.

The benefits of boredom make sense from an evolutionary perspective. Boredom is extremely common. It affects all ages, genders and cultures, and teens are especially prone to boredom. Natural selection favors traits that offer a leg up, so it is unlikely that boredom would be so prevalent if it did not deliver some advantages.

Parents should be wary of treating boredom as a problem they must solve for their children. Psychologists have found that college students with overly involved parents suffer from more depression.

Other research shows that young children who were given screens to help them calm down were less equipped to regulate their emotions as they got older.

Boredom is uncomfortable

Tolerating boredom is a skill that many children resist learning or do not have the opportunity to develop. Even many adults would rather shock themselves with electricity than experience boredom.

It takes practice to learn how to handle boredom. Start with small doses of boredom and work up to longer stretches of unstructured time. Tips for parents include getting kids outside, suggesting a new game or recipe, or simply resting. Creating space for boredom means that there will be some stretches of time when nothing in particular is happening.

Younger children might need ideas for what they could do when bored. Parents do not need to play with them every time they are bored, but offering suggestions is helpful. Even five minutes of boredom is a good start for the youngest children.

Encouraging older children to solve the problem of boredom themselves is especially empowering. Let them know that boredom is a normal part of life even though it might feel unpleasant.

It gets easier

Children are adaptable.

As children get used to occasional boredom, it will take them longer to become bored in the future. People find life less boring once they regularly experience boredom.

Letting go of the obligation to keep children entertained could also help parents feel less stressed. Approximately 41% of parents in the U.S. said they “are so stressed they cannot function,” and 48% reported that “most days their stress is completely overwhelming,” according to a report from the U.S. surgeon general in 2024.

So the next time a kid complains, “I’m bored!” don’t feel guilty or frustrated. Boredom is a healthy part of life. It prompts us to be self-directed, find new hobbies and take on new challenges.

Let children know that a little boredom isn’t just OK – in fact, it’s good for them.

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