

the playful mind newsletter

the developmental importance of play

EXPERTS CALL UNSTRUCTURED PLAY ESSENTIAL TO CHILDREN'S GROWTH

Parents, do you want to increase your children's academic potential, social skills and creativity? Let them experience boredom.

That's the advice of child development specialists who want to see children spend more time in unstructured play and less time in structured activities or zoned out in front of an electronic screen.

Giving your children a break from organized activities and electronic baby-sitters could very well mean sentencing them to boredom, at least at first.

But experts say that when deprived of anything else to do, children will find a way to amuse themselves - even if it means simply daydreaming.

And that's exactly the point: letting children use their own creativity to fill some of their time. In the process, they will be giving a workout to their mental, emotional and social skills.

"Parents worry about kids' boredom, so they schedule their lives to keep them busy," says Alvin Rosenfeld, a child psychiatrist who is co-author, with Nicole Wise, of 'The Over-scheduled Child.'

"But empty hours teach children how to create their own happiness."

Parents can help children get the most out of unstructured play by ensuring their safety and keeping the electronic screens turned off. Parents also might provide materials (paints, clay, etc.) and even gentle suggestions, if necessary.

Parents need to remember, however, that their role isn't one of camp director.

Sharna Olfman, an associate professor of psychology at Point Park College, cautions parents to expect children to be balky at first. There may be increased bickering among siblings and lots of whining.

"It would be easier just to give in and throw a video on," Olfman says. "But it's really so much better to let your child be bored. Amazingly enough, they will eventually think of something to do."

Katrina Kenison notes that most of today's adults learned the benefits of boredom as children. "Left to our own amusements, we found resources that we didn't know we had. ... These were valuable lessons - and I fear that our own busy, well-entertained children may not ever have the chance to learn them. Inventiveness and self-reliance are being scheduled right out of them."

Experts offer these tips to make getting started easier:

Limit or eliminate television

This is the most important recommendation, most experts say. And they admit that it's probably the most difficult, both for the children who will pout and for their parents who use TV to give themselves a breather.

"If another adult spent a day with your kids, regularly exposing them to sex, violence and rampantly commercial values, you would probably forbid that person to have further contact with them," Steyer says. "Yet most of us passively allow the media to expose our kids routinely to these same behaviors ... and do virtually nothing about it."

Limit or eliminate other "screen" time

Most children spend hours each day at computers, playing with hand-held game devices or watching videos in the car.

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Choose toys carefully

Stanley Greenspan, a child psychologist, urges parents to remember one key fact: "The value of a toy is proportional to the degree that it invites imagination and creativity."

Joan Almon, coordinator for the U.S. Alliance for Childhood, tells the story of two girls who were comparing notes about their dolls. One girl had an electronically enhanced doll and boasted: "My doll can say 500 words!" The other girl was holding an old-fashioned cloth doll and countered: "My doll can say anything I want her to say."

As much as possible, send your children outside to play

Playing outside promotes more running around, which helps your child sleep better at night and helps battle the obesity epidemic among youngsters.

Spend time watching your child play

"This can show children that adults value their play," Levin says.

It's not necessary to join in, although that's possible, too, as long as parents don't try to take over. In fact, one highly successful parenting strategy involves spending time each day with your child doing whatever he or she chooses to do.

During this "special time," the child makes the decisions, controls the flow of the play and assigns all roles. It's unstructured playtime for your child, yet you get to participate.

Designating some special time with your child forces parents "to slow down, to alter the rhythm of our daily lives in order to make time for each other," Kenison writes.

"Given our other obligations and the length of our to-do lists, it is all too easy to forget the good stuff - namely, how much we actually like our own kids as people, how much we enjoy their company, and how important it is for us to have fun together."

(Extracted from an article by Karen MacPherson, Post-Gazette Staff Writer, 3 October 2002)