

Antidotes to “I’m Bored”

LET’S MAKE THE WORD “BORING” OBSOLETE. Children who’ve learn to say “I’m bored” often get negative reactions from the adults around them. The word “boredom” implies irritation, discontent, and even feelings of over-entitlement. Adults hear the term as a demand for entertainment, and when used in a social situation such as a visit to an older family member, the phrase sounds downright impolite.

In the past, children were expected to be able to sit happily through adult conversations, fancy dinners, long concerts, etc. Young people who have acquired the habit of saying “I’m bored” need help finding other images for what they are feeling. Holidays, which often bring visiting relatives, celebratory activities, and long trips, seem a perfect time to rethink what boring means—and our responses.

“I need redirection.” A child who has been concentrating on an activity or been passively entertained often enters a kind of empty space when she’s finished. It seems like there’s nothing to do because the outer world has been tuned out. Sometimes actually looking around together for something to do re-connects children to the “next thing.” They may not do what we suggested, but surveying the environment spurs them to fresh ideas.

“I want attention.” Many times children want to be close to us but don’t realize that’s what they are feeling. Asking “Do you want to sit by me while I work?” or “Do you want to cook together?” puts them in touch with their need for contact.

“I need to calm myself.” Feelings of impulsivity are related to boredom. Children who bounce from one activity to the next often need to learn to use their energy in a new way. For example, when a child complains of boredom, we can say “Try drawing a picture that shows how you’re feeling” or “Write some things that you like to do.”

“I need to use my brain.” Feeling confined in a car or an airplane makes children restless. Research shows that children will typically ask “Are we there yet?” within 31 minutes of leaving. When children can’t release physical energy, playing word or number games can channel energy in a productive direction.

“I need to use my imagination.” Children who are stuck listening to a conversation or even a concert can be taught to use the time for self-reflection. It’s difficult to sit for a long time, but children will be expected to wait patiently without expressing irritation throughout their lives. Brainstorm fun ways to pass time, such as counting to themselves how many people are wearing red or practicing reciting one of their favorite stories internally.

Think about what you really mean when you feel bored (but don’t use the word out loud). Instead, be more specific: “When I don’t know what to do next, I write some ideas down” or “If a TV program puts me to sleep, I turn it off and think about doing something that fascinates me.” Imagine Marie Curie or Leonardo Da Vinci, and communicate the feeling that the world is full of fascinating subjects for us to explore.

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