

Keeping cooped up children entertained

Being cooped up is no fun for anyone – especially children. The desire to get out and explore, learn and socialise is innate for them, thus meaning that boredom is the ultimate enemy. While being able to get out, go to the park/beach/friend's house may be the ultimate goal, there are times when home play is essential, thus putting the brakes on outdoor fun and pre-ordered entertainment (such as outings, technology, play dates and parties). Eliminating outings and social events from the child's fun diet can leave both children and adults at their wits' end – often for different reasons.

Knowing ways to bypass the boredom train can help keep everyone sane as well burn the energy stores children manufacture every day. Therefore this article aims to provide a few simple ideas that can help to keep the fun times rolling despite being indoors.

Being creative with what you have

Children from decades past who did not have technology or regular outings to rely on were forced to make their own fun. The outcome was they explored the resources that were available to them. They sifted through cupboards and sheds. They used craft materials and created dance routines to their favourite songs. They built cubby houses in trees and dug holes or made complex road work systems with everyday household items. The possibilities were endless and once children discovered things that they liked doing they would frequently revisit these experiences over and over. Despite play options being more varied today children are still motivated by activities/experiences they like, thus meaning that once adults find what the child likes they have the golden ticket to ongoing, pre-made entertainment.

Knowing what motivates individual children

Knowing whether a child is quiet and reserved or bursting at the seams with energy and enthusiasm will help steer adults in specific directions. Trying to guide an energetic child towards a quiet activity will be like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. Therefore, choosing activities suited to children's dispositions will make in-home entertainment ideas easier to choose and play times more successful.

Making games and finding fun

Simple games like hopscotch and elastics are age old favourites that never seem to disappoint. String tied into a large circle to make different shapes (i.e. parachute or tea cup) provides simultaneous opportunities for entertainment and prospects to build children's persistence and resilience levels. Googling string tricks provides a range of how to videos and can be a good way of engaging children to try and learn something new.

Alternatively using pillows, sheets, tables and all other types of bedding and furniture allows children to build cubby houses and dens. Children (regardless of gender) love making things they can crawl into and play in. These types of experiences encourage children to use their imaginations while they test out and refine their gross motor skills, meaning the benefits stretch beyond filling the daylight hours. Furthermore, active children, the ones who need to constantly move, will be catered for as lifting heavy objects will be right up their alley.

Having access to paper and pens means children can make their own fun (literally). Human-sized board games can be made by numbering individual pieces of paper and upon random ones adding instructions such as miss a turn, go forward/back three spaces, swap places with the person coming first etc. Children can then use themselves as the markers/counters. Every time they roll the dice they move themselves forward. Even when households do not have dice, simply writing the numbers one to six on paper and putting the numbers into a hat can be a sufficient way to overcome such obstacles.

Paper not only provides opportunities for drawing and painting but also opens up possibilities to practise other crafts such as origami or collaging. Once again accessing google for origami ideas is an easy fix. Collaging can take the form of drawing a range of things and cutting them out to make one large artwork. Collage materials can found in the home and provide a great way of recycling things such as sweet wrappers, leaves, string, pieces of old material, stickers, buttons etc.

Treasure hunts

When adults have a little time up their sleeves they can create treasure hunts for children. A simple way to undertake a treasure hunt that lasts longer than a few minutes is to create clues children need to figure out, for example, making up word searches that leave children with a clue to the next destination. These types of strategies are a good way of keeping them motivated and occupied. At the end of their hunt there might be a sweet or a voucher for a set period of technology/TV time etc.

Marble games

Marbles can be used in endless ways. When no marbles exist, stones or pebbles can suffice. Challenging children to build something that gets a marble from one side of the room to another without them touching it can keep them entertained for a long time. Alternatively, children can play marble soccer, make marble runs, use cups and marbles or pebbles to replicate the game known as Manica. Other games such as ring toss can be altered by placing cups or other objects such as pots or plastic bowls around a space to see if marbles can be thrown in. Each pot/bowl is worth points and points are added up at the end of each round.

Newspaper clothing

Old newspapers can be of endless use too. Making costumes out of old newspapers is a great way of passing time. Making new clothes, beds or furniture for dolls/teddies etc. is another possible idea. Children can also make teddies, mobiles etc. out of newspaper by drawing out templates, cutting them out, sticking or stapling edges together and using more paper to stuff them.

Puppet shows

Most people have a pair of old socks or even possibly brown paper bags lying around. Children can make puppets out of either and it can be a pre-cursor to them putting on a puppet show.

Bringing the outdoors indoors

Making a movie cinema at home can be a novel way of entertaining children and helping them to feel like they are not missing out. Getting them to make movie treats, set up their own candy bar (even if it doesn't have any real candy/lollies/sweets), making their own money, drawing out their own movie tickets and rearranging furniture to make a gold class movie cinema can fill the boredom gap before a movie is put on.

Having physical options

Some children are born movers. These children will find it difficult to sit still and engage in quieter activities. Setting up obstacle courses, whether it replicate a show jumping course, dog agility course, or a keep fit obstacle course may help to deliver the type of play these children need. Making sure they have opportunities to move, jump, run, climb, crawl, lift etc. will help to deliver the necessary sensory input and energy output they might need. Masking tape can be placed around carpeted areas to make a balancing beam course or alternatively a racing track for cars.

Modelling to children how to play differently

Some of the above ideas may come very easily to certain children. Other children may look at these suggestions and roll their eyes, refuse to participate or complain because they cannot do them without explicit support. Modelling how to play in different ways helps open up play ideas that children may have never considered before. Offering initial support to engage children and acting like a yoyo in the early stages where help and interaction is offered and then temporarily withdrawn (i.e. making an excuse that you need to do something in the kitchen for a few minutes before returning) will help to build children's interest towards new ways to play without the adult needing to become a 24/7 play companion. Providing children with opportunities to play with and without others will help them become self-sufficient and expand their desire to be curious, explore and learn through play.

Summing it up

There will be times in children's lives when going out and interacting with the world outside their home may not be possible. When these times occur children may struggle with the idea that they have to remain at home rather than going out. While technology can provide a way to fill the boredom gap there are other, no cost ways to entertain children and keep them and the adults who care for them from going stir crazy. Ideas include using materials already available in the home, making games using available resources, building things, role playing, bringing the outside world inside, and making play physical. Knowing children's natural dispositions will help adults tailor games and play to suit individual children. In order to succeed in getting children to play in new and varied ways, adults may need to act as role models. To ensure adults' time is not constantly commandeered, they can purposefully withdraw from children's play for short periods of time. As children become more competent at self-play, adults can increase the time they allow children to play independently. Allowing children time to play alone as well as with others helps them to equally enjoy their own company and that of others and expand their ability to fill boredom voids.

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