

axis



A PARENT'S GUIDE TO

BOREDOM

“

I'm so bored of being bored because being bored is really boring.

Relatable Post #076 from [Tumblr](#)

A Parent's Guide to **BOREDOM**

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What to do when there's nothing to do?

*Okay, I'm bored in the house and I'm in the house bored
Bored in the house and I'm in the house bored (bored)
Bored than a ***** in the house bored
And I'm bored than a ***** in the house bored
Bored in the house
Bored in the house, bored (bored)
Bored in the house
Bored in the house, bored (bored)...*

Curtis Roach's "[Bored in the House](#)" (warning: explicit language and content) became an anthem and [creative outlet](#) for everyone at home during COVID-19. The line's repetition reflected our monotony, as all over the world people sat stuck, staring at the same four walls.

Although our pocket rectangles contain more information and entertainment than we could process in thousands of lifetimes, this constant stimulation leaves us even more sensitive to boredom, when it rears its uninteresting head.

In the next few pages we'll talk about how to respond when our teens complain about being bored, as well as whether filling every minute with activities is the best solution. We'll explore when and whether boredom might actually be a good thing, how our understanding of success and productivity impacts the way we use our time, and how to help our families redeem the experience of boredom.

So, what is boredom?

According to [Google](#), boredom is "the state of feeling disinterested in one's surroundings, having nothing to do, or feeling that life is dull." Other words that come to mind might be restlessness, discontent, malaise, melancholy, ennui, stuck-ness, dissatisfaction, tedium, nausea, listlessness... Smithsonian Magazine writes that [it's](#) "a state in which the sufferer wants to be engaged in some meaningful activity but cannot, characterized by both restlessness and lethargy."

It has also been called a distinctly modern problem, perhaps because “boredom” wasn’t even a popularly used term until Charles Dickens’ 1852 novel, Bleak House. It would be ridiculous to say that no one felt lethargic before the 1880’s, but something did change during the industrial revolution. As people moved to bustling, crowded cities to work in factories, natural seasonal variety from planting and harvesting, small communities with generational ties to the land, and a slower pace of life all but disappeared. Since then, modern life has been characterized by a rapid pace, with an emphasis on output, production, and efficiency.

In a culture of efficiency, unfilled time gaps are disturbing. We forget how to wait, how to be still and unhurried. It’s difficult to know what to do with empty space, or how to handle the quiet (example: how often do we drive around without music, or a podcast on?). As technology continues to advance, we continue to have more and more ways to fill up our down time, and this new normal makes us all more susceptible to boredom when it comes.

Wait, do we even have time to be bored?

It may seem crazy that anyone could be ever bored, given how utterly packed some of our family schedules are. But again, packing things full makes us used to constant activity and stimulation, making empty space all the more noticeable. [An article from Brain Pickings](#) points out, “Not many years ago, it was access to information and movement that seemed our greatest luxury; nowadays it’s often freedom from information, the chance to sit still, that feels like the ultimate prize.”

So, why does boredom matter?

[Manoush Zomorodi](#), a boredom researcher and author of the book Bored and Brilliant: How Spacing Out Can Unlock Your Most Productive and Creative Self, outlines two different kinds of boredom: situational and existential.

- **Situational boredom** happens when an activity is uninteresting and feels like it will never end (“How long has this movie gone on? Isn’t it over yet?!”).
- **Existential boredom** describes the experience of wondering what life is even about, perhaps feeling that we can’t move towards our goals, and questions about how to live the best life.

Thomas Aquinas, an influential Christian theologian of the 13th century, believed that both bored lethargy and restless action came from a common source. He called it “[acedia](#),” and actually regarded it as one of the seven deadly sins. Although today this sin is usually called “sloth” and defined as laziness, Aquinas believed that acedia could also manifest as frantic, restless activity. He saw acedia as a rejection of the joy that comes from living a virtuous life, either by energetically avoiding the things God made us to do—filling our lives with meaningless busyness—or by listless, complacent inaction. The cure for acedia, and the boredom it can reflect, wasn’t just to fill our time with more activities; it was to fill our time with activity that actually mattered.

To sum it all up, [Maggie Koerth-Baker, writing for Scientific American](#), notes,

There is no universally accepted definition of boredom. But whatever it is, researchers argue, it is not simply another name for depression or apathy. It seems to be a specific mental state that people find unpleasant—a lack of stimulation that leaves them craving relief, with a host of behavioural, medical and social consequences.

Why do we dislike boredom so much?

Reflecting on his time as an IRS tax examiner (could he have had a more boring job?), [David Foster Wallace wrote](#),

[T]he really interesting question is why dullness proves to be such a powerful impediment to attention. Why we recoil from the dull. Maybe it’s because dullness is intrinsically painful; maybe that’s where phrases like ‘deadly dull’ or ‘excruciatingly dull’ come from. But there might be more to it. Maybe dullness is associated with psychic pain because something that’s dull or opaque fails to provide enough stimulation to distract people from some other, deeper type of pain that is always there, if only in an ambient, low-level way, and which most of us spend nearly all our time and energy trying to distract ourselves from feeling... This terror of silence with nothing diverting to do.

It’s natural to resist boredom. Did you know that [some people](#) would rather endure mildly painful electric shocks than sit in a quiet room by themselves?

[Bertrand Russell noted ironically](#), “Boredom is therefore a vital problem for the moralist, since at least half the sins of mankind are caused by the fear of it.”

Unhealthy coping mechanisms abound. “[Easily bored people](#) are at higher risk for depression, anxiety, drug addiction, alcoholism, compulsive gambling, eating disorders, hostility, anger, poor social skills, bad grades and low work performance.”

But filling space doesn’t always look as drastic as substance abuse. For teens, procrastination and distraction is a tap away...every app on their phones screams for attention. But endlessly scrolling, even though it’s something to do, may not provide the fulfillment they’re looking for.

What can boredom tell us?

In [an interview](#) with Joy Clarkson, Dr. Rebekah Lamb discusses how boredom isn’t necessarily wrong, or a bad thing in itself. Like any emotion, boredom is a blinking yellow light telling us that something is happening internally that we should pay attention to (similar to a check engine light directing your attention to what’s happening under the hood). Boredom speaks to us not only about our circumstances, but about who we are and what we want in life. Boredom is rooted in desire. So it can be a reminder that we’re made for more. Teens don’t need to be afraid of the great and wonderful longings of their hearts! Here are just a few of the things boredom reminds us of:

People were created to work. To be productive. To influence. [To reign with God over His creation](#). Which is why it can feel very discouraging when there’s nothing to do. These rushing, turbulent, forceful desires to be significant are good. They remind us that we have a part to play in God’s [redemption of all things](#).

Being human means being limited. We can’t accomplish everything that we want to. We get burned out. God’s grand story for the world gets lost in the daily grind of homework, teeth brushing, and lonely Thursday nights. But instead of needing a bigger theology, we need a theology small enough to notice Christ in the everyday. As [Tish Harrison Warren says](#), “The new life into which we are baptized is lived out in days, hours, and minutes. God is forming us into a new people. And the place of that formation is in the small moments of today.”

Things aren't right...yet. Holy dissatisfaction points towards the fact that nothing here fulfills us completely. Not the highest paying job, the hottest girlfriend, the most thrilling adrenaline rush...we still ache. The world is [broken and waiting](#) to be fully and finally redeemed.

The hard part often comes as teens wrestle with what really feeds their desires. Scrolling through TikTok? Going for a jog? Something else? Studies show that if we let it, boredom can lead to some really wonderful things.

It's good for your brain. [Manoush Zomorodi explains](#) that boredom engages the brain's Default Mode Network, which lights up during repetitive tasks that don't require a lot of attention (folding laundry, walking, etc.). The DMN is where some of our most creative, original thinking occurs. It's involved in:

- self-referential processing
- empathy
- autobiographical memory
- future planning
- creative problem solving

Basically, we have a sense of self, an understanding of our story (where we come from and where we're going), dreams and future plans, and emotional intelligence because of boredom, or at least because of space where our minds get to wander.

Creativity. Sandi Mann [explains](#), "At its core, boredom is 'a search for neural stimulation that isn't satisfied...If we can't find that, our mind will create it.'"

Attentiveness. Slogging through classic literature is rough. No one masters calculus in a day. This is the stuff of life; many worthwhile commitments are difficult, and at times, boring. "[The ability to handle boredom](#), not surprisingly, is correlated with the ability to focus and to self-regulate." Boredom is an opportunity to practice focusing on difficult, but important tasks.

Preparation for real life. Responsibility means taking care of tasks that aren't enjoyable, simply because someone has to do them. It'd be really hard to learn that for the first time at age 18...why not help your kids start now?

"[C]ertain good things are not possible except where there is a certain degree of monotony... A generation that cannot endure boredom will be a generation of little men, of men unduly divorced from the slow processes of nature, of men

in whom every vital impulse slowly withers, as though they were cut flowers in a vase.” - [Bertrand Russell](#)

Cultivating Wonder. [GK Chesterton said](#), “There are no uninteresting things, only uninterested people.” Chesterton was known for finding joy in the funniest things (he wrote [poems](#) about gadgets he found in his pockets, [essays on cheese](#), and [was surprised](#) that people walk on their feet and not their heads). He reminds us that delight and fascination take practice.

If you’re needing more inspiration about delighting in ordinary things, here’s a wonderful Chesterton essay called [On Running After One’s Hat](#). It’s where the famous quote, “An inconvenience is only an adventure wrongly considered” comes from.

Making Necessary Changes. [Flow psychology](#) is “the idea that great absorption, focus and enjoyment of work results from a balance between our skills and the challenge of the tasks we face. Both tasks that are too dull, such as factory work, or too complicated, such as doing taxes, feel tedious.”

So if school is too easy, students may zone out and actually need a challenge. But if a subject is too hard they’ll give up because they can’t make any headway and may need less intensity.

Prioritizing and accomplishing goals. If we’re bored, that can also be a good opportunity to try to decide, discover, or remember what our goals are. Maybe we can use this empty space to try to refocus, and then take some steps toward accomplishing what we want.

Following in the footsteps of Christ. “All great books contain boring portions, and all great lives have contained uninteresting stretches.” [Bertrand Russell](#)

What did Jesus do for his first 30 years as a human? He probably lived a typical 1st century existence - one of exhausting labor, weekly worship, feet washing, and time with family. Jesus, literally God walking around in the world, didn’t pack every second with glamorous activity. As we become more authentically human, we follow Jesus’ way (“disciple” means follower, someone who practices the habits of their teacher). So we are called to emulate Christ’s contentment with the slow, ordinary, unseen rhythms of existence.

Why should I talk with my teen about boredom?

Boredom brings us face to face with unmet expectations. When there's not much going on we notice what we don't like about the world. And we notice what we don't like about ourselves. These are sticky emotions, and most of us would rather avoid them. We want a quick, efficient way to move from powerlessness to optimism. A way to numb the sharp pangs of fear about finding a job after graduation, navigating a confusing world of dating apps, living with unwanted (and unasked for) anxiety or depression...

These deep heart wounds reveal that our attempts at comfort and control mean something. Reaching for TikTok whenever our teens feel bored exposes what they believe about themselves, about their circumstances, and about God.

Pop culture tells us that life should be glamorous and meaningful and fun. Moving from high to high to high, looking forward to the next thrill, and numbing ourselves in the meantime. Even church youth group culture can reinforce these expectations. We expect to meet God on the mountaintop, with butterflies jumping around in our stomachs and tears running down our cheeks as strobe lights flash and worship music thumps. In his book [You Are What You Love](#) James K.A. Smith observes,

We've created youth ministry which confuses extroversion for faithfulness, and acted like sincerely following Jesus is synonymous with being 'fired up' for Jesus, with being excited for Jesus, as if discipleship were synonymous with fostering an exuberant, perky, cheerful, hurray-for-Jesus disposition like what we might find at a nightclub or a pep rally.

Where is God when that environment is inaccessible? How do teens encounter God without ambient lighting and passionate singing?

Maybe there's a reason that most of the [Christian calendar](#) is just "Ordinary Time." Of course, there are feast days and celebrations and fasting and mourning. But for the most part, Jesus sanctifies the ordinary; being with Christ does not require perfect situations. Which means that He is with us even in boredom.

So talking with your teen about boredom is actually a way to talk about unmet expectations, their deepest longings, and how they see themselves and the world. Refer to the discussion questions at the end of this Guide for some ideas about how to begin the conversation.

How can we help teens steward boredom well?

We believe the answer to this question actually begins with self-reflection. What do you believe about productivity and down time? How do you feel about the idiom, “Idle hands are the devil’s workshop?” Should we always be engaged in “productive activity”? What happens when we daydream, don’t finish our to-do lists, or just space out for a while?

For a more complete theology of downtime, our [Parent’s Guide to Sabbath & Rest](#) delves deeply into rhythms of work and rest and what it means to be a limited human. For now, we’ll mention that if productivity is the end goal of our existence, there’s no time for Netflix or enjoying a sunset. And a wandering mind or wasted afternoon should be accompanied by lots of guilt.

But if our sense of worth is rooted and unchangeable as God’s beloved children, no matter what we produce or accomplish, then we are free to rest, embrace limitation, and wrestle with boredom.

Try it: this week, do something without an end goal in mind. Live into the truth that God’s favor is yours even when you’re not getting things done. Go for a walk and don’t count the miles. Maybe swing on a swing set. Be with God for a few moments, content to not say anything, and with no pressure to hear anything either.

“In our utilitarian culture, where we suffer from a collective compulsion to do something practical, helpful, or useful, and where we feel compelled to make a contribution that can give us a sense of worth, contemplative prayer is a form of radical criticism. It is not useful or practical. It is simply to waste time for and with God. It cuts a hole in our busyness and reminds us and others that it is God and not we who creates and sustains the world.” - [Henri Nouwen](#)

In a way, boredom lets us practice leaving things with God, trusting that He will work when we have no motivation, that His will can be done on the earth even while we are sleeping. [In Mark 4](#) Jesus tells this parable,

This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the

head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.

We have less control on outcomes than we think we do, and this is liberating. Everything isn't up to us, thank goodness. Boredom could be an invitation to rest and watch what God does.

Reflection: What are you modeling for the teens in your life...what are they observing whenever you have unoccupied time? Do you want them to emulate your habits?

You have the opportunity to cast a vision for your teens about what the Christian life looks like. Here are a couple of ways to do that:

Encourage your teen to name their real emotions. "I'm bored" can be a catch-all phrase, describing everything from feeling tired, to wanting something exciting to happen, to feeling depressed. What's actually happening internally?

It is possible that the roots of boredom lie in a fundamental breakdown in our understanding of what it is we want to do. Bored people tend to score low on measures of self-awareness. They find it difficult to accurately monitor their own moods and feelings and hence understand what they truly want.

So, "I don't like this," "I don't know what to do," and "I feel sad and lonely and like I don't know what's coming next in my life," are all examples of getting to the deeper root of boredom. Figuring out "the why" often leads to a more specific, and therefore more helpful, response.

Try doing something without an end goal together! Encourage your teen to enjoy the moment, and to engage in something that might feel repetitive or pointless, but that actually gives them space to process, reflect, and wander imaginatively. The goal isn't a particular result, which helps combat the mindset that their worth comes from what they do.

- Swing on a swingset
- Go fishing
- Go star-gazing. Or roll out a picnic blanket and watch some clouds drift along
- Go people-watching
- Try a non-screen activity (maybe even put your phones away for an evening)
- Take a walk
- Bake something delicious!

Here are some practices your teen can try on their own:

- 5 minutes of silence
- Journaling
- [Lectio Divina](#)

What would we start to notice if we were still and quiet, and yes, even bored, more often? What kinds of people could we become?

Related Axis Resources

- [The Culture Translator](#), a **free** weekly email that offers biblical insight on all things teen-related
- [A Parent's Guide to COVID-19](#)
- [Social Media Conversation Kit](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Ordinary Time](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Depression & Anxiety](#)
- Check out [axis.org](#) for even more resources!

If you'd like access to all of our digital resources, both current and yet to come, for one low yearly or monthly fee, check out the [All Axis Pass](#)!

Additional Resources

- [The Boredom Experiment](#), a podcast by Jeremy and Ashley Parsons...especially episode 2, "[Preteen](#)" where they interview their two kids about how social media has helped and hurt their family.
- If boredom studies fascinate you, you'll enjoy this short [History of Boredom](#)
- "[Quarantine is perfect for discovering the beauty and power of boredom,](#)" *The Guardian*
- "[Let Children Get Bored Again,](#)" *The New York Times*
- "[A Prayer for Cabin Fever,](#)" Michelle L. Torigian

- [*Bored and Brilliant: How Spacing Out Can Unlock Your Most Productive and Creative Self*](#), by Manoush Zomorodi
- The [Bored and Brilliant](#) project
- [*Manalive*](#), a short story by GK Chesterton
- [Moment App](#)
- [“Blessed Boredom,”](#) an article about dealing with teenage angst
- [“Bertrand Russell on the Vital Role of Boredom and ‘Fruitful Monotony’ in the Conquest of Happiness,”](#) *Brain Pickings*

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Recap

- Humans have probably always wrestled with boredom. But modern expectations about entertainment, productivity, and instant access to information increase our awareness of boredom and discomfort with it.
- Boredom can manifest in a lot of different ways; lazily lying around, or even restless, frantic activity.
- Like many emotions, boredom is an invitation to bravely notice what our internal landscape looks like.
- Boredom doesn't happen in a vacuum...it's an outworking of our deepest longings and desires, and it tells us what we believe about God, the world, and ourselves.
- We can't avoid boredom, but we can choose how we respond to it. Will we mask the discomfort with technology and distraction, or can we learn to embrace empty space, silence, and moments with nothing to do?

Hint: Screen shot or print this page to refer back to later!

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Discussion Questions

- What does boredom feel like to you? How do you usually respond to that emotion (do you sit with it? Are there any activities that make the feeling go away)?
- Is boredom good, bad, or somewhere in between? Why do you say that?
- What would a perfect day look like for you? If you had a full 24 hours to spend however you wanted, what would that day look like from start to finish?
- What feels like a “good day” to you? When you go to bed after a normal day and think back over what happened, what makes it feel worthwhile?
- When was the last time that you completely lost track of time because you were so engaged in what you were doing?
- What’s your favorite app right now? What’s your least favorite app on your phone?
- How does your phone make you feel? Like when you’ve spent 20 minutes or an hour checking your notifications, how do you feel once you put your phone down?
- How do you feel when I (parent, youth leader, etc.) am responding to texts or on Facebook or Instagram? Do you think that I have healthy technology habits?
- Why do you think we’re called human beings instead of human doings?
- What do we want downtime and rest to look like for our family?

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