

● **BREAKING**

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GLOBE MAGAZINE

‘Daddy, I’m bored.’ If you’re a parent, you’re hearing that a lot these days. It’s a good thing

Never before have my children had so much unstructured time. As a father and a psychologist, I’m grateful (most of the time) for the opportunity for growth that it represents.

By **Nicholas Mian** Updated July 17, 2020, 7:54 a.m.



“I’m bored.” I have been hearing this phrase a lot more since our lives became severely constrained by COVID-19. Never in their lives have my kids, who are 7 and 10, had so much unscheduled time on their hands, and the responsibility to figure out how to spend it. Now, quite frequently, they utter those familiar words . . . “Daddy, I’m bored.” And I have to smile.

Boredom represents an opportunity to learn lessons that can be in short supply these days. It teaches us that life is not always fun or entertaining, and that it is up to us to decide how we spend our time. It’s part of adulthood and the sooner kids get used to it, the better. Just as importantly, boredom opens doors to creativity and fantasy, essential aspects of child development that are too often closed by TV and smartphone screens. Play therapists have long argued that unstructured play allows children opportunities to work on social skills, develop emotional regulation abilities, and resolve conflicts and challenges. This happens even when children play alone — using action figures, dolls, and make-believe characters.

I’m a clinical psychologist. I also teach child development and clinical child psychology. One of the methods I use, and teach, is exposure therapy, built on giving children opportunities to practice facing the situations that cause them fear or anxiety. Exposure therapy, the most effective psychotherapy for anxiety disorders, is now being extended into helping young patients practice tolerating and accepting other difficult emotions. Every time an adult removes an obstacle that is emotionally challenging for a child, they are depriving that child of an opportunity to learn to cope with that obstacle.

Is it any different with boredom? It is fair to say that relentless scheduling — school, after-school programs, sports, summer activities, and more — removed

the obstacle of ennui, that feeling that comes with having nothing to do. Then COVID-19 came along and changed everything, canceling summer vacations and closing some camps (or moving them online). So, by my own teachings, I should be glad to see my kids struggling with this new reality, right?

Well, I'm warming up to it. Seeing value in boredom requires practice, patience, and faith that it will be good for your child in the long run. Like many parents, I too often promptly offer up an idea for an activity, or even drop what I'm doing to help entertain my bored child. This is ironic because most people of my generation did not grow up in such a scheduled environment. But modern parents — especially those with the means to — can feel obligated to provide every opportunity they can to enrich their child's life, as the writer Claire Cain Miller has observed. Creating a fulfilling life for kids is seen as giving them every possible advantage toward achieving success in life. This can involve an intense level of monitoring and scheduling — and certainly leaves no time for boredom.

But here's a little secret about all those activities we say are good for our kids: They make parents' lives easier. The reality is that bored kids can be annoying. But also alarming. When a parent hears that desperate voice asking to be rescued from this horrible fate, it can feel as if my child is saying, "I'm bored, therefore you are failing as a parent." We react the same way we do when a child is frightened — we try to protect them and make the feeling go away. But this is not purely altruistic — we're also trying to avoid our own feelings of inadequacy as parents.

The COVID-19 pandemic has turned so many lives upside down, often in ways far worse than additional boredom. My wife and I are fortunate that we can work from home, and had the ability to help our kids participate in the remote

learning activities their teachers designed. Now and then, we were even able to think of a creative way to add something to our children's education, like when I demonstrated to a few 6-year-olds over Zoom how a pipe cutter works. But let's face it: Despite being a professional educator, I couldn't do even a half-decent job of homeschooling my kids while also working my full-time job. And now that school is over, there is even less for them to do. Enter boredom. But, it occurs to me, this boredom is different — it doesn't suggest any parental failing. It's just reality.

As I am writing this, I stop sometimes to watch my younger daughter, who is in our yard in the rain, using a shovel to dig holes (I think). An hour earlier she announced that "Daddy, I'm going outside" after realizing no one was going to entertain her. What is she doing out there? She repeatedly stabs at the mud with the shovel and occasionally bends over to pick something up. She is covered in mud, her unkempt hair sticking to her face. But she does not look unhappy; in fact, it would appear that she is in her element.

As I watch, I feel a tremendous sense of. . . something. It's not quite pride, but something similar. Perhaps, it is the satisfaction that my kid is capable of dealing with boredom after all, and so am I — we just needed some practice.

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