

Why boredom can be great for kids

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"I'm bored!" It's a phrase parents and caregivers work tirelessly to avoid hearing, but it may be the gateway to unleashing a child's creativity, social development and even life skills.

Jamie Jirout, associate professor in the University of Virginia School of

Education and Human Development, researches how curiosity impacts children's learning. She's found the benefits of creating space and time for children's curiosity to thrive can lead to increased creativity.

"Curiosity occurs when a student experiences a gap in knowledge that motivates them to seek information to resolve their uncertainty. Creativity occurs when students generate novel and useful ideas or products," Jirout wrote [in a commentary](#) co-written with UVA colleague Natalie Evans and with Kathy Hirsh-Pasek.

Stretches of relatively unstructured, screen-free time might sound a little scary to both kids and adults, but Jirout said those stretches can provide a great opportunity for kids to embrace curiosity and creativity, and garner life skills.

While the summer may bring weeks at home for some children, opportunities also exist during weekends and holidays. Breaks in routine can provide parents and caregivers the perfect chance to help promote both creativity and curiosity.

Structuring unstructured time

Giving space for kids to be bored does require a bit of structure and takes a little practice. Instead of asking kids to keep themselves busy for two hours or defaulting to screen time where kids are passively engaged, Jirout offers a couple of strategies to provide some structure to unstructured time.

If kids seem stuck about where to start, adults can suggest an activity or two, like building a fort, making an obstacle course or creating a fairy garden. The idea, though, is to be as general as possible.

"You're not saying whether it's inside or outside, or what materials to

use, or what it needs to look like, or anything," Jirout said. "But you're giving a kid some ideas to start with."

If they finish and ask "OK, now what?" ask how they could do it differently than they just did.

"Perhaps they used sidewalk chalk to make a track for their bike," Jirout said. "If they can sit in that uncomfortable bored feeling, maybe they'll start to think, "Well, what kinds of things go around the track to make it more exciting?" or add some more dimensions of challenge, things like that."

Another way to structure unstructured time is for kids to make up their own schedule for a few hours. They may write out tasks like eat breakfast, clean the dishes and then build a fort. Drafting their schedule is an example of how stretches of boredom can offer kids a sense of control and autonomy they typically lack during a typical school or camp day.

"In general, kids don't get to do things of their choice very often," Jirout said. "And they're going to be most motivated when they have the autonomy of choice. So, I think it is great to provide them the opportunity to figure out what they want to do."

Skill building

Even though these moments may not seem as enriching as more structured activities, Jirout said kids learn a lot about problem-solving and thinking creatively from these experiences.

"When kids have the agency to do what they want to do, they're going to be motivated to get into activities in a deep way," Jirout said. "That motivation will then provide a lot of experience and opportunities for

them to develop different skills that they might not get in school, or from more structured activities in general because they don't have to create the entire structure themselves."

If their ideas take them outdoors, there are additional benefits, like physical movement or being around nature.

"Building a fort outside means you might need to figure out how to get different sticks and how to build structures that stay up, learning all sorts of spatial and physical information from doing that," Jirout said.

When children play outdoors, they can interact and play alongside friends, fostering collaboration with siblings or neighbors, which is crucial for [social development](#).

"Everyone's likely to have different ideas about what they want to do," she said. "They will likely be negotiating decisions—what they're going to do, how they're going to do it, and how they're going to work together. They'll also hear different ideas and learn from each other. These social skills are so important."

For slightly older kids, unstructured time might include practical lessons in [life skills](#).

"The summer can be a great [time](#) to walk or bike to a nearby store, buy some ingredients, and then return home to do some cooking," Jirout said. "Or without even leaving the house, packing up a picnic for an outside lunch is a great skill for kids to learn."

Embracing boredom will likely be a bit uncomfortable for both adults and kids at first, but with practice, boredom can foster curiosity and creativity this summer and all year long.

Provided by University of Virginia

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