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Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

Mommy, I'm Bored

How many times in the course of raising a child will a mommy (or daddy) hear these words: "Mommy, I'm Bored?" And they are often perplexing words. Why is a child bored when there are so many opportunities to entertain herself or himself? Why is a child bored when she or he has just spent a whole afternoon with a friend? Why is it so much harder to help children with boredom than it is to help them get dressed, or to find something to eat? Why are the words: "Mommy, I'm bored" sometimes said demandingly, irritably, or with an implication that "nothing will suit?" Parents are in the best position to help a bored child when they understand some of the answers to these questions.

Being bored means having an urge to be entertained by something outside ourselves. People can have this need to be entertained for many reasons. The simplest situation occurs when someone is not interested enough in their own thoughts or what they are doing. We might call this simple situation "straightforward boredom." However, children (and adults) often use the phrase, "I'm bored," to describe situations quite different from straightforward boredom.

All young children cope with various, challenging inside feelings. Over the course of any day, children may feel lonely, frightened, sad, guilty, ashamed, or angry. When children encounter a troubling feeling, they usually need help. One of the ways that children express this need is by saying, "Mommy, I'm bored." We might call this kind of boredom "complicated boredom." It is complicated for the child and for adults trying to help.

Often young children do not ask for help with most of their uncomfortable inner feelings. Usually, they manage in a way that does not even reveal their inside feelings. One child might turn to his trains - his favorite activity - and

fill himself with glee to overcome a worry. Another child might set up a playhouse and work out her feelings in her dramatic play. Yet a third child will lose herself in a computer game or video. All of these children have found a way to manage their troubling inner feelings.

Sometimes children cannot manage uncomfortable inner feelings on their own. Perhaps they are tired; perhaps the feeling is particularly strong; perhaps they feel guilty or ashamed about the feeling. At such times, the child may turn to others for help. One of the ways that a child communicates this need is to complain of boredom.

These considerations can guide parents in their efforts to help a child who complains of boredom. First, parents can recognize that some responses may not always be helpful. For example, when a child complains of boredom after spending all afternoon playing happily with a friend, it is probably not helpful to express confusion that they are "already bored" after playing "all afternoon." Such a comment misses the fact that, for a child, the fun of fifteen minutes ago is ancient history! And, the so-called "boredom" may actually be the result of the play date, rather than being in spite of it. Perhaps the child is coping with missing the playmate, or is worn out after a whole afternoon of sharing and getting along, or is having a delayed reaction to some exciting and over-stimulating fantasy games. Perhaps she or he is having a delayed reaction to being away from mommy (or daddy) all afternoon. Additionally, when parents question the reality of a child's boredom, the child can feel criticized and ashamed about legitimate feelings. Therefore, the first helpful step is for parents to be respectful of the child's feelings even if the feelings are inconvenient and mystifying.

As a next step, parents could try to offer some suggestions to the child about what she or he might do. Suggestions usually help straightforward boredom. If suggestions do not help, the child is probably communicating that she or he needs their parent's direct involvement. The child is likely coping with some feelings that interfere with her or his ability to function at the optimal level. Thus, complicated boredom can be understood as a type of regression, and like any other regression, it requires and will respond to parental attention.

There is one more kind of help that parents can offer to the child with complicated boredom. Parents can try to help their child make sense of the

boredom by helping their daughter or son identify the emotional issue that is causing the struggle. Parents can do that in the usual ways of listening carefully to their child and perhaps offering some tentative ideas. Here are some examples.

3-year-old Jonah complained of being bored on Saturday afternoon. His father was out of town for the weekend. His mother spent time making puzzles with Jonah, and talked about how much he must miss daddy, especially on the day that daddy was usually home.

4-year-old Sarah complained of being bored on the ride home after a fun afternoon playing with her friend Jill. As Mom engaged Sarah in discussion, Sarah described how she and Jill played with Jill's dollhouse. Knowing that Sarah did not enjoy playing with dollhouses, Mom said that it could be hard to be at a friend's house and do some things that are not your choice. Sarah talked about hating dollhouses, and upon arrival at home, bounced out of the car and amused herself until dinner.

Parents should never worry that responding with their attention to a child's boredom will make their child dependent or spoiled. Children always emerge with strength and greater resilience--not with greater dependency --after they have been helped with their regressions. Encouragement of dependency can occur if children are helped excessively at times when they can or should manage, but this is quite another matter.

Of course, in real life parents cannot always drop everything and spend time with a bored child. At those times, parents could still convey their understanding that their child needs them even though they are not available. So, the next time that your child complains, "Mommy, I'm bored," think of this time as an opportunity to help your daughter or son recognize that help is available when she or he needs it, and as an opportunity to help your child gain strength and skill to manage the emotional challenges of daily life.