

Teaching boredom

Boredom is something that we inevitably face over and over in life. When boredom strikes it is often thought we need to distract children from its clutches, however, boredom plays a significant role in supporting the development of specific life-skills. While boredom seems less like something parents would wish to expose children to and more like something they might hope to avoid, this article hopes to highlight the reasons why boredom should not be treated like the enemy but rather a friendship that should be encouraged and promoted.

Boredom in the past and present

Boredom describes the disinterest or lack of enthusiasm someone has towards something. While it cannot be denied that children across the ages have always made mention of being bored, children in today's society face new challenges never before seen in past generations. Not so many decades ago, parents would be less likely to fill a child's boredom void than they are today. The reason for this is not because they were worse parents but rather because a very different world existed. Pushing children out the front door and telling them to come home by dark was an accepted strategy for alleviating children's boredom. It was also a great strategy not to be driven to distraction when children got stuck on the "I'm bored" record player. Now-a-days parents do not have the luxury of telling children to go outside and find something to do. Instead, busier roads, smaller back yards and increased reluctance to let children out of one's sight (for safety reasons) mean children are essentially cooped up unless they have a chaperone.

Some boredom challenges

Most people know that if children do not get out they go stir crazy, making life for themselves and everyone around them less than pleasant. While an obvious fix to this problem would be to get out of the house, things are not that simple. Many parents often discover several hurdles when trying to adopt this policy, notwithstanding the lack of time they have to spare. Other challenges include but are not limited to getting children off devices and/or children only wanting to go out if they get to go to their preferred destination/s.

Who's responsible?

Once upon a time children had to work at having fun. They had to (to name a few) make their own games, explore gardens and seek out company in the form of other neighbourhood children. These types of activities took up hours of their time, thus leading them to discover that the sun had sunk behind the horizon long before they were ready. Today, the idea of finding one's own entertainment can seem an impossible task, especially when children have become accustomed to having others work harder than they do to fill the boredom void.

In order to teach children how to overcome boredom, they must first be exposed to situations where they are not rescued from it. To achieve such a task, adults need to devise a plan that prevents them from jumping in and making boredom-fixing suggestions. When parents absolve themselves from being the "fix-it guy" children are sent a clear message - that it is their responsibility to fix the problem/s they are facing. This attitude in turn promotes the idea that the only person responsible for their own happiness is themselves.

Boredom and developmental skills

When children are bored and adults do not intervene, children are forced to take matters into their own hands. Most will not sit idly by letting the minute hand of the clock defeat them. Instead, even the most determined child will eventually venture off to find a boredom remedy. This is when they open up an endless realm of possibilities, many of which require the use of their imagination. The more children use their imagination the more they exercise their problem-solving and higher-order thinking skills, factors which coincidentally promote emotional and cognitive brain development. If children alleviate boredom by seeking out others to play with they also enhance and fine tune their communication and social skills. Depending on the activity they settle on, the learning and developmental opportunities are not exhaustive.

Boredom and resilience

Resilience is often a skill many parents want their children to inherit. Resilience helps set children up in life, enabling them to overcome multiple adverse experiences. It also helps them adjust their attitudes and behaviours to accommodate the need for change.

It is no secret that life has ebbs and flows. For this reason it is important that children learn how to adapt to the idea that things are not always fun. When they come to accept life as sometimes fun and sometimes boring, they are not looking for the magic pill that makes life fantastic 24/7. Additionally, children who accept the unpredictability of life are typically better equipped to face turbulent times without being overwhelmed by emotions that lead to anxiety and depression.

When children have resilience they are more able to sit in the company of dull, bored or negative feelings. When children possess resilience they are able to adjust their thinking, avoiding the type of rigidity that prevents people from moving on, trying again, overcoming feelings of disappointment, or coming up with alternative solutions to the problems they face. The more exposure children have to boredom the more able they are to overcome strong, negative feelings, thus helping them to accept experiences for what they are, regardless of how fun, boring or otherwise they may be.

Boredom and emotional-regulation

Emotional regulation is a key factor regarding how successful an individual's relationships, careers and educational outcomes are. In short, emotional regulation equates to increased life satisfaction. The more an individual is able to regulate their emotions the more confident and competent they become in life. When children are able to regulate they learn that perceived failure does not equate to giving up. Instead they pick themselves up, dust themselves off and try again.

Children who manage to regulate their emotions typically have higher self-esteem than those who experience emotional dysregulation. Additionally, these children ignore the fact that they are bored and acknowledge the need to persist through less fun times. They recognise that boredom is a temporary state of being and they rely less on adults to fix not only their boredom woes but other problems they may encounter. In turn, children learn how to become self-sufficient and make good choices for themselves. They are also less prone to peer pressure and understand that it is their responsibility to overcome boredom in ways that will help rather than hinder them.

Ideas for parents

It is not a parent's responsibility to make themselves available to their children 24/7. In fact, parents who do can inadvertently prevent their children from developing the necessary skills to overcome boredom and/or manage their emotions. Nevertheless, it can be difficult to accept this statement because it has become a socially accepted idea that parents should be available to their children 24/7. One of the reoccurring problems with this notion is that it places a lot of undue pressure on parents and prevents children from facing the reality that there will be times in their lives when others will not have or want to give them their time e.g. their preferred peers during school lunch breaks etc.

The ingredients for teaching boredom management are always around the corner because boredom happens naturally every day. When these moments occur, adults can give children brief instructions, letting them know that it is their responsibility to find something to do. To purposefully introduce children to boredom, adults can consider setting up a time in the day when children get to experience it e.g. half an hour at the same time each day. (Note: Children who struggle with boredom may need to start with a smaller time frame). During these times it becomes the child's responsibility to find something to do to entertain themselves.

In order for boredom time to succeed, devices and unlimited access to parent attention should to be restricted. Clear rules that provide children with direction such as no devices, access to parent/s etc. will help children to discover that it is their responsibility to find something to do. In order to experience the most success, children will need options available to them, i.e. access to outdoor areas, craft materials, toys, pens and paper, books etc. The types of materials/environments available to children will depend on their interests and preferred hobbies. Additionally, knowing what type of child you have i.e. are they someone who likes their own or other's company will help to determine what support can be put in place before trialing boredom time. For example, social children will need access to people they can interact with. Expecting social children to go off and play in isolation will rarely succeed. Alternatively, certain times in the day can be capitalised to promote boredom, for example, long drives. Many children now have the company of a device wherever they go. While devices have many benefits, they provide the perfect fix, preventing children from feeling bored. They also provide individuals with the idea that distraction via technology use is a valid option. Unfortunately, such distractions redirect negative feelings and prevent children from facing them. As such, adults can consider leaving devices at home. If that option is too difficult, consider possible compromises such as banning them during short drives or when participating in other tasks such as going shopping or out for dinner. Naturally, adults will have to be the ones to set the example as boredom rules will need to apply to and be followed by everyone.

A quick re-cap

Boredom is often something that parents want to avoid rather than promote. Nevertheless, being able to tolerate boredom has multiple and long-lasting effects. When children experience boredom they experience the negative feelings associated with it. It is natural to want to avoid such feelings, however exposure to boredom is crucial to child development.

At present, adults are stuck with the reality that children can rarely get out without supervision. As such, the solution often becomes keeping children entertained by getting

them out of the house, taking them places, becoming their playmate and/or allowing devices to become a child's alternative companion. When children avoid boredom in these aforementioned ways, they can fail to build the necessary experiences that require them to overcome negative feelings and regulate their emotions. In turn, the less children overcome negative feelings associated with boredom the less likely they are to manage adverse feelings and experiences now and later in life. The possible knock-on effects of underdeveloped skills across various developmental domains means children's self-esteem, confidence and self-sufficiency levels can be impeded.

When parents set up times that allow children to experience boredom they inevitably support their child to develop necessary reliance levels to overcome and face challenges independently. In order to succeed in teaching children how to be bored, devices and other forms of technology need to be temporarily removed. Such removal helps children connect to their own inner resources and overcome boredom without using technology as a valid option.

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