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Hecht: How to handle 'I'm bored'

Pam J. Hecht, Special to WNC Parent Published 6:00 a.m. ET Feb. 25, 2019

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I appreciate it when kids use their words. Unless the words are these: “I’m bored.”

This lament unfortunately brings to mind a certain grandmother’s 16-hour rant on the subject back in the day, titled, “Only Boring People Get Bored.” (Ironically, her speech was quite dull.)

The last time a child complained to me about being bored, I unwittingly channeled the late, great Dr. Seuss, who likely would have translated my response to: “Would you, could you play with that? Would you, could you on a mat? Would you, could you build a fort? Would you, could you on the court?”

A common, knee-jerk kid response to boredom is, “Can I play on the computer?”

Call me old-fashioned, but my default setting is an unapologetic, “No.”

What follows may be a somewhat entitled whine lasting approximately a bunch of irritating seconds, “Well ... what

should I do?”

Cue the violins; it's time for the show. If I'm feeling particularly impish, I will use my well-honed dramatic skills to respond to my young, bored victim with loud sobbing and maybe even some real tears of anguish. I will expound on the terrible plight of the human race having nothing to do and theorize about what is undoubtedly a more exciting life on another planet.

If my audience is particularly lucky (or unlucky, depending on your point of view), I may then break out into an improvised show tune about the woes of boredom. At this point, they will decide that they'd better find something to do. Usually, this involves running away screaming, hands covering their ears.

But are kids really bored?

Sometimes, I like to turn it around and “complain” that I'm bored. “So, go do something,” says one pragmatic kid after my own heart.

Interestingly, in many cases, the phrase, “I'm bored,” is really kid code for something else entirely. I know this because nine times out of 10, these pint-sized complainers will not take you up on any of your 229 thrilling suggestions on how to entertain themselves.

“I'm bored,” may sometimes mean: “I'm tired, I'm mad (or sad), I miss my friends, I'm feeling indecisive, I need attention from you, or I'm experiencing electronic withdrawal symptoms.”

Or, maybe, feeling bored means it's time to use their noggins and figure out how to entertain themselves, even if it's simply to

daydream. In most cases, allowing them to muddle through it and come up with something on their own is the ticket. (Unless it's something irksome, like building a fire in the living room.)

Give them some ideas

Sure, some kids get bored more often than others and need occasional guidance in coming up with activity ideas, especially if they have ADHD/ADD. Hint: Lying around the house loudly moaning to pass the time until a computer is available is not an activity idea.

Getting the kids out of your hair, I mean, sending them outside to play, seems to be an underused tool these days. It's unfortunate, as this technique both saves money on kid entertainment and allows parents to focus on important Netflix shows.

An empathetic, "Being bored happens to all of us from time to time," is sometimes all that's needed to spur a child to action.

But I've known at least one grandmother who would not agree with those words.

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