



Center for Early Education and Development

Questions About Kids

Why Can't This Kid Find Something To Do?

Boredom is a warning that things may be out of balance in our lives. With school, chores, friends, and extracurricular activities, children's lives seem so full that it may be difficult for adults to imagine a lack of excitement. By the time a child enters his middle childhood years, he has worked hard to establish predictability and control in his life. It is during this time, however, that parents most often hear their children's whiny complaints of boredom.

What Does a Child Mean When He Says He Is Bored?

By definition, boredom suggests a state of weariness brought on by dullness, repetition, or tediousness. Ask a child what he means when he says he is bored, and he will probably tell you he does not have anything interesting or fun to do.

The key to solving the boredom dilemma is to help children become resourceful.

Children often have difficulty identifying and articulating their feelings. Rather than face their real emotional needs, children may sometimes feel safer labeling an unspecified mood as boredom. The complaint may mean "I need company" or "I had a fight with my best friend." It may mean "I need a challenge" or, conversely, "I'm not ready for this challenge." It may also mean "I am confused, fearful, angry, or disappointed." At the extreme end of the continuum, boredom may be a symptom of depression. If you suspect such, a professional consultation may be in order.

What Should a Parent Do?

Start by letting your child know you understand and you want to talk about it. Sit down together for a discussion. Make sure you pick a time when you are both relaxed in a place where you will not be interrupted or pressured

for time. In a tender, nonjudgmental way, try to discern the specifics of the boredom. It is important that you not dismiss your child's complaint but rather acknowledge her feelings and begin to work out practical alternatives together.

Resist the temptation to come up with a fancy activity or present to relieve the boredom. While this may ease the immediate predicament, it actually builds on the problem instead of helping it. Your child will come to depend on your answers rather than struggle with her own resources. Explain to your child that being bored is really a choice she makes. Help her imagine the possibilities and encourage her to understand that by choosing one, she has taken control of the way she uses her time and has chosen not to be bored. The key to solving the boredom dilemma is to help children become resourceful.

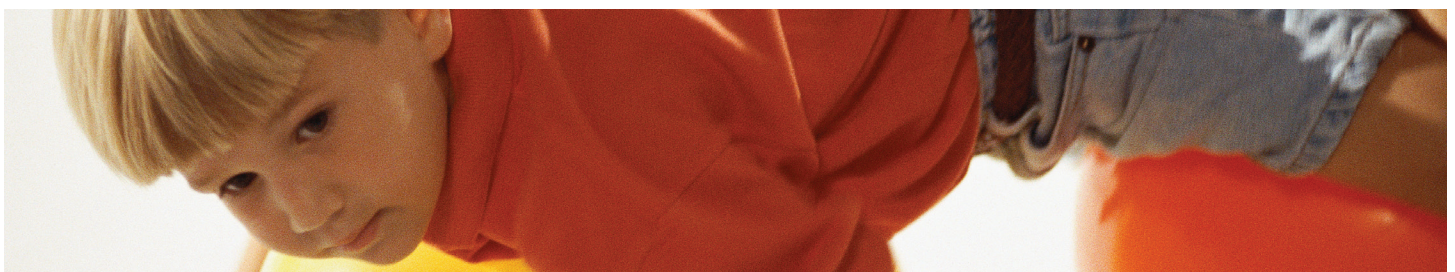
How To Promote Resourcefulness

Help your child value her own company by giving her positive feedback when she chooses to occupy herself, even if it is just for a short period of time.

Promote the risk-taking that builds a strong sense of self-esteem. When your preschooler says, "I can do it myself," respect his independence and allow him to forge ahead. Help him out only when he seems on the brink of frustration.

When your daughter wants to try something new, curb your caution. Instead of taking over, say to her, "Go ahead. Give it a try. I will help you if you need it." If she fails, praise her for her attempt. Solicit your child's opinions on subjects that are important to the family. Show him you value his thoughts by seriously considering and sometimes incorporating his ideas into action.

Try to avoid keeping your child busy every minute. Give her the time and privacy to learn and tolerate and appreciate



her own company. A child needs to develop the capacity to be alone with thoughts and feelings.

Good planning can prevent problems from arising in the first place. Make planning a cooperative effort with your child. You might start by asking your child what he thinks would be fun to do. Once a decision has been made, you can provide some interesting props to help move your child along.

Boredom Busters

Introduce your child to a cumulative project that you can work on together, like cultivating a window box or putting together a large puzzle. Such a project offers opportunities for your child to surprise you with the progress she has made working alone. The same activity can provide great pleasure in sharing and working together towards completion.

Resist the temptation to come up with a fancy activity or present to relive the boredom.

Help prolong your child's interest in a particular subject by expanding the kinds of activities he can pursue. If your child is fascinated with dinosaurs, suggest a variety of reading, writing, drawing, or sculpting activities that relate to dinosaurs. When you determine that interest is waning, offer a trip to a museum or historic site. This gives your child a chance to extend his knowledge base and refuel interest in the topic, while sharing his knowledge with you.

Try an old-fashioned hobby like collecting. Rocks, shells, cards, and buttons are all ideas for beginners.

Encourage using the mail. Link your child with a pen pal or suggest writing to out-of-town friends or relatives. An address book and stationery are good starters. Help your child make a list of people (grandparents, cousins, etc.) to remember on their birthdays or Christmas or Chanukah. Encourage thinking of things that could be made as gifts, creating projects for spare time.

Get your daughter interested in a children's radio program—a pleasant alternative to television. Start by listening together, and discuss the characters and/or topics.

Ask your son to plan dinner, Sunday brunch, or dessert. Tell him to check the cupboards and refrigerator for necessary ingredients and make a shopping list. In this way, you give your child the opportunity to take some initiative and responsibility while, at the same time, he can share his accomplishments with you as you cook the meal together.

For longer periods of time like school vacations and summer, make a calendar with your child and write in all the scheduled events—day camp, family vacation, grandparent visits, and softball games. This gives an overview of the whole summer and helps a child view free time in perspective, as part of the overall pattern.

Reexamine your child care plan. It may be that your child is bored because she has outgrown her child care arrangement. While the loving, nurturing mother figure may be ideal for the very young child, as your child develops, the needs is for someone who can encourage initiative and offer a challenge. An energetic college student or day camp may be better summer choices for the school-age child.

Encourage your child to invest in friendships. Explain to him that although this takes time and effort, a close friendship is one of the richest experiences of a person's life. Being bored together affords rich opportunity for close friends!

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Questions About Kids is on the Web at: <http://cehd.umn.edu/ceed>

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