

# The gift of boredom

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Our culture has increasingly embraced the notion that children must not be 'under-stimulated' – the modern term for 'bored'. The implication is that adults must therefore ensure that children are actively stimulated. This received wisdom has even trickled down to the infant cot as parents are encouraged to expose babies to development-enhancing music and 'age-appropriate educational' DVDs, all in an attempt to prevent early navel gazing, boredom or both.

From primary school age many middle class children are carefully exposed to further stimulation through the scheduling of extracurricular lessons, classes and activities. For many American children, downtime, when they play with a friend, has been re-branded as having a 'playdate' – a form of planned spontaneity. The remaining time that has not been scheduled is now referred to by some psychologists

military became interested in how it could be used to brainwash and torture the captured enemy. Boredom was a negative state, a disease to be avoided or, better yet, harnessed as a weapon to make the enemy talk. The journal *Scientific American* published 'The Pathology of Boredom'. Research began on "sensory deprivation" to obtain basic information on how human beings would react, not by cutting them off from any sensory stimulation, but by removing all patterned or perceptual stimulation.

The neuroscientist John C. Lilly had a more favourable view of boredom's potential. He conducted "physical isolation" experiments minimising external stimulation. Scientists were curious as to what would happen to the brain and mind if all stimulation and interactions with the outside world could be cut off. As the brain was thought to function by reacting to outside stimulation, they thought that if all outside stimuli were removed, the brain would essentially enter into a type of comatose state or 'dreamless'



less is proving to be more. For example, it's been found that reducing the number of toys young children have has significant intellectual benefits, as too much variety confuses and distracts them. Children need time to explore things in depth, yet our culture promotes the opportunity to skim myriad surfaces. Variety and diversity in stimulating opportunities may sound contemporary but conceal a new generation sacrificing breadth for depth. Whether it's the number of television channels, toys or activities to choose from, the libertarian concept of choice is hardly liberating. Like today's consumer, today's child feels the burden of a tyranny of options brought upon them, drowning in a sea of alternatives.

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as 'undesigned moments'. Yet it is precisely those undesigned moments or better yet long periods of self-directed exploration that may ultimately foster creativity and imagination for the expressive arts.

There are also behavioural advantages. Children who are conditioned from infancy to 'outsource' the provision of stimulation to parents, teachers and screen entertainment are being prevented from developing the capacity to self-entertain through their own efforts and to cultivate self-generated creativity and imagination. A sense of entitlement and expectation to be entertained, with the stimulation being conferred upon the child through being administered by an adult or a screen, follows. Thresholds for boredom become lower as the need for externally provided stimulation rises. And frustration and resentment may be the outcome.

## Bored to death?

In the Cold War 1950s, boredom had a bad reputation – so much so that the

sleep. They were pleasantly surprised. "The mind does not pass into unconsciousness, the brain does not shut down. Instead, it constructs experience out of stored impressions and memories. The isolated mind becomes highly active and creative." In the adrenaline-flooded 1980s sensory deprivation re-emerged as 'restricted environmental stimulation' (RES). 'Flotation tanks' began to replace 'isolation chambers'. And now, if people's brains are in any way washed, it means cleared of the unwanted ubiquitous electronic distractions of today. The effects of restricting environmental stimulation are very revealing. In short, by giving people, including children, an enforced absence of stimulation, there are measurable improvements in a variety of things, from creativity to calmness. Tests of attention and reaction time also show improvements.

Perhaps this is why adults are now paying money to withdraw to a 'retreat' and escape their daily ecosystem of interruption technologies.

In an age of stimulation abundance,

Children are naturally nosy and their imaginations can be jump-started by leaving the intellectual space for them to begin the process. However, many children are being deprived of living circumstances that would expand their creative minds – they're being deprived of the right to be bored and, in turn, of learning the process to escape the boredom. It's the creative equivalent of preventing children from doing any physical exertion to the point that they become unfit.

So if we care about our children, give them the gift of boredom.

## References

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