

"I'm Bored!"

How to Deal with Your Child's Boredom

by Patty Wipfler

"I'm bored!"

What's a parent to do when a child flops down on the floor and complains, "I'm bored! There's nothing *todo*," and waits, blank and listless, for some zap of inspiration to save them from a fate worse than chores?

Our children are born to play, create, and feel great satisfaction. They want to have fun. They want to be involved. They relish that surge of initiative that is so abundant in childhood. When they lose it, they suffer.



What keeps their spark alive is a sense of connection. The sense that we see them, and understand who they are and what they love. Our caring and attention is the fuel children depend on for their next idea of what to do, or who would be fun to play or learn with. When our children don't feel connected, even the coolest, newest toy or adventure loses its luster.

So when you hear, "[I'm bored](#)," and see that the shine is missing from your child's eyes, I can almost guarantee that listing activities or trying to lure them into action won't work. Your attempt to fix their boredom will just bring frustration, for you and for them. Unless they're in an unusually restricted environment for a long time, the problem isn't a lack of opportunity to have fun. The problem is that they don't feel connected enough to enjoy life in the first place.

So the remedy isn't your list of things your child could do. It's not forcing your child up out of their doldrums. The remedy is your warm attention.

Here's what we recommend when your child is caught in the feeling of boredom.

- If seeing your child listless and moaning irritates you, find someone to listen to you! To be of help, you need to vent your frustration, give the lecture that runs in your mind, and work on whatever anger, resentment or worry that you experience in this situation. Do this, not with your child, but with another adult, out of earshot, at a time you both agree upon. Getting listening time is a bit like the vigorous scrubbing process surgeons must do before they operate on a patient. You could use a good emotional scrub to help you bring needed attention to your bored child. Attention infected with impatience or other upsets won't help much. You may have to muddle through until you can find and develop a Listening Partnership, but it's worth the effort.
- Remember that your child is good. There's nothing deficient about him or her because boredom has struck. Your child has a fine mind and a good heart. He or she has just run out of gas. Refill needed! The vital fuel is a sense of connection, and you're just the person to provide it.
- Don't try to fix anything. There's not much to fix. Your presence, your warmth and your willingness to be close and attentive are all that's needed. The less bustling you do to deliver your presence, the better. The main thing that might need a slight fix is your immediate plan for your next half hour or so. That plan might require a postponement of some kind.
- Do move in close to your child. Bring a sense of pleasure in him or her, and interest in the situation. Your initial tone could be something like, "Ohhh, bored, huh? Hmm. Nothing to do. Wow, nothing to do..." and then, be there and attentive. Flop down right next to your child, wherever he or she landed when the boredom hit. You want to let your presence and lack of worry about the situation to sink in, so stay attuned, perhaps propping yourself up on your elbow now and then to make eye contact, or snuggling in a bit closer as the minutes roll by.
- Listen to whatever your child can tell you about how awful it is to be bored. Listening opens the communication channels. Your ideas are not needed here. Your warm attention is.
- Offer physical contact after you've listened. Your child will still feel bored. It takes awhile to fill up a tank that's empty. Physical touch can help, as long as it's what a child can agree to, and is offered without urgency or agenda. So the spirit of it might be sweet, or could also be lightly playful. "Shall I rub your forehead, son?" or "Maybe if I massage your little toe, and work my way up to your knees, that will help. What do you think?" or "While you're trying to think of what you might want to do, I'll just give these shoulders a bit of a massage. How would that be?" If you get a very resigned, "Oh, Dad! That won't help! I'm *bored!*" don't get discouraged. Stay light and add a bit of humor if you can. For

instance, you could ask one more time, “I don’t think it will help, either, but my massage energy is getting stronger and stronger. What shall I do with it? Massage your pant leg? Your sleeve?”

- Keep listening. When your child’s complaint lasts quite awhile, you can bet that the sense of isolation he’s felled by is not small. Your child’s difficulties may not be connected to any current lack of connection in his present life at all. It can happen that lots of warmth and connection during nourishing family times will build a child’s sense of emotional safety. And when it’s safe, very early childhood feelings of isolation bubble up out of their hiding place in your child’s emotional memory. Your listening and willingness to pay attention is the most powerful antidote you can deliver. It’s exactly what’s called for. If your child needs to have a good cry about how life is not any fun at all right now, Staylisten. The cry is a big part of the solution. Keep resisting your urge to judge him or her as lazy or ungrateful. Keep being interested in what your child can tell you, and in any feelings that pour out along the way.

- After you’ve listened and stayed close for at least ten or fifteen minutes without trying to solve the problem, and if your child isn’t in the middle of a nice, healthy cry, you can try offering a few fanciful solutions. Toss out some outlandish thoughts to see if you can raise a giggle or two. Laughter is one of the strongest connectors we have access to as human beings, so silly ideas tailored to your child’s tastes might help move things along a bit.

For instance, for a girl who is very interested in her clothes and in looking good, you could say, “Well, you could dress me up in the worst outfit ever, and make me go outside where people would see me, or you could do a beauty makeover on me that wouldn’t look so much like a makeover. Or you could make a concoction in the kitchen and put lots of stuff in it, and then make me taste it...” For a boy who usually likes adventure, you could float ideas about squirt gun fights in the cold outside; or about lighting matches together over the kitchen sink, and experimenting with how various materials and foods burn; or ideas about throwing various kinds of food up against the side of your house or apartment, to see how they smash and dribble down. You’re looking for laughter, not for the “right” activity. You’re using your imagination to try to connect with your child. And you are looking to spark a fifteen- to thirty-minute adventure of your child’s choice that would bring more laughs, to further revive your child’s sense of connection.

- And if these things don’t work, hang in there. As long as you can stay close and unworried, you’re rebuilding your child’s sense of connection. His or her tank might signal empty for quite awhile, until it suddenly signals “Full,” with an “I know what I want to do!” or “Mom, would you help me with x, y or z? Then I want to...” Your child’s mind is in gear again, at last! You’ve helped, by being there, trusting that your child would absorb your caring, and by remembering that your caring was the elegant solution all along.