Beating Boredom: Increasing Independent Play and Engagement

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Down time and Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)

- Difficulties in the areas of play and social interactions are a core feature of ASDs (Leaf & McEachin, eds., 1999)
- Individuals with ASDs have greater difficulty coping with unstructured time than neurotypical peers and benefit from increased structure in their lives (Van Bourgondien et al., 2003)
Excerpt from Developing Leisure Time Skills for Persons with Autism: A Practical Approach for Home, School, and Community
By Phyllis Coyne, Colleen Nyberg, and Mary Loud Vandenburg (1999)

For the individual with autism, and for his or her family, unstructured or free time may be one of the most challenging times. The families of individuals with autism generally do not look forward to going to the zoo or to an evening at home playing table games. Parents of young children with autism often wish that their child could entertain himself or herself appropriately, even for just a few minutes. Teachers and others working with individuals with autism want to know how to assist them to be more independent and self-directing in leisure. Both parents and professionals have remarked that when individuals with autism are doing things that they like and that make sense to them, problem behavior often decreases. Developing competence in leisure is a positive means of reducing inappropriate self-stimulation or stereotypic behavior. It increases enjoyment for all.
What’s so bad about down time?

- Down time often leads to boredom
- Which can lead to sadness
- Or...
Large amounts of unstructured downtime represent increased rates of stereotypic behavior (McEntee & Saunders, 1997) and missed opportunities to develop meaningful skills.
So we know the problem...

- Too much downtime can lead to negative behaviors...
- And children with ASD are especially prone to boredom because of difficulty structuring downtime independently...

What’s the solution?
The Basics

- Have stuff for your child to do
- Structure time so they know when to do it
- Teach them what to do with it
- Reinforce them for doing it
- Increase their independence with doing it
Disclaimer!

- Every child is different
- Keep in mind your child’s developmental level
  - Words vs. pictures
  - Simple vs. complex
- Keep in mind child’s preferences
- Don’t make too overwhelming!
Stuff to Do
On-the-Go Items

- Keeping hands occupied – anything is better than nothing!
- Don’t require much/any teaching to know how to “play” with these
- When might these be useful?
Other Stuff to Do

- Items/Toys
- Games/Activities
- Electronics
- Social Interaction
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Ages</th>
<th>Toys</th>
<th>Games/Activities</th>
<th>Social Interaction</th>
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<tr>
<td>2-3</td>
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<td>Peek-a-boo</td>
<td>Ball</td>
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<td>Characters</td>
<td>Interactive Songs</td>
<td>Tea Party</td>
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<td>Cars</td>
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<td>Coloring</td>
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<td>Music</td>
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<td>4-5</td>
<td>Lego</td>
<td>Candy Land</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Cars</td>
<td>Shoots &amp; Ladders</td>
<td>Hide &amp; Seek</td>
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<td>Dolls</td>
<td>T-Ball, Soccer, etc.</td>
<td>Play Dates</td>
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<td>Disney Figures</td>
<td>Puzzles</td>
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<td>Play Kitchen</td>
<td>Painting</td>
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<td>6-7</td>
<td>Computer</td>
<td>Uno</td>
<td>Sleep Overs</td>
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<td>Stuffed Animals</td>
<td>Baseball, soccer, etc.</td>
<td>Catch</td>
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<td>Action Figures</td>
<td>Dance</td>
<td>Pretend Play (house, school, etc.)</td>
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<td>Crafts</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8-10</td>
<td>Sports Cards</td>
<td>Baseball, basketball, etc.</td>
<td>Sleep Overs</td>
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<td>Marble Cars</td>
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<td>Barbies</td>
<td>Video Games</td>
<td>Catch</td>
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<td>Swim Parties</td>
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<td>11-15</td>
<td>Books</td>
<td>Baseball, tennis, etc.</td>
<td>Slumber Parties</td>
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<td>Magazines</td>
<td>Water sports</td>
<td>Phone Calls</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Music</td>
<td>Mall</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Leaf & McEachin (1999) A Work in Progress
Structure their Time
Helping Children Structure “Down Time”

- Timers
- Visual schedules
  - Activity schedules
- If-Then contingencies
- Activity Bins
Timers

- Timers also increase predictability
- Useful for transitions
- Can be used for preferred and nonpreferred activities
- Can be used for tasks:
  - Without discrete end (e.g., playing with Play-Doh)
  - With discrete end (e.g., completion of a puzzle) to shorten task into chunks
- Can be visual or digital
Visual Timer Examples

- Often best if initially accompanied by verbal warnings of:
  - **The contingency**: “Bobby, when the timer goes off, TV will be done and it will be time for puzzles.”
  - **The approaching transition**: “Bobby, it is almost time for TV off.”
Visual Schedules

- Why?
  - Increases predictability
  - Better than you standing and directing play as it moves in the direction of independence
  - Takes advantage of the visual strengths of individuals with ASD (Mesibov et al., 2005)
  - Does not have to be perfect
  - Does not have to include pictures!
  - Can include “free time”
Activity schedules

- Can fall under the visual schedule umbrella
- Adding structure to down time
- Setting the schedule can be done by adult or child
- Include choice!
- Can incorporate use of timer
Schedule Procedures

- Start by reviewing the schedule
- Use timers and provide verbal warnings prior to transitions
- Provide prompting and redirection as needed to keep your child on task
- Praise appropriate transitions!
Visual Schedule Example

- “Kristy, (pointing to first task) first, you need to?”

- “Kristy, snack time is almost over, then it will be time for homework.”

- “Kristy, great job finishing homework!”
Activity Schedule Example

- “Bobby, first you are going to play with cars (point), then your book (point), then dinosaurs (point), and then action figures (point).

- “Bobby, cars are almost done. It’s almost time for book!”

- “Bobby, car time is over, now it’s time for book!”
If-then

- Use when more immediate rewards/reinforcers are required
- Use when presentation of too many tasks at one time will not be meaningful
- If = the less preferred task
- Then = more preferred task/item
If-Then Example

- Example language: “Bobby, first it is puzzle time, then you can play iPad.”
Activity Bins

- Set up several bins, each containing a different activity (beads, matching, etc.)
- Use an activity schedule to help children transition from bin to bin
- Prompt your child to complete each activity
- Provide reinforcement for successfully completing all the activities.
Teach them How
Prompting

- Goal to help/support child to perform skill

- Types of prompts and examples:
  - **Verbal**: “Do puzzle.”
  - **Gestural**: Point to where puzzle piece goes
  - **Model**: Put piece in puzzle, then let child do
  - **Physical**: Guide child physically to put piece in puzzle
Teaching Procedures

- Begin by teaching one activity at a time
- Determine your child’s current level of performance with activity
  - How much can they do already?
  - How long can they work already – don’t punish hard work with more work!
- Use prompting to help your child learn the activity
  - Prompt only as much as is needed
- Use reinforcement to motivate
Increase Duration of Activities

- Duration of engagement in activities can be gradually shaped up
- If your child can stay on task with puzzles for 5 minutes now, let’s set the timer for 4 minutes and gradually increase!
- Alternating tasks keeps tasks fresh and helps kids stay engaged longer
- Don’t let your child “burn out” on a task
Reinforce for Doing
Reinforcing Appropriate Behavior

Reinforcement =

- Anything that can be given following behavior
  - M&M’s, bubbles, praise
- Anything that can be removed following a behavior
  - Task demands

THAT INCREASES THE BEHAVIOR IT FOLLOWS!
Reinforcement in Practice

- Alternating less preferred activities with more preferred activities
- Rewarding a child for every X minutes he/she is engaged
- Reinforcing completion of schedule task/activity

- Other ideas?
- Remind your child what he/she is working for...the carrot!
Build Independence
Fostering Independence

- Greater role in selection/setting of schedule
- On-the-go bag worn by child
- Fading prompts related to completion of task
- Fading prompts related to following schedule
- Fading reinforcement – doesn’t mean taking it away completely!
  - Rate
  - Type: Edible → Praise
## Prompt Fading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BIG Prompt</th>
<th>SMALL Prompt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reviewing schedule</td>
<td>“Bobby, first we are going to play with cars, then trains, then books.”</td>
<td>“Bobby, what are we going to do first?” “Then?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting schedule</td>
<td>Mom sets schedule</td>
<td>“Bobby, what do you want to do first?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to Items</td>
<td>Mom carries bag of things to do</td>
<td>Bobby carries backpack of items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessing Items</td>
<td>Mom hands Bobby his cars</td>
<td>“Bobby, what do you need to get first?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitions</td>
<td>“Bobby, when the timer beeps, it will be time for trains.”</td>
<td>“Bobby, when the timer beeps, it will be time for?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary

- Don’t expect your child to structure their time independently—this is a skill to be taught like any other!
- Gradual increases in engagement duration are goal
- Keep the basics in mind!
- Independence = Only as much support as is required
Applications

- Visual/Activity Schedule
  - “Choiceworks”
- Visual Timer
  - “VisTimer”/”VisTimerFree”
- If-Then/First-Then
  - “First Then Visual Schedule” by Good Karma Applications, Inc
References


Questions?

Thanks for your attention!
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