

Find a Hobby Already!

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Sarah here. "I'm bored" is one of my least favorite sentences in the universe. I don't even understand the concept. As my own child can attest to, "That's not a thing!" is my standard response to "I'm bored." I mean...I could retire from work today and for the rest of my life, I could stay busy happily doing projects, fixing things, making things, and learning new stuff. I have *a lot* of hobbies and interests! I enjoy being on my own. As Lisa described in her blog last week (*Who ARE These People?*), introverts get recharged spending time on their own. I can do my crafts and hobbies with others...but I am also really, really happy doing things on my own.

I just don't understand the idea of being bored. That being said, I'm sure that at least 1 person in your home has said "I'm bored" over the past month and a half. And, I'm sure you may have felt annoyed, irritated, frustrated or even enraged by that sentence, given that you may be overwhelmingly busy from morning till night and may desperately need some time alone to decompress, take a break or (gasp!) enjoy a leisure activity. Or, you may find "I'm bored" maddening since you know your kids have *many* things they could do on their own!



It's vital that everyone at home who *can* occupy and entertain themselves on their own do so, at least sometimes. I'm not suggesting your 2-year-old spend an hour on her own unsupervised while you read a book. But I think it's critical for kids and adults to be able to enjoy alone time.

A lot of families struggle with the “boredom” issue. I certainly hear about it from parents of only children, but I’ve also heard this story from plenty of families with multiple kids. Oh- and just to dispel a common myth, not *all* only children expect others to entertain them. I should know, seeing as I’m an only child who has easily entertained myself since I was a little kid. ☺

Besides being annoying, why is being “bored” a problem? As Lisa mentioned last week, clashes at home can happen when family members have different interpersonal needs. If 1 of your kids enjoys spending downtime alone but your other child always wants to be with him, it can be a recipe for sibling conflict. Likewise, if you’re more of an introvert but have a child who thrives on spending time with others, you may be feeling a little...suffocated.



But there’s another reason that being able to entertain one’s self is so important. Self-soothing is an important part of self-regulating our emotions and behavior. To calm ourselves down, we have to know what we enjoy and what helps us feel relaxed, happy, energized, etc. When we always rely on others to help us feel better emotionally, we don’t develop self-soothing skills.

It’s really important for kids to be able to manage their own emotions! After all, you won’t always be able to help. Sometimes, your kids are going to have a hard time at school or out in the world. And, sometimes, they may be at home feeling bad, but you can’t help them...like when you’re leading a conference call. But in a bigger picture sense, helping your child develop self-soothing skills will ensure that (s)he can independently function as a successful adult.

So, being able to cope with what life sends our way involves being able to entertain ourselves. And, being able to enjoy alone time can help minimize interpersonal conflict/tension and give family members much needed breathing room. Plus, having talents and hobbies can help us identify strengths and talents, develop relationships and overall help us be well-rounded and interesting people. So, needing solo time at home doesn't mean you're a selfish monster or a mean mom. Solo time helps your kids grow up into awesome adults who enjoy time spent with others but who are also okay on their own.

So, when your kids say, "I'm bored," take a deep breath and give them the benefit of the doubt...the first time or 2. They may genuinely have a hard time figuring out what to do. Seriously. Knowing what their options are, thinking through how they want to use their time, choosing and initiating an activity...these are executive function skills your kids may still need help with. They also may still be figuring out what they like and what they're good at.

So, instead of boredom becoming a battle each and every time it comes up, help your kids generate boredom buster lists that you can refer them back to. Help them think about things they each enjoy doing. Be sure to keep track of activities that involve or require others on a separate group activity list. Make sure your kids have ideas for things they can do *on their own*. If they say they don't enjoy doing anything on their own, I'd *strongly encourage* them to come up with some ideas unless they want to stare at the wall while the rest of the family is enjoying their solo time (be prepared to follow through on this if needed).

Now, if your kids are like most kids these days, they enjoy playing video games, watching TV, movies and videos, listening to music and/or using apps during their free time. And, in general, it's okay for kids to spend *some* downtime using electronics. I mean, a couple of weeks ago (*I Scream, You Scream, No Need to Scream Over the Screen (Time That Is...)* blog post), I wrote about how your kids may have more screen time than usual right now, which is probably okay. The problem arises when downtime *only* involves electronics. If the *only* hobby your child has is

playing video games, it's time to diversify. From a stress management standpoint, it's good to have multiple tools in the toolkit, to ensure they can deal with various things that may come up.

Video games, TV, movies and videos, music, apps...these are great escape activities. They can be mindless fun and we may enjoy them with others. But these engaging activities help us cope largely through distraction. While various skills are needed to excel at playing video games (depending on the game), other electronics-based activities may not help us develop talents.

So, instead of passively watching and listening, maybe your kids could actively do something. If you have a teen who loves watching anime, maybe it's time to try drawing. If your tween loves music, maybe it's time to pen lyrics or poetry. Help your crafty kid line up some projects. Jigsaw puzzles, building with Legos, imaginative play, coloring, photography, painting, reading, word or number games (e.g., word search, sudoku), solitaire...there are lots of activities to enjoy. Or, maybe your kids need some fresh air. Playing in the yard, gardening, going for a bike ride, fishing, practicing layups or becoming a master at cornhole...the options are limited by what's feasible given your home environment, equipment and kids' age, skill and maturity level. But seriously, there are lots of things kids can safely do on their own both inside and outdoors.

For activities to make the boredom buster list, kids need to be reasonably able to them alone. Learning a new skill can be a fun challenge (e.g., your teen daughter who has never made anything wants to knit a scarf), but since it requires more supervision and assistance, it won't make a good solo activity for now. Some families enjoy doing parallel activities while others need to have physical distance from each other during their alone time. Either way, remember that everyone needs and deserves some time alone and your kids can and should know how to have fun on their own. Even if solo activities don't become their preferred things to do, they're important tools to have in their toolboxes. And remember to start small- even if everyone only spends 15 minutes a day on their own, that's a great start!