

Let Children Get Bored Again

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Opinion

"I'm bored." It's a puny little phrase, yet it has the power to fill parents with a cascade of dread, annoyance and guilt. If someone around here is bored, someone else must have failed to enlighten or enrich or divert. And how can anyone — child or adult — claim boredom when there's so much that can and should be done? Immediately.

But boredom is something to experience rather than hastily swipe away. And not as some kind of cruel Victorian conditioning, recommended because it's awful and toughens you up. Despite the lesson most adults learned growing up — boredom is for boring people — boredom is useful. It's good for you.

If kids don't figure this out early on, they're in for a nasty surprise. School, let's face it, can be dull, and it isn't actually the teacher's job to entertain as well as educate. Life isn't meant to be an endless parade of amusements. "That's right," a mother says to her daughter in Maria Semple's 2012 novel, "Where'd You Go, Bernadette." "You are bored. And I'm going to let you in on a little secret about life. You think it's boring now? Well, it only gets more boring. The sooner you learn it's on you to make life interesting, the better off you'll be."

People used to accept that much of life was boring. Memoirs of pre-21st-century life are rife with tedium. When not idling in drawing rooms, members of the leisured class took long walks and stared at trees. They went motoring and stared at more trees. Those who had to work had it a lot harder. Agricultural and industrial jobs were often mind-numbing; few people were looking to be fulfilled by paid labor. Children could expect those kinds of futures and they got used to the idea from an early age, left unattended with nothing but bookshelves and tree branches, and later, bad afternoon television.

Only a few short decades ago, during the lost age of underparenting, grown-ups thought a certain amount of boredom was appropriate. And children came to appreciate their empty agendas. In an interview with GQ magazine, Lin-Manuel Miranda credited his unattended afternoons with fostering inspiration. "Because there is nothing better to spur creativity than a blank page or an empty bedroom," he said.

Nowadays, subjecting a child to such inactivity is viewed as a dereliction of parental duty. In a much-read story in *The Times*, "[The Relentlessness of Modern Parenting](#)," Claire Cain Miller cited a [recent study](#) that found that regardless of class, income or race, parents believed that "children who were bored after school should be enrolled in extracurricular activities, and that parents who were busy should stop their task and draw with their children if asked."

Every spare moment is to be optimized, maximized, driven toward a goal.

When not being uberparented, kids today are left to their own devices — their own digital devices, that is. Parents preparing for a long car ride or airplane trip are like Army officers plotting a complicated land maneuver. Which movies to load onto the iPad? Should we start a new family-friendly podcast? Is this an O.K. time to let the kids play Fortnite until their brains melt into the back seat? What did parents in the '70s do when kids were bored in the way-back? Nothing! They let them breathe in gas fumes. Torture their siblings. And since it wasn't actually for wearing, play with the broken seatbelt.

If you complained about being bored back then, you were really asking for it. "Go outside," you might get, or worse, "Clean your room." Was this fun? No. Was it helpful? Yes.

Because things happen when you're bored. Some of the most boring jobs I've had were also the most creative. Working at an import factory after school, I pasted photos of ugly Peruvian sweaters onto sales sheets. My hands became encrusted with glue as the sweaters blurred into a clumpy sameness. For some reason, everything smelled like molasses. My mind had no choice but to drift into an elaborate fantasy realm. It's when you are bored that stories set in. Checking out groceries at the supermarket, I invented narratives around people's purchases. The man buying eggplant and a six-pack of Bud at 9 p.m.: Which was the must-get item and which the impulse purchase? How did my former fifth-grade teacher feel about my observing her weekly purchase of Nutter Butters?

Once you've truly settled into the anesthetizing effects of boredom, you find yourself en route to discovery. With monotony, small differences begin to emerge, between those trees, those sweaters. This is why so many useful ideas occur in the shower, when you're held captive to a mundane activity. You let your mind wander and follow it where it goes.

Of course, it's not really the boredom itself that's important; it's what we do with it. When you reach your breaking point, boredom teaches you to respond constructively, to make something happen for yourself. But unless we are faced with a steady diet of stultifying boredom, we never learn how.

The idea isn't that you suffer through crushing tedium indefinitely like Neville ("N is for Neville who died of ennui") of "The Gashlycrumb Tinies." It's that you learn how to vanquish it. This may come in several forms: You might turn inward and use the time to think. You might reach for a book. You might imagine your way to a better job. Boredom leads to flights of fancy. But ultimately, to self-discipline. To resourcefulness.

The ability to handle boredom, not surprisingly, is correlated with the ability to focus and to self-regulate. Research has shown that people with attention disorders are particularly prone to boredom. It makes sense that in a hyperstimulating world, what at first seems captivating now feels less so; what was once mildly diverting may now be flat-out dull.

It's especially important that kids get bored — and be allowed to stay bored — when they're young. That it not be considered "a problem" to be avoided or eradicated by the higher-ups, but instead something kids grapple with on their own.

We've stopped training children to do this. Rather than teach them to absorb material that is slower, duller and decidedly two-dimensional, like a lot of worthwhile information is, schools cave in to what they say children expect: fun. Teachers spend more time concocting ways to "engage" students through visuals and "interactive learning" (read: screens, games) tailored to their Candy Crushed attention spans. Kids won't listen to long lectures, goes the argument, so it's on us to serve up learning in easier-to-swallow portions.

But surely teaching children to endure boredom rather than ratcheting up the entertainment will prepare them for a more realistic future, one that doesn't raise false expectations of what work or life itself actually entails. One day, even in a job they otherwise love, our kids may have to spend an entire day answering Friday's leftover email. They may have to check spreadsheets. Or assist robots at a vast internet-ready warehouse.

This sounds boring, you might conclude. It sounds like work, and it sounds like life. Perhaps we should get used to it again, and use it to our benefit. Perhaps in an incessant, up-the-ante world, we could do with a little less excitement.

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