

## The Power of Boredom by Rae Pica

“But, Mo-o-m, there’s nothing to do!” Naturally, if free time is something to which she’s unaccustomed, you will at first hear numerous complaints of boredom (likely in a whining tone). Ignore them! And don’t succumb to the temptation to let electronics entertain her. Boredom is something today’s children are rarely allowed to experience – because someone is always seeing to it that they don’t have a chance!

But boredom can be a powerful incentive. A child who’s bored *has* to be resourceful. He has to solve this immediate and urgent problem. A child who’s given enough time and encouragement will figure out what to do with himself. Eventually, he’ll come to glory in these periods, finding all kinds of ways to use them, and the only time he’ll be tempted to whine is when he’s interrupted. A child who is fully engaged in a project, like looking at objects with a magnifying glass or sorting marbles by color and size, will be disappointed to learn he has to stop for lunch.

Boredom, along with quiet time, will also stimulate a child’s creativity. Imagination and creativity – ideas – arise from having time to think, to ponder and reflect, or just let the mind go. A child with time to think will make up games, create dramas to act out, build a fort, or even remember where she put that lost book. A child without such time develops only the ability to do what she’s told, when she’s told to do it, and that child isn’t likely to become an adult with initiative.

Boredom, rather than a parade of organized activities, is also more likely to help a child find his strengths and weaknesses, his passions and talents. As he experiments with a variety of activities at his own pace and in his own way, he discovers his likes and dislikes. And when he has the opportunity to spend time on those activities he likes – to delve deeper into the possibilities – his interests and skills blossom.

Of course, if you’re a parent, it’s natural for you to be concerned if your child seems to lose interest in something after a while and then moves on to something else. But don’t be. We’ve all had the experience of being passionate about something during certain periods in our lives – knitting, gourmet cooking, or gardening, for example – only to find these interests eventually fade. All it means is that the interest no longer serves our lives. But it definitely wasn’t pointless. All of our experiences enrich us in some way. And children are meant to be fickle! Their whole early lives are about finding and losing interest, trying and discarding. Unfortunately, our superkid culture has convinced parents that this isn’t a good thing – that children need to specialize early and for the rest of their lives if they’re going to succeed.

Having downtime allows a child to dabble. Free time also allows a child time to just be, and to engage in authentic play (self-chosen, self-directed, and without extrinsic goals) – alone and with others. And once she’s become familiar and comfortable with the experience, rather than boredom, she’ll display an amazing level of concentration as she plays. Human development expert Joseph Chilton Pearce, whose passion has been the “unfolding” of intelligence in children, calls authentic play “a state of being.” Poet laureate Donald Hall says play is about “absorbedness.”

Whatever this aspect of play is called, it can’t happen unless a child has the time and the space with which to make it happen. Then he’ll have the chance to indulge his curiosity and spontaneity. Because play employs divergent thinking, his creativity and problem-solving skills will grow. If he has the time to carry out his plans and bring them to a conclusion, he’ll

experience the satisfaction that comes from thinking things through and working them out. And he'll be far more well-rounded, self-reliant, and fulfilled as a result!

Rae Pica has been a children's physical activity specialist for 26 years. A former adjunct instructor with the University of New Hampshire, she is the author of 17 books, including the text Experiences in Movement, the Moving & Learning Series, and A Running Start: How Play, Physical Activity, and Free Time Create a Successful Child, written for the parents of children birth to eight. Rae is nationally known for her workshop and keynote presentations and has shared her expertise with such groups as the Sesame Street Research Department, the Head Start Bureau, Centers for Disease Control, Nickelodeon's Blue's Clues, Gymboree Play & Learn, and a number of state health departments throughout the country. Rae served on the task force of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) that created Active Start: A Statement of Physical Activity Guidelines for Children Birth to Five Years. E-mail her at [raepica@movingandlearning.com](mailto:raepica@movingandlearning.com), and be sure to read her blog, "The Pica Perspective."