



“I’m Bored” – Coping With Your Child’s Ennui

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Kids! What's the matter with kids today? Do any of these questions sound familiar? "I'm bored." "Who cares?" "Why do I have to do this anyway?" "This is stupid." Our kids seem to think it's our responsibility to keep them charged-up and engaged every moment. They look to us to provide them with constant stimulation, as if video games, iPods, the TV, and cell phones are not enough. Sometimes it can feel like pumping air into a balloon with a hole in it. We see a similar phenomenon in our groups at In Step, especially within our teen groups. Our group members frequently look to our therapists to make their group experience fun, exciting, and stimulating.

Let's look at some of the reasons for this childhood culture of ennui.

Virtual Passivity

We wonder why kids today seem so utterly unable to entertain themselves. It's not that the children of this generation own the patent on boredom! I remember plenty of rainy days when I complained to my mother about being bored. But children today take boredom to a whole new level. They are virtually flooded with video games, high-tech gadgets, and other highly stimulating forms of passive entertainment that require very little of their imaginations. Thus, immediate gratification is at their fingertips. Kids get minimal practice at tapping into their own powers of resourcefulness. After all, resourcefulness is an ability to look within one's self to accomplish a task with the few tools that are available. We provide our kids with tons of tools, toys, and technology! Who needs resourcefulness?

"Boring" and "Stupid": Code for Internal Emptiness

The words "boring" and "stupid" are without a doubt the most common descriptors used by unmotivated kids. Everything is boring and stupid. School is boring. Family is stupid. The child's use of these words to describe his external world is really a reflection of the emptiness of his internal world. These kids believe that joy and entertainment come from the outside in, rather than the other way around. They have trouble seeing that their own actions, commitment, and engagement is connected to their own personal life experience.

Maintaining a Mask of Boredom

Teenagers, in particular, are masters at feigning indifference. I use the word "feigning" because the emotions these kids present to the outside world as defiance, avoidance,

passivity, and even contempt do not accurately reflect how they feel inside. As teenagers' feelings swirl around inside of them, they put on outer masks of boredom and apathy to protect themselves.

What's a Parent To Do?

Step One: Know that it's Not Your Job to Motivate and Inspire

You don't want to fall into the trap of believing that it's your duty to provide your child with constant stimulation; or the way to motivate him is by getting angry or yelling. These methods may work in the short-term and cause your child to take action to avoid your anger. Unfortunately, it does nothing to help him develop his own internal motivation that can be maintained over time. Keep it light! And maintain your sense of humor at all costs!

Step Two: Help Your Child Use His Head

It's easy to get into the habit of telling your child what to do. "Why don't you play with your Gameboy?" "Do your homework." "Go read a book." Did you ever notice that your child rarely takes your suggestions -- as creative and well-intentioned as you are? That's because the ideas are not his. When children are inspired by their own thoughts, they are much more likely to follow through and take action. As painful as it can be for children to own their boredom, you, as the parent, must allow them to sit with it. They will likely fuss and whine and complain for a time, but eventually they do figure out what to do with themselves. It's ironic, but it's often after these brief periods of suffering, for all parties involved, that children do finally use their own imaginations and figure out something satisfying to do.

Step Three: Acknowledge the Feelings Underneath the Complaint

We want our kids to enjoy their lives, so when they express themselves negatively, it's not hard to feel frustrated, even wounded. It's tempting to respond to your feelings by denying the feelings of your bored child. Then, you may try (in vain) to get them to feel what you want them to feel. "You can't possibly feel that way! Do you not see how much stuff you have in this house to play with??" Unfortunately, this method is ineffective. It's okay for your child to have negative feelings. You can say empathically to your child, "You seem really bored today" without jumping in to fix it. Instead, show confidence that he can come up with a plan for coping with his own bored state. "I know you are really unhappy and bored right now, but I'm confident that you can find something fun to do." End of story.

With positive support and encouragement, your child will begin to take responsibility for his own experience of life. Hang in there. Then your child begins to use his inner resources to fulfill himself, there is little room for boredom.