

Dream on!

In seeking to ensure children are always busy, have we overlooked the value of simply doing nothing? *Dr Natasha Kirkham* considers the issue

'I'm bored. I'm BORED!' my youngest son shrieks, and immediately leaps in with, 'There's nothing to do!' The older two nod in agreement. It is a refrain that will be familiar to many parents.

However, at the risk of sounding cruel, I truly believe that the response to such wails should be, 'I don't care.' You can, of course, provide a nicer version of that. But what is wrong with being bored? In fact, let us turn the question around and ask ourselves, 'Is there something wrong with being constantly engaged?'

In this era of screen time and over-scheduling, the modern child has relatively little time to just do nothing. I am not talking about sepia-coloured memories of times past when children ran free through fields, playing games of imagination from dawn to dusk. I am talking about a time when there wasn't 24-hour access to information, to immediate gratification. This is new. This was not part of our childhoods, and as practitioners, parents and researchers, we need to figure out what is enough and what is too much.

OVER-ENGAGED

Is today's child over-engaged? I found myself considering this question in earnest while involved in a research project designed to investigate something completely different. In collaboration with the Theatre Centre, a theatre company that creates plays for children, and Dr Edward Barker of the Institute of Psychiatry, I completed a study of children in Year 5.

Working with the playwright Ed Harris, I spent two days in each of ten different schools around England and Wales. This study was designed to address children's understanding of bullying and victimisation, but it highlighted something we had not been expecting.

To make the topic engaging, we presented a day-long creative writing

programme on the theme of violence. Part of the day was spent helping the children write a story – create a character, name them, give them a back-story and describe a conflict. We were shocked by how difficult this was for the children.

This was supposed to be the fun bit, to loosen them up, but it took the better part of the day. They couldn't think up names ('Can I just use my own name, Miss?' 'Can I use your name, Miss?'), and if they did, it was quickly discovered that this name was actually the name of a character on TV, or from an Xbox game.

They couldn't produce a back story, were confused by the idea of creating something brand new, and more often than not created stories that were either autobiographical or

ripped from a game or movie. We were stumped.

We asked them what they did after school or during holidays: Xbox, television, movies, YouTube. They named every *Simpsons* episode they had ever seen, they discussed *American Dad*, and *You've Been Framed*. They talked about people they met online. They frequently used terms such as 'FBI' and 'CIA' when discussing police in their own English neighbourhoods.

We asked them what they did when they weren't watching TV or playing on screens. They were at swimming lessons, hockey or gymnastics. Their every waking moment seemed to be occupied.

I came home pondering this. I started to ask around, to read. And I discovered that most children I know are involved in at least three to four organised events per week, that their weekends are birthday parties and organised outings, that evenings are computers and television.

This, in and of itself, is not a bad thing. Obviously, learning to swim, play hockey or play the piano is good. These are nice skills to have. And this is definitely not a rant against technology. As a geek of the highest order, I am well aware of its benefits. The problem, however, is that we have

Research has shown that allowing minds to wander can help foster creativity



overlooked the benefits of unstructured time – time with nothing to do.

BENEFITS

Dr Teresa Belton is a psychologist at the University of East Anglia School of Education and Lifelong Learning. In a recent BBC interview she made the claim that, 'Children need to have stand-and-stare time, time imagining and pursuing their own thinking processes or assimilating their experiences through play or just observing the world around them.'

Her opinion is that our expectation that today's child should be always engaged in activities could be having negative effects on the development of imagination. Could this be true?

Certainly, there is a great deal of anecdotal evidence of breakthrough moments occurring when we are thinking of other things – 'eureka' moments, popularised by stories of Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein. But what about actual research?

Benjamin Baird and Jonathan Schooler, psychologists at the University of California, Santa Barbara, recently published a paper showing that mind-wandering (or 'zoning out') fosters creativity. It is not the case that just doing nothing supports the creative process. Importantly, it

is actual mind-wandering that helps. This is what psychologists call 'task-unrelated thought', but could also be called daydreaming. Time to 'zone out', to let one's mind wander off topic is the key point.

According to Dr Scott Barry Kaufman, author of *Ungifted: Intelligence Redefined* and the brilliant *Scientific American* blog Beautiful Minds, we should revisit psychologist Jerome Singer's 1970s ideas of 'positive constructive daydreaming'.

In their recent article, 'Ode to positive constructive daydreaming', Kaufman and Singer claim that the rewards of this style of daydreaming include self-awareness and creative incubation. In other words, mind-wandering, while not ideal during a structured school lesson, is something that should be encouraged in children. It could lead to more imaginative play, which in turn could lead to more time spent in the creative process. And this process is what child development is all about.

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

This idea of unstructured time leading to creativity and imagination fits in perfectly with what we have known about cognitive development for a very long time. Jean Piaget is known as the godfather of the study of cognitive development. He termed himself a 'constructivist'. He believed (rightly) that children are driven to construct their own development. They are intrinsically motivated to explore their environment.

From the first time they pick a red ball over an equally attainable blue ball, they are exercising control over their development. They learn about objects by picking them up, looking at them, tasting them and throwing them around.

They learn about depth by hurling themselves off stairs and beds. They figure out social interactions by crying, screaming, pointing, demanding and saying please. They create their own worlds through trial and error, and in doing so help their brains develop.

If you are not interacting with your environment, you are not developing – this was his idea. And it has been proven time and time again to be correct. This does not speak against learning from technology or from structured learning environments, of course, but it does once again underline the importance of unstructured time, time spent wandering and

MORE INFORMATION

- 'Children should be allowed to get bored, expert says' by H Richardson (2013), BBC, www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-21895704
- 'Inspired by distraction: mind wandering facilitates creative incubation' by B Baird, J Smallwood, MD Mrazek, JWY Kam, MS Franklin, JW Schooler (2012) in *Psychological Science*, 23(10), 1117-1122
- 'Ode to positive constructive daydreaming' by RL McMillan, SB Kaufman and JL Singer (2013) in *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4, 1-9
- *Plays, Dreams, and Imitation in Childhood* by J Piaget (1962)
- *The Inner World of Daydreaming* by JL Singer (1975)
- *The Origin of Intelligence in the Child* by J Piaget (1953)



Dr Natasha Kirkham and her son

exploring for oneself. A balance is needed between the two.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Finally, it is important to keep in mind the crucial role in child development of spending time face-to-face with other people in an unstructured environment – just hanging out with friends or family. This allows the child a chance to explore different relationships, to practise verbal and non-verbal communication, to share toys and experiences, and to learn from other people's points of view.

Chatting, discussing and bickering may seem like idly wasting time. But they are incredibly important ways in which a child can test social and linguistic skills in the field. As much as violin lessons, gymnastic classes and the latest education apps, children learn from these bored moments of exploration and social interaction.

DEEP BREATH

It is all very well to say that boredom is good, but what should you do when your own child cries boredom – or an exasperated parent seeks your advice on how to cope on rainy weekends? Well, my advice is to take a deep breath, tell yourself that it will be fine, and then tell the child that it is okay to be bored sometimes. Tell them everyone gets bored and that it is good sometimes to just sit and think or daydream or wander around the house aimlessly.

Offer some loose suggestions of things they can do; the trick here is not to provide detailed ideas about a game, but to set out some vague guidelines. Then, when the child has stomped off, open your newspaper, sit down and wait it out. ■

Dr Natasha Kirkham is a senior lecturer in psychology at the Centre for Brain and Cognitive Development, Birkbeck, University of London