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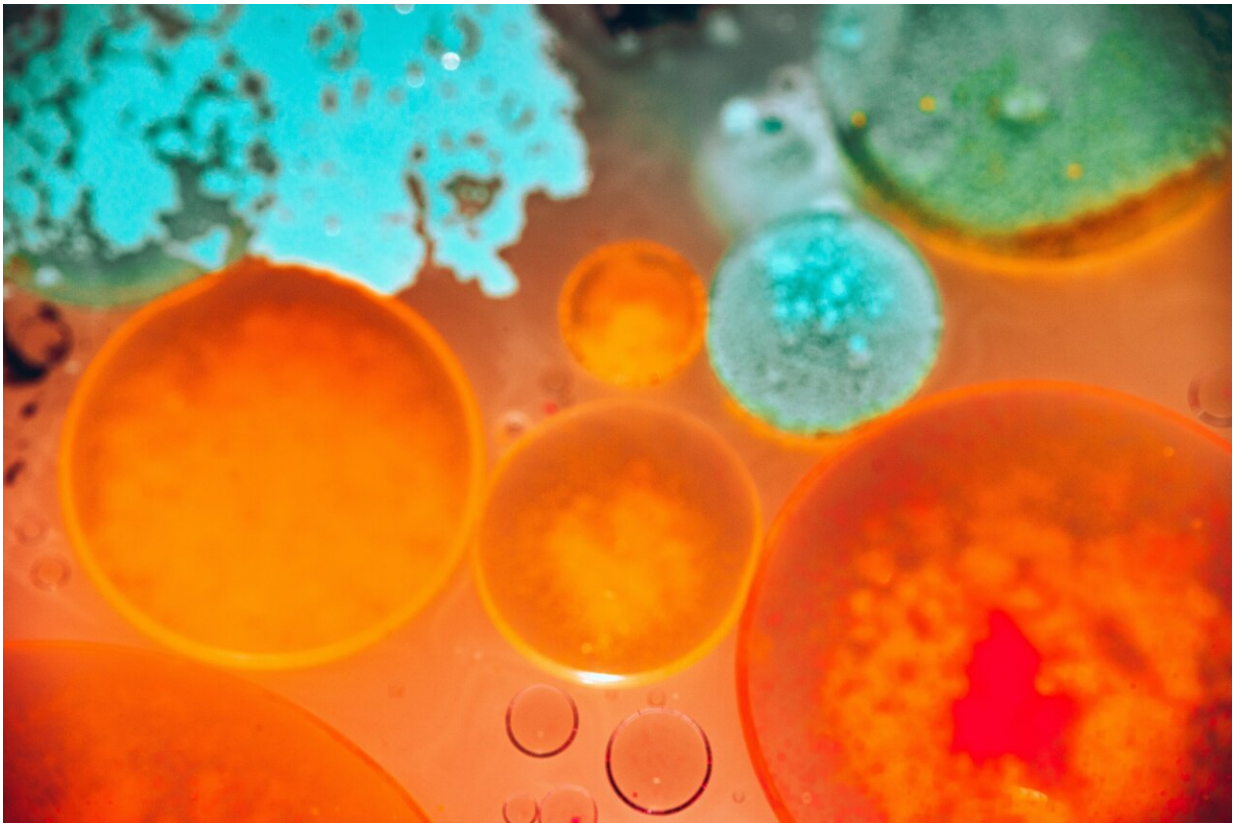
How kids can benefit from boredom

September 26 2016, by Teresa Belton



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From books, arts and sports classes to iPads and television, many parents do everything in their power to entertain and educate their children. But what would happen if children were just left to be bored from time to time? How would it affect their development?

I began to think about boredom and children when I was researching the influence of television on children's storytelling in the 1990s. Surprised at the lack of imagination in many of the hundreds of stories I read by ten to 12 year-old children in five different Norfolk schools, I wondered if this might partly be an effect of TV viewing. Findings of earlier research had revealed that television does indeed reduce children's imaginative capacities.

For instance, a large scale study carried out in Canada in the 1980s as television was gradually being extended across the country, compared children in three communities – one which had four TV channels, one with one channel and one with none. The researchers studied these communities on two occasions, just before one of the towns obtained television for the first time, and again two years later. The children in the no-TV town scored significantly higher than the others on divergent thinking skills, a measure of imaginativeness. This was until they, too, got TV – when their skills dropped to the same level as that of the other children.

The apparent stifling effect of watching TV on imagination is a concern, as imagination is important. Not only does it enrich personal experience, it is also necessary for empathy – imagining ourselves in someone else's shoes – and is indispensable in creating change. The significance of boredom here is that children (indeed adults too) often fall back on television or – these days – a digital device, to keep boredom at bay.

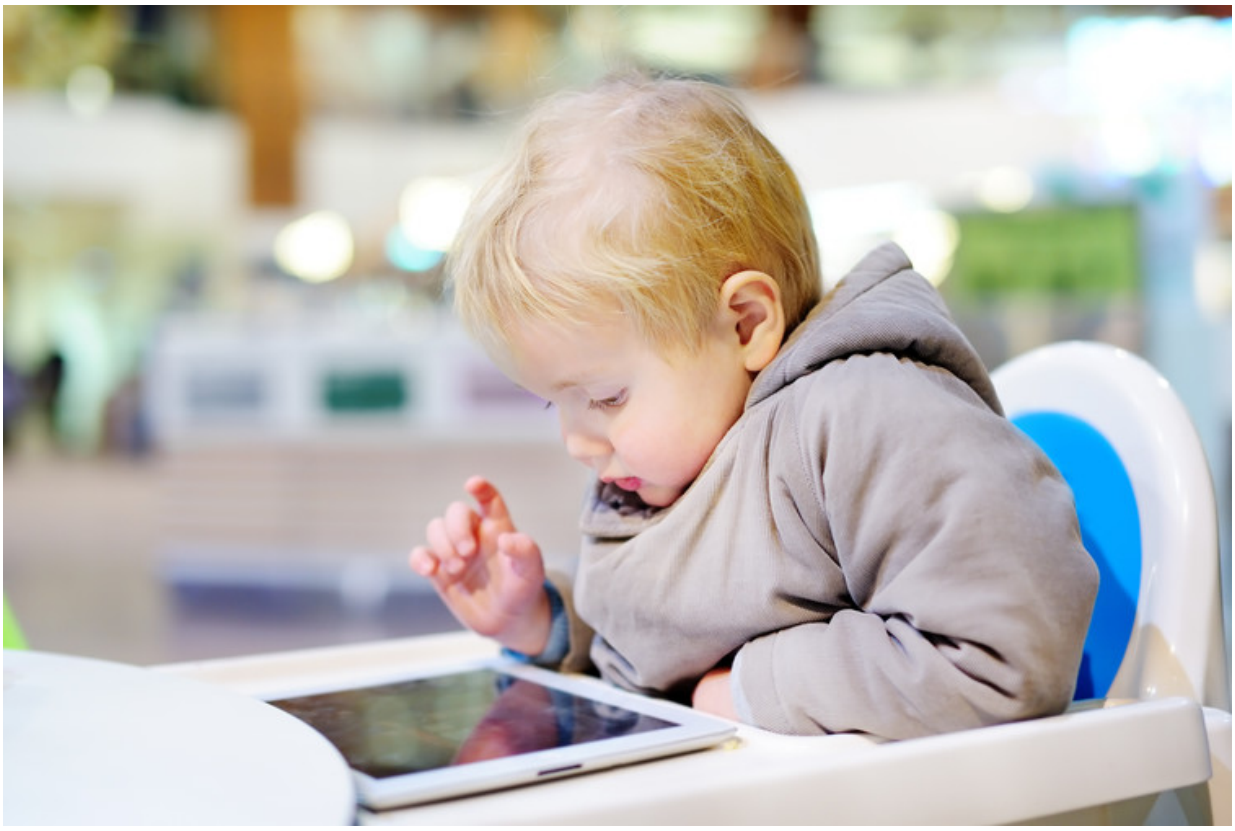
Some years after my study, I began to notice certain creative professionals mentioning how important boredom was to their creativity, both in childhood and now. I interviewed some of them. One was writer and actress Meera Syal. She related how she had occupied school holidays staring out of the window at the rural landscape, and doing various things outside her "usual sphere", like learning to bake cakes with the old lady next door. Boredom also made her write a diary, and it

is to this that she attributes her writing career. "It's very freeing, being creative for no other reason than that you freewheel and fill time," she said.

Similarly, well-known neuroscientist Susan Greenfield said she had little to do as a child and spent much time drawing and writing stories. These became the precursors of her later work, the scientific study of human behaviour. She still chooses paper and pen over a laptop on a plane, and looks forward with relish to these constrained times.

Sporting, musical and other organised activities can certainly benefit a child's physical, cognitive, cultural and social development. But children also need time to themselves – to switch off from the bombardment of the outside world, to daydream, pursue their own thoughts and occupations, and discover personal interests and gifts.

We don't have to have a particular creative talent



Hmm. I wanted Youtube, not Netflix. Credit: Maria Sbytova

or intellectual bent to benefit from boredom. Just letting the mind wander from time to time is important, it seems, for everybody's mental wellbeing and functioning. A study has even shown that, if we engage in some low-key, undemanding activity at same time, the wandering mind is more likely to come up with imaginative ideas and solutions to problems. So it's good for children to be helped to learn to enjoy just pottering – and not to grow up with the expectation that they should be constantly on the go or entertained.

How to handle a bored child

Parents often feel guilty if children complain of boredom. But it's actually more constructive to see boredom as an opportunity rather than a deficit. Parents do have a role, but rushing in with ready-made solutions is not helpful. Rather, children need the adults around them to understand that creating their own pastimes requires space, time and the possibility of making a mess (within limits – and to be cleared up afterwards by the children themselves).

They will need some materials too, but these need not be sophisticated – simple things are often more versatile. We've all heard of the toddler ignoring the expensive present and playing with the box it came in instead. For older children, a magnifying glass, some planks of wood, a basket of wool, and so on, might be the start of many happily occupied hours.

But to get the most benefit from times of potential boredom, indeed from life in general, children also need inner resources as well as material ones. Qualities such as curiosity, perseverance, playfulness, interest and confidence allow them to explore, create and develop powers of inventiveness, observation and concentration. These also help them to learn not to be deterred if something doesn't work the first time, and try again. By encouraging the development of such capacities, parents offer children something of lifelong value.

If a child has run out of ideas, giving them some kind of challenge can prompt them to continue to amuse themselves imaginatively. This could range from asking them to find out what kind of food their toy dinosaurs enjoy in the garden to going off and creating a picture story with some friends and a digital camera.

Most parents would agree that they want to raise self-reliant individuals who can take initiatives and think for themselves. But filling a child's time for them teaches nothing but dependence on external stimulus,

whether material possessions or entertainment. Providing nurturing conditions and trusting children's natural inclination to engage their minds is far more likely to produce independent, competent children, full of ideas.

In fact, there's a lesson here for all of us. Switching off, doing nothing and letting the mind wander can be great for adults too – we should all try to do more of it.

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